

Safe Storage

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Gun control. It's a hot button issue for both Democrats and Republicans, a centerpiece for presidential candidates on what they will do to prevent gun violence, or instead what they will do to protect gun ownership. Gun violence prevention (the term gun control advocates use to refer to the issue and possible solutions) is trying to solve many different forms of gun violence, such as urban violence, police shootings, school and mass shootings, suicides, and domestic violence. With a broad issue like gun control, it's impossible to analyze the entire issue to determine specific causes and solutions. A key, common-sense, first step should be the safe storage of firearms, which has faced fierce opposition even though the unsafe storage of firearms significantly increases the number of deaths each year from suicides, unintentional shootings, and school shootings.

Unsafe storage has not been addressed by Congress and most state legislatures due to the hyper-partisanship that results in gridlock. On one side, Democrats generally push for gun violence prevention measures such as universal background checks, licenses to own firearms, limits on ammunition capacity in magazines, and safe storage. On the other side, Republicans generally oppose any action that they refer to as gun control. The Republican party reached their position through the NRA's lobbying, millions in campaign contributions (OpenSecrets), and a core grassroots base that are "politically engaged and politically active" (Surowiecki). This intense pressure from the NRA has created a culture for the Republican party that the 2nd Amendment, as originally written, is the be-all and end-all regulation necessary.

This 2nd Amendment culture has resulted in little progress in common-sense measures like safe firearm storage laws. Half of all gun owners report not safely storing all their firearms (Crifasi, et al.). With 328 million people in the United States (Census), and a third of Americans owning firearms (Saad), roughly 55 million Americans do not safely store one or more firearms.

Those firearms that are not stored safely dramatically increase the number of suicides in the United States. The lethality of using a firearm during a suicide attempt is an important factor: 90% of suicide attempts by firearm are successful while they only account for 4% of attempted suicides (Everytown). However, access to firearms also increases the likelihood one will be used in a suicide attempt, particularly shown with youth. Doctor Renee M. Johnson and her partners, from Boston University and Harvard Schools of Public Health, researched the ownership of guns involved in youth suicide attempts and found 80% of firearms used in suicides were owned by the family of the deceased youth. With half of gun owners reported to not safely store all their firearms (Crifasi, et al.), a significant number of suicides and attempted suicides may be preventable.

Similarly, unintentional shootings are another source of gun violence that would likely be prevented with safe storage regulations. According to Everytown for Gun Safety, a Gun Violence Prevention organization which compiles firearm statistics, “In 2020 there were at least 369 unintentional shootings by children, resulting in 142 deaths and 242 injuries nationally” (Everytown Index). Furthermore, Matthew Miller and two other researchers from the Harvard School of Public Health, found that unintentional shooting fatalities are more frequent in states that tend to keep guns loaded while stored compared, and even more frequent in states that tend to keep firearms unlocked. An unintentional shooting is what many would consider just an accident; however, these are preventable through common-sense safe storage practices that would drastically decrease the frequency in which we see unintentional shooting fatalities and injuries.

The firearms used in school shootings are often obtained by the school shooter easily, as the firearm was stored unsafely. John Woodrow Cox and Steven Rich, journalists from the

Washington Post, determined that in 145 school shootings since Columbine in 1999, 80% of the mass shooters acquired a firearm from friends or family. We can then determine that with half of firearm owners not securing firearms safely, a significant number of school shootings may be preventable.

The unsafe storage of firearms is a clear problem that directly increases the number of deaths each year from suicides, unintentional shootings, and school shootings. We have a gun violence epidemic that is widespread and normalized. The need for clear data, identification of specific problems of gun violence, exact solutions, and the courage of our leaders to follow through on those solutions is critical for the future of the United States.

Gun violence is an epidemic sweeping across the United States and no single piece of legislation can solve the many facets of the problem. Thousands of suicides, accidental shootings, and mass shootings are preventable each year with safe storage laws. One must first determine how they will judge the success of a safe storage policy and its impact on the broader gun violence epidemic. A successful safe storage policy would meet the following criteria: a robust education campaign for current and future gun owners; a measurable increase of gun storage rates; and a decrease in suicide by firearm.

