

# GIFFORDS LAW CENTER

TO PREVENT GUN VIOLENCE

## MEMORANDUM

**TO** Interested Parties

**FROM** Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence

**DATE** March 18, 2020

**RE** The Importance of Safe Gun Storage During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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As the coronavirus pandemic sweeps across America, communities are increasingly urging residents to practice social distancing to help slow the spread. While families are contending with tremendous disruptions to daily life and nearly unprecedented uncertainty, COVID-19 also presents a life-threatening risk for America's young people: unsecured guns in the house.

Recent data indicate that approximately [4.6 million children and teens](#) in the United States live in homes where loaded guns are kept unsecured. Two of the greatest threats posed by unsecured guns to children, teens, and young adults are accidental shootings and suicide.

We must ensure that firearms are properly secured to protect the millions of young Americans who are spending significantly greater periods of time in their homes. By practicing safe storage—keeping unattended firearms unloaded and locked, with ammunition stored separately—gun owners can significantly reduce the risks of unintentional shootings and firearm suicide and save lives.

## Unsecured Guns Discovered by Children and Teens Lead to Unintentional Shootings

On January 25, 2020, a [three-year-old](#) in Baton Rouge, Louisiana who discovered a loaded and unlocked gun shot and killed himself. Less than 24 hours earlier, a five-year-old across town had shot himself in the hand.

As demonstrated by the tragedies in Baton Rouge, children as young as three are strong enough to fire some types of handguns. In one study, [73% of children](#) under age 10 living in homes with guns reported knowing the location of their parents' firearms, and 36% admitted they had handled the weapons. Many of these children handled guns without their parents' knowledge. Nearly a quarter of parents did not know that their children had handled a gun in their house.

When children and teens have unsupervised access to firearms, tragedies are all but inevitable. According to the CDC, [888 children under the age of 18 died from unintentional gunshot wounds between 2009 and 2018 in the United States](#). Among these victims were 598 children ages 14 and under. Children ages five to 14 are more than [20 times](#) more likely to be killed in unintentional shootings in the US than in other high-income countries.

The exact number may be even higher: an [investigation](#) by the *New York Times* in 2013 found that unintentional shootings “occurred roughly twice as often as the records indicate, because of idiosyncrasies in how such deaths are classified by the authorities.”

## **Unsecured Guns in the Home Make Suicides More Likely**

Many people, young and old, may be experiencing increased anxiety and depression during this time due to fear of infection, financial strain, social isolation, and other stressors related to social distancing and the uncertainty of this pandemic. Data shows that during a crisis, easy access to guns [significantly increases the risk of death by suicide](#).

Studies have demonstrated that the risk of suicide among minors is significantly higher in homes where a firearm is kept loaded and/or unlocked. And tragically, youth firearm suicide has been on the rise in recent years. A [2017 study](#) by CDC researchers found that youth firearm suicide rose dramatically between 2007 and 2014, with gun suicides among minors 10 years old and older spiking 60 percent in that period. The most current CDC data available also indicates that this alarming trend continued from 2014 to 2018, with firearm suicide among minors 10 years and older increasing by 36%.

With the temporary closures of colleges and universities, young adults around the country are returning to their homes or the homes of family and friends, where unsecured guns will put them at particular risk. Young adults [ages 18 to 25](#) experience the highest rates of serious mental illness of all Americans. Suicide attempts that result in death or treatment in a hospital peak between ages [16 and 21](#). It is well-documented that the biological processes that take place during late adolescence and young adulthood predispose these individuals to [riskier and less controlled behavior](#).

While suicide attempts with a firearm are fatal [84% of the time](#), people who attempt suicide by other means are much more likely to survive in both the short and long term—[90% of survivors](#) do not go on to die by suicide. Now more than ever, it is imperative that guns do not fall into the hands of minors and young adults in crisis.

## **Safe Gun Storage Saves Lives**

Fortunately, research has shown that keeping guns stored unloaded and locked can prevent unintentional shootings, suicides, and [other types of gun violence](#).

A 2019 [study](#) by Harvard researchers suggests 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. Twenty-seven states and the District of Columbia have enacted a wide range of [child access prevention](#) (CAP) laws that impose liability on gun owners who allow minors access to firearms. Numerous studies over the past 20 years have found that CAP 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 with stronger laws.

Safe storage practices have been proven effective at reducing gun suicide among adult gun owners as well as minors. A 2004 [study](#) indicated that people who stored their firearms safely were less likely to die by firearm suicide than people who stored their firearms unlocked and/or loaded.

## **A Call to Gun Owners: The Time for Safe Storage is Now**

During this worldwide pandemic, all Americans are being called on to change our behavior for the safety and well-being of vulnerable populations and society as a whole. Let this serve as a renewed call to gun owners to do the same with regards to their firearms. Safely storing firearms will protect vulnerable populations during the pandemic, and in the foreseeable future, long after COVID-19 is contained.

## **Experts Available for Comment**

Giffords experts are available to talk about safe storage and other aspects of how gun violence will be impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak. Please don't hesitate to reach out to [media@giffords.org](mailto:media@giffords.org) to speak with any of our experts.

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## **ABOUT GIFFORDS LAW CENTER**

For over 25 years, the legal experts at Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence have been fighting for a safer America by researching, drafting, and defending the laws, policies, and programs proven to save lives from gun violence.