

OVT-009] On Advocating for Reduction of Firearm Violence

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[OVT-009]

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Recommendation

The Synod of the Covenant overtures the 224th General Assembly (2020) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to do the following:

1. Direct the Presbyterian Mission Agency, through the Office of Public Witness, to advocate for federal laws that would establish
 - extreme risk and protection orders (so-called red-flag laws) that allow a court to intervene by removing weapons of violence when someone shows warning signs of impending violence either to themselves or others;
 - universal background checks before purchasing firearms in any and all venues; and
 - a ban on the sale and ownership of assault weapons and restrict the use of large capacity ammunition magazines.
2. Call on our Congress to develop and pass federal laws to establish
 - extreme risk and protection orders (so-called red-flag laws) that allows a court to intervene by removing weapons of violence when someone shows warning signs of impending violence either to themselves or others;
 - universal background checks for purchase of firearms in any and all venues; and
 - a ban on the sale and ownership of assault weapons and restrict the use of large capacity ammunition magazines.

Rationale

At the time of the writing of this overture, we are shocked at the senseless and tragic loss of life in Dayton, Ohio, (9 killed and 27 injured), which is in the bounds of our synod, and in El Paso, Texas (22 killed and 26 injured)—both due to mass shootings occurring within hours of each other and where in both cases the shooter used assault weapons capable of firing multiple bullets in seconds.

Such weapons should not be condoned in our communities. And these two mass shootings are the 249th and 250th mass shootings in 2019!

We grieve that such hate and anger is directed at innocent people, in particular immigrants as in El Paso and people of color both in El Paso and Dayton.

As Presbyterians we must speak out.

Red-flag laws have been shown to reduce deaths by suicide. A 2018 study¹ of the effect of risk-based firearm seizure laws in Connecticut and Indiana demonstrated that such laws are associated with a reduction of population-level firearm suicide rates. Moreover, 60 percent of firearm deaths are by suicide,² thus adding to the value of these laws in reducing overall deaths from firearms.

Universal background checks have been shown to reduce firearm violence. According to a review article in the *Annual Review of Public Health*, “some prohibitions for high-risk individuals (e.g., those under domestic violence restraining orders, violent misdemeanants) and procedures for checking for more types of prohibiting conditions are associated with lower rates of violence.”³ Another study of Connecticut’s permit-to-purchase handgun law and homicides found that “Connecticut’s handgun purchaser licensing law is associated with a subsequent reduction in homicide rates ... committed with firearms.”⁴

An argument against universal background checks is that the two instances of mass shooting which recently occurred in El Paso, Texas, and Dayton, Ohio, the shooters purchased the firearms legally. This observation highlights the importance of a ban on the sale of assault weapons, such as those used in most mass shootings, in addition to comprehensive background checks. A ban on large capacity ammunition magazines is also important as they can be used to inflict as much harm as possible to as many people as possible in a very short time. The shooter in Dayton, Ohio, had a 100-bullet magazine at his disposal!

A law on the ban of sale and ownership of assault weapons may be designed with a buyback program for those who owned such weapons before the ban. It has been shown by several studies that such bans decrease the occurrence of mass shootings and the lethality of such shootings.

For example, a study of U.S. gun owners from 1998 to 2015 published in *BMJ (The British Medical Journal)* demonstrated that “States with more permissive gun laws and greater gun ownership had higher rates of mass shootings, and a growing divide appears to be emerging between restrictive and permissive states.”⁵

And in a study of the 1994–2004 federal assault weapons ban and its association with deaths due to mass shootings demonstrated that “mass-shooting related homicides in the United States were reduced during the years of the federal assault weapons ban.”⁶

In conclusion, assault weapons provide mass shooters the ability to kill many people in a very short period of time. In Dayton, Ohio, it took only thirty seconds to kill 9 people and injure 27. There is an alarming increase in occurrence of mass shootings.

Let us heed “The Call to Action”⁷ approved by the 219th General Assembly (2010) of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):

God has provided us with the elements to be agents of change in the world. The change needs to be comprehensive: we need to address the idolatry of guns, the violence that permeates our culture, our obsessions with personal rights over public responsibility, the practices of widespread and indiscriminate sale of military style weapons, as well as the legislation necessary to regulate the accessibility and sale of military weapons disguised as “sporting guns.” We must keep our “eyes on the prize,” of preventing gun violence and the unnecessary deaths and injuries that result. Enough blood has been spilled. We affirm that through good organizational effort animated

by the passion of justice that comes to the people of God through the Holy Spirit, violence can be dramatically reduced.

May our Church rededicate itself to this crucial task.

Endnotes

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3. Daniel W. Webster and Garen J Wintemute. Effects of Policies Designed to Keep Firearms from High-Risk Individuals. *Annual Review Public Health*, Vol. 36:221–37, March 2015. On-line: <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-031914-122516>. *Annual Review of Public*.
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5. Paul M Reeping, Madalena Cerda, Bind Kalesan, Douglas J Wiebe, Sandro Galea, and Chales C Branas. State gun laws, gun ownership, and mass shootings in the US: cross sectional time series. *BMJ* 2019; 364 dos: <https://org/10.1136/bmj.1542>.
6. DiMaggio, C, Avraham J, [Berry C](#), [Bukur M](#), [Feldman J](#), [Klein M](#), [Shah N](#), [Tandon M](#), [Frangos S](#). Changes in U.S. mass shooting deaths associated with the 1994–2004 federal assault weapons ban: Analysis of open-source data. *J Trauma Acute Care Surg*. 2019 Jan; 86(1):11–19. doi: 10.1097/TA.0000000000002060.
7. Gun Violence, Gospel Values: Mobilizing in Response to God's Call. The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP). Minutes, 2010, Part I. pp. 830ff, in particular, p. 842.