



## **FPCP GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION TASK FORCE BACKGROUND AND 2020-21 INITIATIVES**

### **I. SYNOPSIS**

With close to 400 million guns in civilian hands, the U.S. has more guns per person than any other country, at about 1.3 guns per person (followed by Serbia, then Yemen).<sup>1</sup> With 4% of the world's population, the U.S. has 50% of the civilian-owned guns and exceptionally loose restrictions on acquiring guns, assault weapons, and ammunition magazines.<sup>2</sup> While a number of gun owners are responsible, gun violence in the U.S. continues to surge, especially in these pandemic times and in Philadelphia, which now is only second to Chicago in gun violence;<sup>3</sup> and deaths of children in 2020 were up by 68% as of mid-August.<sup>4</sup> Efforts for common sense restrictions or solutions, many supported by a majority of citizens, are politicized, polarizing, and are usually obstructed by lobbying interests.

The PC(USA), since the late 1960s, has advocated the involvement of its membership in addressing the national epidemic of gun violence, most recently in the 2014 Gun Violence Prevention Overture adopted by the General Assembly (attached as Appendix 1 and summarized in Part III).

The FPCP Gun Violence Prevention Task Force, under the auspices of the Missions Committee, plans a number of initiatives in 2020-21, to engage the congregation and community regarding this issue, as presented in Section IV (timeline and summary). These initiatives are starting points and community engagement is an ongoing priority.

### **II. GUN VIOLENCE IN THE U.S.**

Gun possession is a fiery flashpoint topic in the U.S. The concept is politicized to the point of almost shutting down any constructive discussion from different viewpoints, while daily death tolls in the U.S. from irresponsible gun use are shocking – even surpassing some war zones – and are estimated to be at least 100 per day.

We are a uniquely gun-oriented society, with sales soaring in these times of anxiety and uncertainty<sup>5</sup>, and the carrying of weapons being encouraged in many political arenas.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/maps-and-graphics/mapped-the-countries-with-the-most-guns/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2019/08/05/world-thinks-americas-gun-laws-are-crazy-theyre-right/> (This report was in 2019 and gun sales have surged in 2020)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.inquirer.com/news/philadelphia-gun-violence-homicides-emergency-hearing-city-council-20200811.html>

<sup>4</sup> <https://6abc.com/philadelphia-gun-violence-shootings-violent-weekend-in-news/6362552/>

<sup>5</sup> An estimated 1.9 million additional guns were sold in March and April 2020 compared to the same time period last year. <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/covid-19s-impact-include-20-firearm-suicides-day/story?id=71635386>

According to a Pew Research study<sup>6</sup> and a number of other sources:

- Estimates of the number of guns in the U.S. range from 300 million (about 1 per person) to even 600 million.<sup>7</sup>
- Two-thirds of adults in the U.S. own guns; of that number, 66% own more than one; and 67% say the main reason is for protection.
- 50% of adults in the U.S. grew up with guns; 72% have fired a gun and 44% know someone who has been shot.
- Firearms are the leading cause of death for American children and teens.<sup>8</sup>
- Gun deaths in the U.S. in 2019<sup>9</sup> were estimated at close to 40,000.
- Suicides make up about 60% of the total number of gun deaths in the U.S.
- There were roughly 400 mass shootings in the U.S. in 2019 alone (which number does not include many shootings in cities, especially involving black populations).

Our City of Philadelphia is particularly impacted, especially being in Pennsylvania, known for its ease of buying and trafficking guns (no license or registration needed to buy guns; no background check needed for buying semi-automatic rifles).<sup>10</sup> In 2019, over 1,352 people were shot in Philadelphia (including over 100 children),<sup>11</sup> with about 360 deaths by gun violence.<sup>12</sup> On August 15, 2020, the Philadelphia Inquirer reported that shootings have increased by 38%, deaths by over 30%, and over 100 children shot.

Gun violence, whether suicides, unintentional killings by or of children or others due to unlocked guns in the home, domestic violence, heat-of-the-moment shootings, or other deaths, is corrosive to our society. It inflicts traumatic and long-lasting devastation on survivors: family, friends, witnesses, and the community, as well as a physical, psychological and economic toll due to non-lethal but lasting injuries.

Active shooter training is the norm in many schools, workplaces, and some churches, with no training required to purchase a gun (unlike to drive a car). News reports show pro-gun demonstrators slinging multiple firearms in defiance of governmental authorities and in the name of personal liberty, while people are shot or threatened by gun violence in disputes related to pandemic concerns, workplace grudges, political gatherings, and/or lawful protests.

Common sense solutions make little legislative headway, even when advocated by a majority<sup>13</sup>, and “They want to take your guns!” refrains are simplistically chanted to scare gun owners against reasonable efforts to regulate gun possession. Then there are the many depictions of Jesus with a gun, readily available on the Internet and elsewhere, and those who link Christianity with carrying firearms.

