

# Preventing Gun-Related Child Deaths:

The Current State of Firearm Policy and Violence  
Prevention Efforts in Ohio

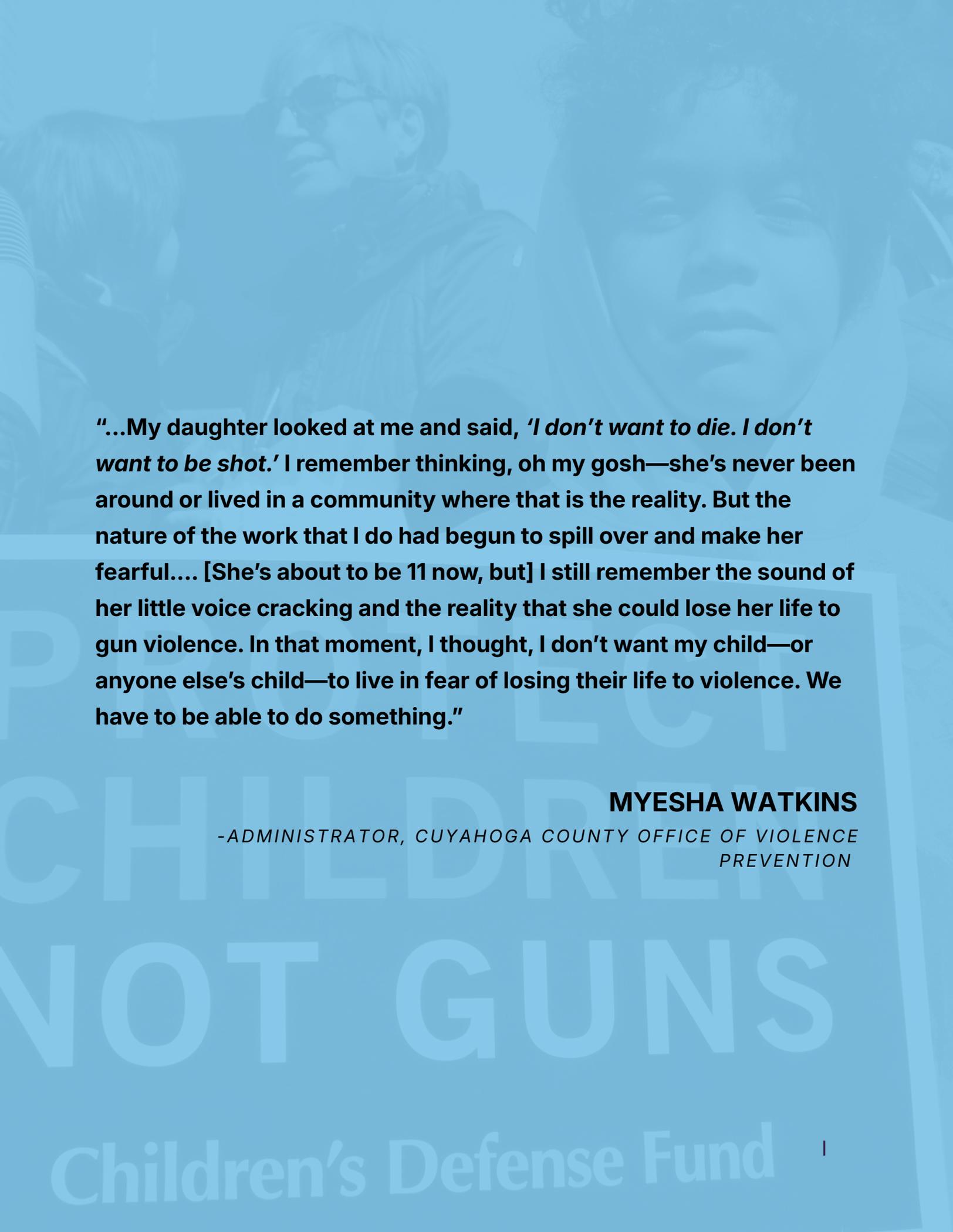
Prepared By *Policy Associate*, Brianna Booker



