



Volunteer Testimony

HB 636- SUPPORT

Child Access Prevention Public Safety - Access to Firearms - Storage Requirements

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House Judiciary

February 19, 2020

Dear Mr. Chairman Clippinger and Members of the Judiciary Committee,
My name is Leena Rai, and I serve as Legislative Advocacy Director for the Maryland High School Democrats of America. We are the Maryland branch of the youth-run organization, High School Democrats of America, dedicated to promoting youth mobilization and democratic ideals within Maryland policy. We urge the committee to support HB 636, preventing child firearm access and strengthening existing safe storage policy.

This bill changes the definition of a minor from under 16 to under 18 years of age. It also provides for a graduated system of penalties commensurate with the harm caused by a failure to store a weapon securely. Writing this testimony as a 16-year-old, why should I be defined as an adult in firearm policy, but considered a minor in every other respect? Why should I legally be able to access a gun negligently left out by its owner, and be held legally responsible for my actions with it when I cannot even purchase a firearm? It's loopholes like these, definitions that don't make sense, that freed the Great Mills high school shooter's family from responsibility for his actions. On March 20, 2018, a 17-year old male gained access to his father's gun, entered Great Mills High School in Maryland and shot and killed young Jaelynn Willey and injured another 14-year-old boy. Because the shooter was over 16 and killed himself at the scene, no true responsibility was assigned for a tragedy that never should have happened in the first place, an incident stricter safe storage and child access prevention laws could have deterred. In an age where the high school experience is clouded with shootings and fear, it is the responsibility of lawmakers to hold adults that recklessly leave their firearms in the reach of children responsible for their dangerous actions.

Furthermore, approximately 4.6 million American children and minors are living in homes with at least one loaded and unlocked firearm, which represents approximately 20% of homes. An additional 50% of households reported storing guns either loaded or unlocked. The presence of unlocked guns in the home increases the risk of both accidental and intentional gun injuries. In youth suicides, approximately 80% of the time, the owner of the firearm was either a parent or another relative.

Maryland leaders have understood the importance of preventing access to young people in the past when they passed the existing laws, but we must recognize and correct the inherent weaknesses within our current access prevention laws. HB 636 addresses this weakness by increasing the age of a minor from 16 to 18, clarifying storage requirements, and creating a meaningful penalty to enhance compliance. Currently, if a youth gains access to a firearm, regardless of death or injury, there is only a fine. Allowing a child to get access to a gun is a severely negligent offense, and the penalty should reflect that. Passing this law will help prevent young people from accessing guns while still allowing legal and responsible ownership of firearms.

The Maryland High School Democrats of America urge the committee to pass HB 636, strengthening gun owners' accountability and responsibility for the safe storage of firearms.



Volunteer Testimony

HB 636- SUPPORT Child Access Prevention Public Safety - Access to Firearms - Storage Requirements

Martha Zaslow, Ph.D.¹

Marylanders to Prevent Gun Violence

House Judiciary Committee

February 19, 2020

Dear Chairman Luke Clippenger, Vice-Chair Vanessa Atterbeary, and Members of the House Judiciary Committee:

I am writing as a resident of Maryland's District 16, as a research psychologist whose work focuses on children's development, and as a volunteer with Marylanders to Prevent Gun Violence, to thank you for your consideration of ways to diminish injury and death caused by children finding and handling firearms in their homes. Many children in the United States live in homes with firearms, and there is substantial evidence that the presence of firearms increases the risk of suicide and unintentional firearm death. As you consider legislative approaches to address this serious problem, I ask that you take into account recent reviews of the research on the two major approaches to keeping children safe from injury and death from firearms: educational programs to teach children about gun safety, and child access prevention laws.

- A recent carefully conducted review of the evidence on educational approaches² concludes that "Gun safety programs do not improve the likelihood that children will not handle firearms in an unsupervised situation."
- In contrast, a recent review of the research on state gun policies³ concludes that "Child-access prevention laws reduce firearm self-injuries (including suicides) and unintentional firearm injuries and deaths among children."

Based on the evidence, I urge you to support HB636.

Why consider differing approaches to gun safety for children? Children have substantial exposure to guns in the home. Results of a national survey⁴ indicate that there is at least one gun

¹ If more detail about the research studies would be helpful, please contact me at mjz444@aol.com.