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<sup>6</sup> The 2017 study was partially updated in 2019: <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/10/22/facts-about-guns-in-united-states/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://bearingarms.com/jenn-j/2017/06/27/more-than-600-million-firearms-in-america/>

<sup>8</sup> [https://everytownresearch.org/gun-violence-america/#foot\\_note\\_17](https://everytownresearch.org/gun-violence-america/#foot_note_17)

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/past-tolls>

<sup>10</sup> City of Philadelphia Action Guide, Gun Control Policies: <https://www.phila.gov/2018-03-20-gun-control-policies/>

<sup>11</sup> [www.phillypolice.com/crime-maps-stats](http://www.phillypolice.com/crime-maps-stats)

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.ceasefirepa.org/general-interest/100-children-shot-in-philadelphia-in-2019-so-far/>; <https://6abc.com/murder-rate-philadelphia-homicide-homicides-in/5802150/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/10/22/facts-about-guns-in-united-states/>

The focus and interest of the current NRA is not what it was in our grandparents' time and there is still debate over limiting access to semi-automatic weapons (shooting up to 600 rounds per minute) or fully automatic weapons, as well as requiring background checks, with resistance based on expansive interpretations of the Second Amendment right to bear arms, passed in 1791 ("A well-regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed").

Gun violence in the U.S. is a public health crisis as well as a source of national disunity and a major challenge for constructive communication and action, which are critically needed.

### **III. THE PC(USA) SINCE THE LATE 1960s**

The devastation from gun violence in the U.S. is not abating, especially with gun sales skyrocketing with the pandemic and fears stoked by the divisive political climate, but it also is not new.

Since the late 1960s, the PC(USA) General Assembly has called for controls on the sale and possession of firearms, with multiple and extensive resolutions passed as of 1976. The most recent one was in 2014 (full text in Appendix 1) and it calls for:

- formation of support, healing and advocacy groups for those who have experienced gun violence in their families;
- opposition to legislation that exempts gun manufacturers and marketers from legal liability and/or financial accountability for the medical and security costs of predictable gun misuse and availability to criminals, the unstable, and the self-destructive;
- opposition to "stand your ground" and other legislation that may entitle gun owners to shoot before taking alternative measures (such as relying on law enforcement and/or other de-escalation techniques) in perceived defense of persons or property;
- encouraging church sessions and PC(USA) entities that own property to declare their particular premises and gatherings to be gun-free zones;
- raising the age for handgun ownership to 21;
- supporting legislation to ban semiautomatic assault weapons, armor-piercing handgun ammunition and .50-caliber rifles; and
- advocacy in support of state and federal legislation to regulate ammunition.

Further, in 2019, the PC(USA) appointed the Rev. Deanna Hollas as Gun Violence Prevention Minister, the first position of its kind, and the Presbyterian Mission's Peacemaking Program offers many resources, including webinars and the Gun Violence Prevention Congregational Tool Kit.

### **IV. 2020-21 PLANS FROM THE GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION TASK FORCE**

The FPCP Gun Violence Prevention Task Force<sup>14</sup> coalesced under the auspices of the Missions Committee in 2019, to coordinate FPCP efforts and to:

- 1) emphasize that being against gun violence is not the same as being against responsible gun ownership;
- 2) determine how best to identify, learn from, and use available educational resources and organizations addressing gun violence; and

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<sup>14</sup> Current members are Andrea Bowman, chair, and Anita McLarin, Carol Cook, Cindy Jarvis, Diane Rogers, Jeannie Bohner, Kay Keenze, Suellen Smith, Susan Davis, and, ex officio, Baron Mullis.

- 3) promote civil, informed discourse between varying viewpoints and seek a common understanding that improves our community.

To advance these goals, the following steps are anticipated for 2020-21 (as well as having had Task Force trainings from Interfaith Philadelphia and CeaseFirePA), as we seek to inform the FPCP community about our group (for communicating any interests or concerns) and provide information, education, programs, speakers, and discussion for the FPCP and extended community, to broaden awareness and support.

**SEPTEMBER – Communication to Congregation**, re: the reason for concern about gun violence prevention; PC(USA) support for gun violence initiatives and the 2014 overture; and intended activities by the GVP Task Force through spring of 2021

**LATE SEPTEMBER – EARLY OCTOBER – Purple ribbon installation** on outdoor railings, and related worship opportunities, to commemorate victims of gun violence

**LATE OCTOBER – EARLY NOVEMBER – Film and discussion** by the Women of Wit & Wisdom and any other FPCP church focus groups or others

**JANUARY – Targeted letter-writing campaign regarding proposed legislation**, at the state, federal and/or local level

**FEBRUARY – Souls Shot exhibit** (with a community open, month-long exhibit, kicked-off with an opening that includes artists and families of victims and invites the greater community, coordinated by Cindy Jarvis under the auspices of the Missions Committee)

**MARCH or thereafter in the spring – CE offering of perhaps several parts/weeks**, under the auspices of and coordinated by the CE Committee, which might include: 1) speakers, 2) an interchurch initiative on book reading and discussion, and/or 3) any or part of the curricula proposed in the Gun Violence Prevention Congregational Tool Kit.