**PROTECT  
CHILDREN  
NOT GUNS**

Children's Defense Fund

**2025**

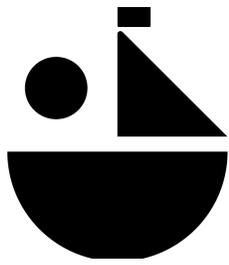


**"...My daughter looked at me and said, 'I don't want to die. I don't want to be shot.' I remember thinking, oh my gosh—she's never been around or lived in a community where that is the reality. But the nature of the work that I do had begun to spill over and make her fearful.... [She's about to be 11 now, but] I still remember the sound of her little voice cracking and the reality that she could lose her life to gun violence. In that moment, I thought, I don't want my child—or anyone else's child—to live in fear of losing their life to violence. We have to be able to do something."**

**MYESHA WATKINS**

*-ADMINISTRATOR, CUYAHOGA COUNTY OFFICE OF VIOLENCE  
PREVENTION*

**Children's Defense Fund** |



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ohio**

## **About Children's Defense Fund-Ohio**

Established in 1981, Children's Defense Fund-Ohio (CDF-OH) is a statewide, multi-issue, child advocacy organization that has worked on behalf of children, young people, and families in Ohio for 45 years. Our mission is to build community so that young people grow up with dignity, hope, and joy.

### **HISTORY OF ADVOCACY:**

This report builds upon Children's Defense Fund's history of gun violence prevention research and advocacy, which includes, among other publications and events:

- The 2023 State of America's Children Report: Gun Violence
- National Day of Social Action, Ohio: Gun Violence, 2023
- Ohio Child Access Prevention, 2018
- Protect Children Not Guns, 2019
- Protect Children Not Guns, 2013

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Note: Structural edits were supported by an AI writing assistant. All policy analyses, findings, and conclusions are those of the author and organization.

# Executive Summary

## Overview

Every child deserves to grow up in an environment that prioritizes their safety. Unfortunately, in the United States, the prevalence of gun violence means this is far from reality. In recent years, firearms have become the leading cause of death for children,<sup>1</sup> leaving many fearful of attending the schools meant to nurture their curiosity and unable to enjoy the neighborhoods where they should be able to live, laugh, and play. In Ohio, this fear has only been exacerbated by recurring instances of negligent firearm storage, a lack of funding for community intervention programs, and a lack of sufficient gun-violence prevention legislation. As such, this report analyzes the most recent state and national data concerning firearm-related youth deaths, synthesizing the studies with community member testimony, to provide legislative recommendations to address gun violence in Ohio.

## Community Engagement

As part of this report, CDF-Ohio held listening sessions and one-on-one interviews to understand the local impacts of gun violence on Ohio's youth. We believe it is essential that the voices of those most impacted be prioritized in conversation, recommendations, and solutions to this topic. Communities represented include Akron, Columbus, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Dayton, Toledo, and the Appalachian region. Participants included school safety teams, community intervention groups, local government actors, faith communities, mothers and families of children killed by firearms, and lay community members. Names of some participants have been removed to protect privacy.

## Definition

This report defines "gun violence" as any harm to youth, whether intentional or unintentional, inflicted using a firearm of any type. To see a full list of those the state of Ohio has lost to Gun violence, including children and teens, you can visit the Ohio Gun Violence Memorial.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Panchal, Nirmita, and Sasha Zitter. 2025. "The Impact of Gun Violence on Children and Adolescents." KFF. <https://www.kff.org/mental-health/the-impact-of-gun-violence-on-children-and-adolescents/>

<sup>2</sup> Gun Violence Memorial. n.d. "Ohio Gun Violence Memorial." <https://gunmemorial.org/OH>

## Key Findings

### Across Age Groups, Child Firearm Deaths Are Higher in Ohio Than Nationwide.

Firearm-related death rate per 100,000 children: Ohio compared to the United States