The first criteria of a successful policy will be the education of all current and future firearm owners. The education of the safe storage law, along with general firearms safety, needs to be incorporated into the rollout of any safe storage policy that hopes to be successful. The effectiveness of any policy that addresses safe storage will only be as effective as the number of people who are aware that the policy even exists, and creating awareness of how their actions can save lives. So this education criteria must extend beyond those who are purchasing their first firearm, but must also retroactively be required for those who have already owned firearms. This

firearm education campaign would in particular have to reach every American regarding the policy's content, but also why it was passed into law. Particularly in regards to firearms, it is not enough to just tell United States citizens that they have to lock their firearm in their home, this education campaign would also have to address the why. *Why is the federal government requiring safe storage? How does safe storage save lives? What does safe storage mean for a firearm owner?* These are the questions every gun owner will have for any safe storage law, making an education campaign a critical part of any policy that hopes to succeed. This criteria would be difficult to measure with hard numbers, but likely will consist of the Center for Disease Control, or CDC, compiling state participation and successful outreach.

The second criteria of a successful policy is that safe storage rates among firearm owners increases by at least 30% over five years. As established in part one, currently only half of gun owners store their firearms safely. This leads to a variety of issues resulting from firearms being too accessible, such as accidental and mass shootings. At its core, any safe storage law must make an improvement directly to the safe storage rate to be considered successful, or even an improvement. The first criteria is necessary to ensure that the safe storage rates of firearm owners increases as well. Measuring this criteria should be done through the CDC by examining both self-reporting surveys administered in each state and comparing the self-reporting data to the volume of safe storage solutions purchased in each state. This would have to be done prior to a policy going into effect, and should be an ongoing study through each of the five years to determine any improvement.

The third criteria of a successful policy should be the reduction of annual suicides by 25% over five years. Safe storage is not the problem in and of itself: the consequences of a lack of safe storage are the problem. The first and second criteria is not enough to be the sole factor to

determine the effectiveness of safe storage laws, as we ultimately need to measure the effectiveness of a gun violence prevention policy in the number of lives saved. Safe storage laws must incorporate the first two criteria of a safe storage policy, an education campaign leading to an increase in safe storage rates, but we must then see this third criteria: a direct causation between safe storage rates increasing and the reduction of suicides annually. Measuring this criteria will likewise have to be accomplished through the CDC. The resources of a federal agency will allow for a complete collection of data from across the country, allowing for a larger sample size and more accurate data. The analysis and breakdown of this data is equally as important, as the CDC will be able to compile a holistic view of gun violence. Specifically, the CDC can compile data about suicides through examining countless death certificates, determining if cause of death was suicide by firearm, and pulling police reports to verify if it household-owned.

The success of a safe storage policy is dependent on three elements: the education of firearm owners to enable safe storage rates to increase, which directly causes a reduction in problems like the suicide rate. The only way to cross the roaring river that is systemically blocking any type of gun violence prevention legislation, is to begin constructing a bridge of solid, consistent, and data-driven policies that tackle the smallest parts of gun violence. A safe storage policy that meets these three criteria can be the first of many gun violence prevention policies that save countless lives.

Gun violence. For decades, our nation has experienced countless mass shootings in public gatherings and schools, record suicides, and more. Many of these deaths are preventable through the implementation of safe storage laws. The problems the United States faces without safe storage laws were identified in part one, and the criteria for a successful safe storage public

policy outlined in part two. It is time to review the good, the bad, and the ugly of three possible public policy solutions: first, a mass education campaign of firearm owners; second, offering tax credits for the purchase of safe storage options; and third, creating a national firearm and storage registry.

