

HB 659/SB 676 Firearm Safety - Storage Requirements and Youth Suicide Prevention (Jaelynn's Law)

A Public Health Strategy to Keep Youth Safe:

Safe Firearm Storage Reduces Risk of Youth Suicide and Firearm Deaths

Youth Suicide: The Crisis in Maryland

Youth suicide is a public health crisis in Maryland. Based on a 2018 survey conducted in Maryland, 22.9% of middle schoolers reported seriously thinking about killing themselves and 18% of high schoolers reported they had seriously considered attempting suicide.ⁱ

Suicide rates are not equal across demographics. The Journal of Community Health reported that the suicide rate among Black females between the ages of 13-19 nearly doubled from 2001-2017.ⁱⁱ During the same time period for Black males ages 13-19, the rate of suicide rose 60%.

Youth Suicide and Firearms Access

Access to firearms is a significant risk factor for adolescent suicides.ⁱⁱⁱ Nationally, between 2015 and 2016, a firearm has been involved in 40% of the over 2,000 annual youth suicides.^{iv} Extensive evidence shows that access to firearms increases the likelihood of death by suicide among youth:

- When a home contains unlocked guns the odds of a child or adolescent dying by firearm suicide is more than **twice** as high as in households where guns are locked.^v
- The risk of suicide by gun is more than **twice** as high in households with loaded guns, as compared to households with unloaded guns.^{vi}

Sound evidence exemplifies the heightened behavioral and public health risks associated with youth access to firearms:

- 85% of suicide attempts with a gun are fatal compared to every other method which has a 5% fatality rate.^{vii}
- 82% of youth under the age of 18 who attempted suicide by gun used a firearm belonging to a family member, usually a parent.^{viii}
- About two-thirds of firearms in homes are stored unlocked.^{ix}
- 75% of children report knowing exactly where firearms are stored in their homes – ultimately risking tragic outcomes.^x

Firearm Deaths by Youth

Maryland's Child Access Prevention legislation is named "Jaelynn's Law" in honor of 17-year-old Jaelynn Willey who was killed at Great Mills High School in St. Mary's County in 2018 when a student in crisis obtained a firearm from a family member. School shootings often imply suicide intentions on the part of the perpetrators, either by themselves or expecting a fatal outcome from authoritative personnel. One of the highest risk factors or warning signs for youth who may be considering a school shooting incident is "access to and experience with weapons" along with indicators such as recent history of violence, past history of violence, history of suicidal behavior and more.^{xi}

Updating Maryland's Law on Firearm Storage: How a few updates can provide significant public health protections

In Maryland, as in other states, legislators protect children from public health risks through common-sense legislation such as requirements for car seats, restrictions on tobacco and alcohol use. Child access prevention (CAP) laws are an effective tool to reduce gun death and injury among children.

Maryland's current law is as follows:

MD Crim Law Code §4-104: Child's Access to Firearms: A person may not store or leave a loaded firearm in a location where the person knew or should have known that an unsupervised child would gain access to the firearm. A person who violates this section is guilty of a misdemeanor and on conviction is subject to a fine not exceeding \$1,000.^{xii}

Maryland's law has not been updated in nearly 20 years. The law should be updated to reflect advancements in technology for safely storing guns and the need for public health education by:

- Adding a requirement that guns and ammunition be stored securely. With advancements in technology, options for safely storing guns and ammunition are commonplace.
- Protecting all minors. The current law only requires adults to limit access to firearms for minors up through age 15. Maryland's own experience shows that minors are still at considerable risk at ages 16 and 17.
- Providing for reasonable penalty provisions. Maryland's options for penalties are limited. Prosecutors need more options in order to tailor penalties appropriately. In addition, research supports the need for consequential penalties because they serve as an important motivator in changing unsafe gun storage behaviors.^{xiii}
- Supporting a public health information initiative. The Maryland Department of Health should provide parents and health care providers information about the importance of safe firearm storage in preventing youth suicides.