■ Ohio ■ US

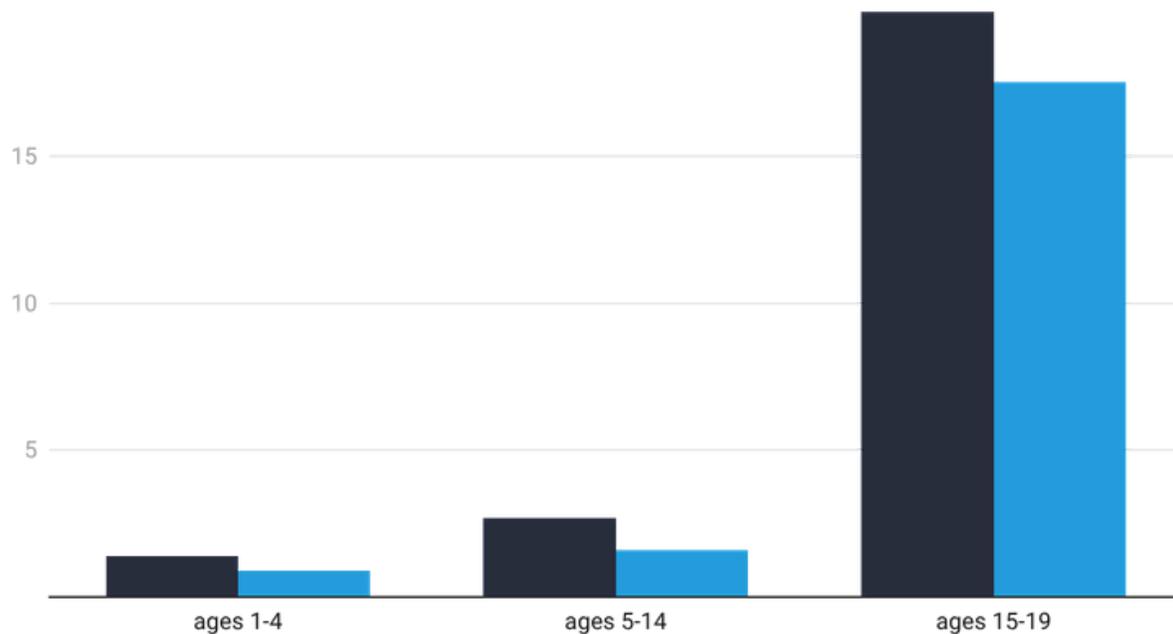


Chart: CDF-Ohio • Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, Multiple Cause of Death by Single Race Files via CDC WONDER Online Database 2021-2023, America's Health Rankings • Created with Datawrapper

Gun violence remains a leading cause of death for children and teens in Ohio. Among these instances, Black youth and young people living in high-poverty urban areas face disproportionate harm, while rural communities experience unique risks tied to firearm normalization and inconsistent safety training. Beyond the profound human toll, gun violence imposes billions of dollars in economic costs on Ohio each year, straining families, local governments, and community systems. These tragedies are closely linked to preventable risk factors, including unsafe firearm storage, gaps in access to prevention resources, and the absence of comprehensive, evidence-based gun safety policies. In the absence of strong statewide protection, communities, schools, and families have taken on much of the responsibility for preventing violence. Despite the demonstrated promise of these groups, many of their efforts remain under-resourced relative to their impact.

## Recommendations

To reduce gun-related deaths and injuries among Ohio's children and teens, we recommend that the General Assembly adopt a comprehensive, prevention-focused approach grounded in community feedback:

### **Reimagine public safety by investing sustainably in community-based violence interventions.**

Ohio should equitably fund community-led prevention efforts alongside traditional public safety strategies. The state should provide long-term, stable funding for local nonprofit organizations, mental health providers, and community intervention programs that have demonstrated success in reducing gun violence, rather than relying on short-term grants or creating duplicative state programs. Existing grant programs should also be reevaluated to use realistic measures of success.

### **Create safe, anonymous pathways for turning in firearms.**

Ohio should consider nonpunitive, anonymous alternatives to traditional police reporting for families or youths who encounter firearms, ensuring weapons can be removed from communities without fear of criminalization.

### **Establish and support gun violence prevention working groups.**

The state should promote collaboration between community organizations, law enforcement, and youth by supporting regional or statewide task forces to break down silos and coordinate strategy.