The creation of a mass education campaign is the first possible public policy solution. This would entail several components, starting with the creation of a national curriculum for the safe storage education efforts. What a firearm owner is taught about safe storage should not change state to state, with the exception of state-specific data that should be included in the curriculum. This curriculum must provide meaningful data and stories to demonstrate the need for the universal safe storage of firearms. This education campaign would have to be from a federally funded mandate for all states to adopt the safe storage curriculum, and provide the resources necessary for states to quickly implement the safe storage education campaign into their existing infrastructure. This safe storage course would be required by all future firearm owners before the purchase of a firearm, with the best of efforts made to retroactively reach current firearm owners.

An education campaign public policy has a few noteworthy advantages and disadvantages. Educating the public about the need for universal safe storage through accurate information and relevant stories plays into both the logical minds and the emotional hearts humans have. The importance of fanning the flame of responsibility held by gun owners, to encourage them to be part of the solution to gun violence, cannot be overstated. This would likely lead to a greater voluntary participation in safely storing firearms. The education campaign would likely fail to retroactively reach the majority of current firearm owners, which at the minimum is the specific demographic a safe storage public policy needs to reach. Additionally,

probably at least two dozen states will do everything in their power to reject any federal curriculum for safe storage, if they would even implement any federally funded mandate regarding firearms.

Offering tax credits for the purchase of safe storage options is the second possible public policy solution, and the most narrow. Creating a federal income tax credit, designed to pay the firearm owner 150% of the cost of the safe storage option they purchased, would provide an incentive for individuals to voluntarily begin safely storing firearms. 150% of the cost of the safe storage option would allow the firearm owner to reduce their tax liability by the cost of the option, but then more on top as an added benefit and incentive. The safe storage options that should qualify an individual for this tax credit should be a safe, locker, or trigger locks. Any safe storage option can be acceptable, but would have to be reviewed and approved on a case-by-case basis to ensure the safe storage option either a) prevents an unauthorized user from operating the firearm, or b) prevents an unauthorized user from accessing the firearm.

There are a few major advantages and some disadvantages to creating a tax credit for safe storage options. The political viability of a tax credit, as opposed to an education campaign or national firearm and storage registry, is significantly higher. Additionally, tax credits are something that can be widely observed as favored by Republicans, and many Democrats as well. This tax credit would provide the institutional foundation to continue to enact safe storage policies. That said, it is all too likely, given our Congress and its recent history, that this could be the only change enacted. A small solution to a large problem would be messaged as the solution to all of our gun violence problems, and advocating for any more would potentially be futile.

Creating a national firearm and storage registry is the third possible public policy solution, and the most broad. A national firearm and storage registry, or NFSR, would require all

future firearms manufactured to have a clear and well-documented chain from the production plant to the current owner, each weapon identified by its serial number. Additionally, all vendors would be required to report the sale of firearms and safe storage to the NFSR. Transactions between two individuals would still be required to report any transaction of their firearm or safe storage through a self-completed form on the NFSR website, the seller reporting the serial number and whom they sold the weapon to through reporting the information on the buyer's Drivers License. Additionally, all current and future firearm owners would be required to self-report the serial number of any weapons they own or purchase by verifying if it is safely secured by providing the storage method and a copy of the receipt, photo of the storage, or some other type of documentation. For both transactions between individuals and current firearm owners, there is no realistic solution to fully enforce the registration of a firearm. If a weapon is stolen, used in an accidental shooting, suicide, mass shooting, etc. and the chain was not maintained correctly with safe storage information, the firearm owner should be subject to felony charges for gross negligence.

There are many advantages and disadvantages to a national firearm and storage registry. The successful implementation of a national firearm and storage registry would firstly be near impossible given the pushback that would be likely from the National Rifle Association and Republican Party. Additionally, the United States has little of the infrastructure needed for a registry of this size, and so the cost and time to create the registry would be considerable. If successfully adopted however, this possible public policy solution would more than likely dramatically increase the safe storage rates in the United States, reduce suicides and other forms of gun violence, and would have to incorporate an education campaign to inform firearm owners to prevent anyone from reasonably stating they were unaware of this policy.

