



# *Policy Position:* Firearms Regulations and Public Health

Gun violence is a leading cause of premature death in the U.S. Guns kill more than 38,000 people and cause nearly 85,000 injuries each year. Historically Hawai'i has seen the lowest rates of gun violence in the nation, even as the rest of the country has faced and struggled with a complex firearms culture. Hawai'i's strict and highly effective gun control laws have kept our gun violence low. Now, with the Supreme Court ruling regarding a citizens right to conceal carry, and growing incidents of gun-related violence across Hawai'i reveal the need for immediate attention to firearm regulation. We must take a public health approach to ensuring our families and communities are safe. We must place a renewed emphasis on improving gun injury and violence research.<sup>1</sup>

Gun violence is a public health epidemic that affects the well-being and public safety of all Americans. In 2019, nearly 40,000 Americans were killed by gun violence, more than the number of Americans killed in car crashes.<sup>2</sup> An additional 71,000 Americans suffer nonfatal firearm injuries,<sup>3</sup> and millions of Americans face the trauma of losing a loved one or living in fear of being shot. The impacts of gun violence, both direct and indirect, inflict an enormous burden on American society. When a child is shot and killed, they lose decades of potential: the potential to grow up, have a family, contribute to society, and pursue their passions in life. When compared to other communicable and infectious diseases, gun violence often poses a larger burden on society in terms of potential years of life lost. In 2019, firearm deaths accounted for 925,023 years of potential life lost before the age of 65 – more than diabetes, stroke, and liver disease combined.<sup>4</sup>

The mental health effects of gun violence can include anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). There is a growing canon of evidence that speaks to the extreme toll gun violence takes on people's mental well-being. In a 2018 study, gun violence survivors reported increased fear and vigilance; some were so fearful that they did not want to leave their homes.<sup>5</sup> Within a group of urban adolescent girls assessed at an adolescent medicine clinic, two-thirds of those exposed to violence—including gun violence—met PTSD symptom criteria.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, a 2017 study found that women who were survivors of intimate partner violence were more likely to have more severe symptoms of PTSD if they had been threatened with a firearm by their intimate partners or feared that their intimate partners would use a firearm against them.<sup>7</sup>

Domestic violence, including intimate partner violence, is a public health crisis in the U.S. Nearly one in four women and one in seven men will experience severe physical violence at the hands of their intimate partner in their lifetime. Firearms contribute significantly to domestic violence in the U.S. – to threaten, to coerce, to control, and to kill. Around 4.5 million women in the U.S. have been threatened with a gun, and nearly one million women have been shot or shot at by an intimate partner. Over half of all intimate partner homicides are committed with guns. In fact, a woman is five times more likely to be murdered when her abuser has access to a gun. To reduce the number of domestic violence homicides, we must ensure that people who abuse their intimate partners or family do not have access to firearms.<sup>8</sup>

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- The elimination of gun violence is inextricably linked to all areas of public health, including but not limited to ensuring safe active and equitable transportation, combating toxic stress and chronic disease, and reducing incidence of childhood adverse experiences.
- In the same manner as public health advocates vehemently seek to reduce and eliminate vehicle-related injury and death, we should advocate for policies to reduce and eliminate gun-related injuries, death, and trauma.
- Despite having the lowest national gun death rate, we have been moving in the wrong direction. Hawai'i should strive to strengthen its gun laws until its gun-related injuries amount to zero.<sup>9</sup>
- Keiki deserve to live and walk in neighborhoods, attend school, and navigate life without the threat of being killed by gun violence.<sup>10</sup>
- It is incumbent on state and local governments to implement solutions to eliminate gun violence, rather than relying upon individual action.<sup>11</sup>
- As a geographically unique state, Hawai'i has an enhanced ability to restrict the entry of firearms.
- Solutions focused solely or primarily on response, rather than prevention, and which place greater responsibility onto the shoulders of teachers and others for mitigation efforts, are inadequate to eliminate gun violence.
- Firearm ownership, use, and sale should be restricted to the fullest extent of the law to prevent gun violence.

## POLICY PRIORITIES

- Passing reasonable, evidence-based restrictions and regulations around the ownership, use, sale, transportation, and concealment of firearms.
- Imposing sensitive place requirements for the concealed carry of legal firearms.
- Engage with community stakeholders, health-focused nonprofit organizations, experts, and attorneys to craft solutions that restrict access to or sale of firearms to the fullest extent of the law.

## RATIONALE

- All people of Hawai'i deserve to live, work, play, and move in neighborhoods, and navigate all aspects of life without the threat of being emotionally and physically traumatized or killed by gun violence.
- People in Hawai'i cannot live full, healthy lives if they feel threatened by gun violence.
- Domestic violence is exacerbated by firearms; all people have the right to feel safe in their homes.

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707 Richards Street, Suite 300, Honolulu, HI 96813  
(808) 591-6508 | [hiphi.org](http://hiphi.org)