² Holly, C. Porter, S., Kamienski, M., & Lim A. (2019). School-based and community-based gun safety educational strategies for injury prevention. *Health Promotion Practice*, 20 (1), 38-47.

³ RAND (March 2018). What science tells us about the effects of gun policies. <https://www.rand.org/research/gun-policy-key-findings/what-science-tells-us-about-the-effects-of-gun-policies.html>.

⁴ Azrael, D., Cohen, J., Salhi, C., & Miller, M. (2018). Firearm storage in gun-owning households with children: Results of a 2015 national survey. *Journal of Urban Health*. Published on line May 2018. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-018-261-7>.

in approximately 13 million households with children, comprising 34% of such households. Further, a gun is stored loaded and unlocked in approximately 2.7 million households, or 21 percent. In 2015, 1468 children under age 18 died of a gunshot wound, 40% of these by suicide or through unintentional injury by a firearm, most often involving a gun from the child's own home. In addition, nearly 7,000 children under the age of 18 were non-fatally injured with a gun. **What does the evidence on educational approaches say?** One important possibility for reducing these injuries and deaths is to educate children about firearm safety: teaching children that they should not touch guns unsupervised if they see them, that they should leave a room where a gun is found, and that they should inform an adult if they see a gun. Educational approaches can involve providing children with information about gun safety in writing or through in-person or media presentations (passive learning), or they can involve behavioral approaches in which children see and practice models of appropriate responses, such as leaving a room where they find a gun and informing an adult (active learning). Educational approaches deserve consideration because the more active behavioral approaches have been an important tool in other situations involving risk to children, such as teaching children what to do if an adult attempts to abduct them.⁵ But handling of guns in the home is different in important ways: the setting is familiar so children may not be as cautious, children may not be able to distinguish real from toy guns, and they may not understand the differences between a gun that is loaded and unloaded. Children may also have been exposed to positive images about firearms in the media, making them seem more attractive to touch. Given these differences, it is important to look separately at the research on educational approaches on gun safety.

In conducting a systematic review of the evidence on educational approaches, Holly and colleagues⁶ found ten studies that evaluated educational programs involving children from preschool to grade 4. The studies show that children are able to learn the messages taught in informational sessions (the passive learning approach). Teaching behavioral skills, in which children practice gun safety behaviors (active learning approach), sometimes increased the ability of the children to show these behaviors when they were asked. But when children were then exposed to simulated real life situations, the evidence did not consistently show that educational approaches increased children's ability to use the skills in these situation.⁷ In the words of one of the authors of the review: "Although programs that used active learning strategies, such as modeling, simulation or feedback, were slightly more effective at teaching gun-safety skills than programs that handed out literature, the majority still failed to teach the children to put what they learned into practice."⁸

What does the evidence on child access prevention laws say? Researchers at RAND Corporation underscore the importance of considering the evidence in deciding on gun-related policies: "Good public policies are based on facts and data, and the best laws—including gun laws—are written when policymakers understand the effects of the policy on a range of outcomes."⁹ Their review considers 13 types of state-level gun policies on 8 different outcomes, and categorizes the evidence for each type of policy as having no studies, inconclusive evidence, limited

⁵ Holly et al., (2019)

⁶ Holly et al., (2019)

⁷ See evidence summarized in review by Holly et al., (2019).

⁸ Science Daily (May 15, 2018). <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2018/05/180515113601.htm>

⁹ RAND (March 2018)

evidence, moderate evidence, or as supported (with 3 or more studies finding significant effects in the same direction using at least two independent data sets, with no contradictory evidence in other studies). The evidence for child access prevention laws falls in their highest category: supported. The review concludes that such laws reduce unintentional firearm injuries and deaths among children as well as self-injuries, including suicide.¹⁰ Of all of the policies considered, the support was strongest for child access prevention laws.

We lack strong evidence that educational programs help children use gun safety skills in real-life situations. However, the research on child access prevention laws shows that these are effective at reducing harm and death to children. I urge you to support HB636, strengthening our State's child access prevention law by extending it to include children below age 18 and increasing penalties.

¹⁰ RAND (March 2018)