A mass education campaign for firearm owners, a tax credit for safe storage options, and a national firearm and storage registry; these three proposed public policy solutions are pieces to the larger puzzle of reducing gun violence in the United States through safe storage. None should be readily dismissed, as we are facing an epidemic of gun violence in our nation, and all solutions should be on the table. We are in drastic need of any change to our system that upholds the status quo if we hope to pass any glimmer of hope for the future generations.

Safe storage laws are a necessity given the gun violence epidemic the United States has seen in recent years. Mass shootings, accidental shootings, and suicides are primary problems that result from a lack of safe storage, but it is possible to move our nation forward and prevent these deaths. Starting the conversation about gun violence and safe storage is just the beginning. The first step to adopt an effective public policy to increase safe storage rates by creating a federal income tax credit for the purchase of a safe storage option. Of the possible solutions, this tax credit is the most likely to pass Congress in our current political environment, as this will provide an incentive for firearm owners to store guns safely voluntarily.

The proposed tax credit would have to be implemented by Congress, to insure that every tax-paying citizen has access to the tax credit -regardless of the state they live in. Eligible safe storage options should start with safes, lockers, and trigger locks. Other types of safe storage could also be considered on a case by case basis, or implemented directly into law, through a strong litmus test to the quality of a safe storage option. There should be two qualifiers for other types of safe storage, either a) the storage system prevents an unauthorized individual from using the firearm, or b) prevents an unauthorized individual from obtaining the firearm. The tax credit should provide 150% of the cost of the safe storage option back to the firearm owner, reducing other tax liabilities first. This is designed with an incentive-oriented approach, to effectively

waive the cost of the safe storage option, and pay the firearm owner for purchasing a safe storage option to drive the incentive home. There should be a limit to this tax credit, likely up to \$3,000 and a one-time use unless there is documentable evidence that they require a new safe. Safe storage options are accessible for as low as \$200 with a simple Amazon search. While there are certainly more expensive options available, this tax credit should not allow for exploitation through the purchase of \$50,000 safes or using this tax credit every year.

Now understanding how the tax credit will work, we must examine the biggest hurdles, starting with the current political landscape in Washington. Congress has been crippled by hyper-partisanship, which has caused political dysfunction. The ability of our Congress to draft and pass a piece of legislation has been stunted in recent years. If any safe storage option is to possibly pass in Congress, it must be a moderate, common-sense approach to safe storage that embraces Republican ideals such as lowering taxes. A tax credit can meet this political viability, while other policy proposals will not. Even with this compromise just to take a small step forward, it is still very likely that such a proposal will not be considered, nevermind pass, Congress in a bipartisan manner. If it does not pass across party lines, then as soon as the power shifts from one party to another the tax credit would likely be eliminated.

A tax credit for purchasing a safe storage option is an incentive that would hopefully motivate the American people to move towards safely storing their firearms. However, the next major obstacle of a tax credit is that it does not create any legal requirement for safe storage, and is not necessarily indicative that a firearm is actually stored safely. As this only encourages safe storage, it does not create any consequences for unsafely storing firearms. It is likely that this will be considered by the majority of Congress as the only reform necessary; the tax credit should be the first step, not the only step.

Of the possible public policy options, a tax credit is the most politically viable. As previously noted, it aligns closely with the Republican ideal of lowering taxes. This is important to note, as the likelihood of this proposed policy passing -and staying in effect- is contingent on a bipartisan Congress passing the policy. A tax credit is the least objectionable option for Republicans, in comparison to a national gun registry or mandatory firearm education. Additionally, Democrats would likely favor this solution as the tax credit follows their neo-liberal economic theories, and moves gun reform forward while not going after the firearm manufacturers and retailers. Lastly, part of the idea behind Congress is small, consistent, incremental policy changes. A tax credit does not address many of the issues from unsafe storage, or the larger gun violence epidemic, but it is the first of hopefully more changes.

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