## APPENDIX 1

### **PC(USA) GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2014 OVERTURE TEXT – On Gun Violence Prevention** as Adopted by the 221st General Assembly (2014) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

In response to Gun Violence, Gospel Values: Mobilizing in Response to God’s Call, which calls us to “encourage the church at every level—from individual member to congregation, presbytery, synod, and national church—to become informed and active in preventing gun violence” and urges that “the church take responsibility to build public awareness of gun violence and the epidemic of preventable gun-related deaths” (Minutes, 2010, Part I, pp. 830ff, electronic version), the Presbytery of Hudson River, Synod of the Northeast, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), respectfully overtures the 221st General Assembly (2014) to do the following:

1. Direct the Presbyterian Mission Agency to a. provide models for congregational and local ecumenical forums to explore the dynamics of gun violence in their areas, and to select appropriate initiatives for witness and action in their communities, and b. assist in the formation of support, healing, and advocacy groups for those who have experienced gun violence in their families.
2. Encourage synods, presbyteries, and seminaries to develop educational programs that include
  - a. the theological and pastoral care issues raised by murder, suicide, domestic violence, and wounding by gun violence,
  - b. a means of public acknowledgement of grief and repentance in worship and in communal events, and
  - c. links between those who have suffered from gun violence and existing support, healing, and advocacy groups.
3. Commend Presbyterian Mission Agency for the development and dissemination of the film Trigger: The Ripple Effects of Gun Violence, and the inclusion of mass shootings among the disasters addressed by PDA disaster response teams; and encourage the continuation of these important efforts.
4. Direct the PC(USA) and its constituent parts to recommit itself to work with federal, state, and local legislators to:
  - a. oppose legislation that exempts gun manufacturers and marketers from legal liability and/or financial accountability for the medical and security costs of predictable gun misuse and availability to criminals, the unstable, and the self-destructive;
  - b. support the disclosure of funds spent by gun manufacturers on lobbying, campaign contributions, and other legislative strategies that serve to undermine the protection of U.S. citizens from the highest rates of gun violence in the world;
  - c. oppose “stand your ground” and other legislation that may entitle gun owners to shoot before taking alternative measures (such as relying on law enforcement and/or other de-escalation techniques) in perceived defense of persons or property;
  - d. oppose legislation designed to permit and encourage the carrying of weapons in all areas of life, including houses of worship, noting that those in possession of guns are four times more likely to experience gun violence;
  - e. support legislation to require licensing, registration, and waiting periods to allow comprehensive background checks, and cooling-off periods;

- f. support legislation to close the ‘gun show loophole’ by requiring background checks for all gun buyers;
  - g. support legislation to ban semiautomatic assault weapons, armor piercing handgun ammunition, and .50 caliber sniper rifles;
  - h. support legislation to advocate for new technologies to aid law-enforcement agencies to trace crime guns and promote public safety;
  - i. support legislation to raise the age for handgun ownership to the age of twenty-one;
  - j. following the recommendation of the International Association of Chiefs of Police, support laws to ‘require judges and law enforcement to remove guns from situations of domestic violence, as well as from people whose adjudicated mental illness, drug use, or previous criminal record suggests the possibility of violence,’ and to increase police training in nonviolent proactive intervention;
  - k. advocate that federal and state governments enact legislation to regulate ammunition, guided by Gun Violence Gospel Values, as approved by the 219th General Assembly (2010);
  - l. Support the development, promotion, and use of ‘smart gun’ and ‘smart ammunition’ technologies that will help to prevent unintended and accidental shootings and aid law enforcement in reducing gun violence.
5. Consistent with Gun Violence, Gospel Values: Mobilizing in Response to God’s Call, Recommendation 9 (page 2; see also Minutes, 2010, Part I, p. 831, electronic version), which reads “we recommend that churches and other entities prominently display signs that prohibit carrying guns onto their property,” we strongly encourage
- a. the session of each PC(USA) congregation to declare their particular premises and gatherings to be gun-free zones by voting to adopt the following (or similar) policy and recording it in their minutes: “Individuals (other than active law enforcement officers) are prohibited from carrying guns onto this property,” and to publicize this policy by prominently displaying appropriate signage, such as one of the samples attached, which can be downloaded from a website such as the Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, etc.; [See sign samples in this Toolkit, Action Resources, and on the back cover]
  - b. all PC(USA) entities that own property (including but not limited to the Office of the General Assembly (OGA), synods, presbyteries, camps and conference centers, educational institutions, etc.) to declare their particular premises and gatherings to be gun-free zones by adopting the following or a similar policy as indicated by official vote and recorded in the minutes: “Individuals (other than active law-enforcement officers) are prohibited from carrying guns onto this property,” and to publicize this policy by prominently displaying appropriate signage, such as one of the samples attached, which can be downloaded from a website such as Presbyterian Peacemaking Program, Presbyterian Peace Fellowship, etc.; [See sign samples in this Toolkit, p. 52 and on the back cover]
  - c. individual Presbyterians to bear witness to the gospel value of peacemaking and to build safer and more secure communities by advocating for similar gun-free zone policies in their workplaces, schools, neighborhood businesses, and gathering places. (2014 General Assembly Vote: 484 affirming, 87 opposed, or 85% approval) Action was item 09-07 and can be found here: <https://www.pc-biz.org/#/search/4627>