The peer-reviewed research supports an update to Maryland's law:

- Estimates suggest that modest increases in the number of American homes safely storing firearms could prevent almost a third of youth gun deaths due to suicide and unintentional firearm injury.^{xiv}
- A number of studies over the past 20 years have found that child access prevention laws can reduce suicide and unintentional gun deaths and injuries among children and teens by up to 54% with the greatest reductions occurring in states which require safe storage of firearms.^{xv}
- A recent study estimated that approximately 100 suicides among 5- to 19-year-olds could be prevented annually if the proportion of unlocked firearms in households with children or adolescents decreased from 50% to 30%.^{xvi}

Safe storage requirements are the best practice for responsible gun ownership. CAP legislation is a simple common-sense policy to protect the health and safety of youth.

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<https://health.maryland.gov/bha/suicideprevention/Documents/2020%20Maryland%20State%20Suicide%20Prevention%20Plan.pdf>

ii [The Changing Characteristics of African-American Adolescent Suicides, 2001-2017 | Request PDF \(researchgate.net\)](#)

iii <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/means-matter/risk/#:~:text=Twelve%20or%20more%20U.S.%20case,live%20in%20homes%20with%20guns.&text=Firearm%20access%20was%20a%20risk,for%20both%20males%20and%20females.>

iv <https://www.usnews.com/news/healthiest-communities/articles/2019-01-17/youth-suicide-rates-higher-in-states-with-more-gun-ownership>

v <https://www.srcd.org/research/access-firearms-increases-child-and-adolescent-suicide>

vi <https://www.srcd.org/research/access-firearms-increases-child-and-adolescent-suicide>

vii <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/means-matter/risk/>

viii <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/means-matter/youth-access/#:~:text=Source%20of%20Firearms%20in%20Youth%20Suicides&text=An%20NVISS%20study%20of%20firearm,family%20member%2C%20usually%20a%20parent.>

ix <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/means-matter/youth-access/>

x <https://www.nationwidechildrens.org/research/areas-of-research/center-for-injury-research-and-policy/injury-topics/general/gun-safety>

xi <http://jaapl.org/content/jaapl/36/4/544.full.pdf>

xii <https://law.justia.com/codes/maryland/2016/criminal-law/title-4/subtitle-1/section-4-104>

xiii [Reexamining the Association Between Child Access Prevention Gun Laws and Unintentional Shooting Deaths of Children | American Academy of Pediatrics \(aappublications.org\)](#)

xiv <https://giffords.org/lawcenter/gun-laws/policy-areas/child-consumer-safety/safe-storage/>

xv Emma C. Hamilton, et al., "Variability of Child Access Prevention Laws and Pediatric Firearm Injuries," *Journal of Trauma and Acute Care Surgery* 84, no. 4 (2018): 613–619. See also, Peter Cummings, David C. Grossman, Frederick P. Rivara, and Thomas D. Koepsell, "State Gun Safe Storage Laws and Child Mortality Due to Firearms," *JAMA* 278, no. 13 (1997): 1084–1086; Daniel W. Webster, Jon S. Vernick, April M. Zeoli, and Jennifer A. Manganello, "Association Between Youth-focused Firearm Laws and Youth Suicides," *JAMA* 292, no. 5 (2004): 594–601; Jeffrey DeSimone, Sara Markowitz, and Jing Xu, "Child Access Prevention Laws and Nonfatal Gun Injuries," *Southern Economic Journal* 80, no. 1 (2013): 5–25.

xvi <https://www.srcd.org/research/access-firearms-increases-child-and-adolescent-suicide/#:~:text=A%20recent%20study%20estimated%20that,case%20today%2C%20to%2030%25.>

Please join Marylanders to Prevent Gun Violence &
National Association of Social Workers – Maryland Chapter
in Support of Child Access Prevention Legislation
in the 2022 Maryland General Assembly

American Academy of Pediatrics – Maryland Chapter
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Baltimore Behavioral Health Systems
City of Takoma Park
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Disability Rights Maryland
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Maryland Clinical Social Work Coalition
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