



Testimony in Support of Child Firearm Access Prevention SB 479/HB 200

Karen Herren, JD, Director of Legislative Affairs
Marylanders to Prevent Gun Violence

February 11, 2021

Dear Chair Smith, Vice-Chair Waldstreicher, and Members of the Committee,

Marylanders to Prevent Gun Violence is a statewide grassroots organization dedicated to reducing gun deaths and injuries throughout the state of Maryland, with a particular focus on reducing urban gun violence and gun suicide. Our work ranges from addressing data-driven legislative change, leading a violence intervention and prevention coalition, and running programs for at-risk children. Our mission is to work toward ending the cycles of violence that plague our state. We do this by following the data and advocating for changes that we know can make a difference. **We urge the committee to vote FAVORABLY on Senate Bill 479 to strengthen Maryland's law governing a child's access to firearms.**

Current Maryland law requires gun owners to store firearms away from where a child under the age of 16 would gain access. There is no requirement to lock firearms or to keep them stored unloaded. The American Academy of Pediatrics' recommends that gun owners store all household firearms locked and unloaded. Maryland's current law is not in line with this recommendation and does not apply if the child is 16 or 17 years old. Nationally more than 1.7 million youth live in households with firearms stored in a manner inconsistent with these safety guidelines. This legislation is needed to provide clearer gun storage guidelines for Marylanders to follow and to reduce these completely preventable tragedies.

Gun owners are often misinformed about the risks associated with unsafe gun storage practices. In an effort to promote the gun-owning lifestyle, gun rights organizations often rely on a message of fear to persuade people that they need a gun for safety. This mindset may lead one to feel that they must have a firearm easily accessible. In reality the bigger threat to family safety comes from a poorly secured firearm. The risks of an unintentional shooting, suicide, or of a firearm being turning on the person attempting to use it to defend themselves is far greater than the threat of some unnamed evil. As Harvard researcher, David Hemingway stated in an [interview](#) with NPR, "The average person ... has basically no chance in their lifetime ever to use a gun in self-defense. But ... every day, they have a chance to use the gun inappropriately. They have a chance, they get angry. They get scared."

Compounding this risk, is the escalating number of gun owners in the state of Maryland. While these numbers are still being calculated, the [Baltimore Sun](#) reported in December that Maryland has seen a 76+% spike in FBI background checks in 2020 (this is in the first 11 months). The national spike appeared to be 49% at the same point. The [Washington Post](#) reported in January that the national gun sales of 23 million over the entire year represent a 64% increase over 2019 numbers. This number included more than 8 million first time buyers. The Baltimore Sun article referenced above ranked Maryland as the sixth highest state topped only by Michigan, Alabama, Arizona, Georgia, Utah, and Rhode Island. Depending on the survey relied upon, new gun owners constituted between 34-40% of these purchases. The combination of these numbers and the percentage of gun purchasers who are not utilizing adequate storage methods, is a deadly combination to our children.

Guns are now the second leading cause of death for children under 18 in the United States. (Source: [Giffords](#)/CDC WISQARS) Suicides and unintentional shootings make up almost 40% of Maryland's gun related deaths. (Giffords Fact Sheet) Accidental gun deaths occur mainly in those under 25 years of age. In 2014, 2,549 children (age 0-19) died by gunshot. An additional 13,576 were injured. Meanwhile victims use guns for self-defense in less than 1% of contact crimes. Victims using a gun are no less likely to be injured after taking protective actions than victims using other forms of protective action. Self-defense gun use does not appear to be uniquely beneficial in reducing the likelihood of injury or property loss. (See NPR's Here & Now citation above). On the contrary, a gun in the home is linked to higher rates of death and injury from firearms including increased risks of accidents, violent domestic altercations, and suicide. In other words, the risk to children of an unsecured weapon in the home is much greater than that of a lack of quick access to a firearm for the purpose of self defense. We must look to mediating the inherent risks of having firearms in homes with children.

Safer storage of firearms will reduce youth and young adult suicides by making it harder for those acting impulsively to gain access. Firearms are a sadly effective method of attempting and completing suicide. Behavioral characteristics associated with adolescence, such as impulsivity, feelings of invincibility, and curiosity about firearms make this a particularly important age to protect.

Instances of children gaining access to firearms are not isolated cases. In September, an 11-yr-old Baltimore boy was injured when he gained access to a firearm while home [alone](#). Also in September, a three-year-old gained access to a gun and shot himself in the [hand](#). On Christmas Day in Charles County, 17-year-old Edwin [Juarez](#) was shot and killed when his 13-year-old friend fired a weapon the teenagers were handling into Edwin's upper body. None of these kids should have had access to a firearm. One lost his life. All of the others will carry this with them for the remainder of their lives. Safe storage would have prevented these tragedies. And of course, we cannot forget the horrific shooting at Great Mills High School in St. Mary's County in 2018 where a 17-year-old used his father's firearm to kill 17-yr-old Jaelynn Willey and injure 14-year-old Desmond Barnes before taking his own life. The 911 calls logged from that day as reflected in this [Baltimore Sun](#) article are devastating. We can prevent future tragedies like this by making sure that

youth access to firearms is reduced through mandates to store them in the safest way possible.

The sensible strategies set forth in this piece of legislation provide much needed protection while respecting the right to own and possess a firearm. **MPGV urges the committee to vote FAVORABLY on SB 479 to strengthen Maryland's law governing a child's access to firearms.**