

Gun Violence Prevention

WRJ Board of Directors Statement (June 2013)

“Do not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor.” ~Leviticus 19:16

The issue of gun violence prevention is again in the forefront of consciousness in the United States. Resolutions to strengthen gun controls have been in front of the United States Senate and in the legislatures of many states. Though recently defeated in the U.S. Senate, it is likely that some proposals to strengthen the restrictions on gun purchases will be revisited.

In 1993, at its Biennial Assembly, Women of Reform Judaism passed a resolution calling for gun control. The need for the implementation of that resolution and for new gun violence prevention measures has become even more apparent.

The tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut, serves as a grave reminder of the plague of gun violence that affects our nation. With recent mass-shootings at a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, a mall in Portland, Oregon, a Sikh Gurdwara in Oak Creek Wisconsin, Virginia Tech University campus, the shooting of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and others outside of a shopping center in Tucson, Arizona, it is clear that there is no safe haven from gun violence.

Despite the high profile of mass shootings, such newsworthy events account for only a small percentage of gun violence. Our nation suffers from gang-wars, drive-by and random shootings, children with guns, quarrel resolution by guns, suicides, and countless homicides.

According to the FBI and United States Department of Justice, more than 30,000 Americans are killed annually with guns in homicides, suicides and accidents. Nearly 12,000 of these gun-related deaths are murders. And with more than 300 million firearms in private possession, the United States ranks highest in the world in per-capita gun ownership.

While many claim that gun violence can be stemmed only by a greater proliferation of weapons, we recognize that a firearm used in the home is 22 times more likely to be used in a homicide, suicide, or unintentional death than it is for self-defense (Center for Injury Control, Emory University, August 1998).

Since the important enactment of the Brady Bill in 1994, more than 2.1 million individuals have been prevented from buying weapons because of their failure to pass a criminal background check. Although this legislation has been instrumental in preventing criminals and those who pose a threat to society from purchasing firearms, we recognize a great loophole in current legislation. Because the system of background checks implemented by the Brady Bill applies only to weapon sales from gun stores, criminals are able to bypass such checks by purchasing their weapons from gun shows, classified ads, and from online sellers. This loophole jeopardizes the efficacy of gun checks and must be closed in order to prevent criminals from gaining access to firearms.

Many states have taken important measures to limit the sale and transfer of firearms in order to curb the rise of gun violence. Because current Federal law does not criminalize the interstate transfer of weapons, criminals know that they can bypass state regulations on firearms with little reprimand. Established gun-trafficking routes undermine the ability of states to enforce regulations and to ensure the safety and security of their constituencies. Like-wise, it is not a Federal crime to participate in straw-purchasing, allowing criminals to obtain weapons through second-hand purchases. It is crucial that the Federal government criminalize gun trafficking and straw-purchasing.

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The increased militarization of civilian weapons also threatens domestic security. Semi-automatic assault weapons, such as those used by the shooters in Newtown and Aurora, allow shooters to fire 30 or more rounds of ammunition without reloading. Semi-automatic assault weapons and the high-capacity magazines they use must be banned.

While gun violence prevention advocates work to enhance gun regulations, opponents continue to push for counterproductive laws. One such measure is conceal-carry reciprocity, which would require that all states recognize the conceal-carry permits issued by other states. If passed, this measure would undermine states' abilities to enforce their own laws. One other dangerous proposal is to arm teachers and to militarize our nation's schools. While proponents of this measure argue that arming our teachers will prevent gun violence, little evidence supports such a claim. Recent history shows that armed guards at Columbine High School in Colorado and at Fort Hood in Texas were unable to stop shooters. The militarization of schools will not increase school safety. Recognizing that school shootings make up a miniscule portion of all mass shootings, and an even smaller portion of all shootings, it is clear that plans to arm teachers are more of a publicity stunt than they are aimed to combat gun violence.

Accidental gun deaths can be avoided by enacting laws which require that guns have proper safety locks when not in use. Failure to require safety locks allows children playing with guns to accidentally shoot and kill others. These laws are simple to implement and can save lives.

It should be noted that Canada has very strict gun control laws that have served it well in preventing the carnage that we see in the United States. To the extent that gun control can be implemented in the United States along the Canadian model while respecting recent Supreme Court interpretations of the Second Amendment, the United States should follow the lead of Canada.

Given the danger we all face from the proliferation of guns in the United States, the Women of Reform Judaism, reaffirms its commitment to gun control and calls upon all its American sisterhoods to:

1. Urge the immediate enactment of legislation that would:
 - Require background checks for all gun sales.
 - Make gun trafficking and straw purchasing a federal crime.
 - Ban assault weapons and high-capacity magazines.
2. Oppose legislation that would:
 - Arm teachers and/or put weapons in schools, except for licensed security personnel.
 - Force states to recognize the conceal-carry permits of other states.
3. Support state legislation to limit conceal and carry permits, to require safety locks for guns, would require background checks for all gun sales, make gun trafficking and straw purchasing a state crime, and would ban assault weapons and high-capacity magazines.
4. Continue to educate constituencies, congregations, and communities to become knowledgeable advocates for strong gun violence prevention measures; and work jointly with temple youth groups to the same end.