### **Create a statewide office of violence prevention to expand public education and firearm safety resources.**

Ohio should create an office of violence prevention to distribute accessible, multilingual gun safety and violence prevention materials through schools, faith institutions, and community organizations.

### **Enact Child Access Prevention (CAP) mandates.**

We strongly recommend passing a CAP law requiring firearms in homes to be securely stored. This should be paired with the distribution of free gun locks to prevent youth access and reduce firearm-related suicides and homicides.

### **Expand background checks for private firearm transfers.**

Mandating background checks for private sales would close a critical gap in Ohio law and help prevent firearms from reaching individuals who pose a risk to themselves or others.

# Background

## The Human Cost of Firearms in Ohio 2020-2023

Potential Years of Life Lost to Firearm Deaths (All Intent) Among Children 0–19, per 100,000

Intent	Years of Potential Life Lost
Unintentional	1,176
Homicide	26,219
Suicide	10,463
Undetermined	697

Table: CDF-OH • Source: National Center for Health Statistics-CDC annual mortality data files for WISQARS Fatal data National Electronic Injury Surveillance System-All Injury Program for WISQARS Nonfatal data, an estimated number of hospital visits for injury care that start in an emergency department based on a U.S. nationally representative probability sample of hospitals. Produced by: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, CDC.2020-2023 • Created with Datawrapper

When 11-year-old Queenie Reed was killed by a firearm on New Year's Day in Cincinnati, her community grieved. Stuffed animals were left in memory near the playground where it happened. Groups organized marches to the police headquarters, chanting "Enough is enough," and hundreds attended a balloon release in her honor. "Out of all the things a person could have done in their life, why would you choose kids that had nothing to do with anything?" said Erick Reed, Queenie's father, to the local news outlet.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, vigils like those held for Queenie are far from an anomaly in Ohio, where an estimated 185 children and teens are lost to gun violence each year.<sup>4</sup>

To understand the impact of gun violence on youth in Ohio, it is necessary to examine both recent tragedies like that of the Reed family and the legislative history shaping approaches to gun violence prevention. Since 2012, when an armed intruder entered Sandy Hook Elementary School and killed several staff members and students, there have been increased calls for states to adopt preventative measures to reduce gun violence affecting children.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Madden, Tyler. 2026. "Loved Ones Mourn 11-Year-Old Killed in Park Shooting, Call for Preventive Action." Local 12 News (WKRC). <https://local12.com/news/local/loved-ones-mourn-11-year-old-killed-laurel-park-shooting-call-preventive-action-west-end-cincinnati-ohio-queenerre-reed-queenie-kill-shot-shooting-shots-fired-police-investigation-peace-walk-march-honor-memorial-memory-violence-response-funeral>

<sup>4</sup> Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund. 2025. "Gun Violence in Ohio." EveryStat. <https://everystat.org/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/Ohio.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Children's Defense Fund–Ohio. n.d. "CDF-OH Gun Violence Protection." <https://www.childrensdefense.org/cdf-in-the-states/ohio/policy-priorities-in-ohio/cdf-oh-gun-violence-protection/>

These calls have included efforts focused on schools, local neighborhoods, and communities. Here in Ohio, many of those requests have included calls to enact child access prevention (CAP) mandates, an effective<sup>6</sup> type of legislation designed to prevent children from accessing guns in their homes. While 35 other states have implemented various forms of CAP, attempts in the Ohio legislature have been unsuccessful, even when less punitive alternatives emphasizing support for gun-owner choice have been proposed.<sup>7</sup> CAP, however, has not been the sole policy proposal in the state. Additional forms of gun-violence prevention legislation have also been recommended or introduced. For example, in recent years, Governor DeWine's 17-point plan to reduce instances of gun-related violence in the state gained traction.<sup>8</sup> However, several key elements of the plan have been disregarded by the General Assembly, including the implementation of Universal Background Checks, which can significantly reduce gun-related homicides.<sup>9</sup>

As policymakers have debated how best to respond to these tragedies, proposed solutions have often encountered social resistance rooted in concerns about self-defense, government overreach, and enforcement approaches. Opponent testimony regarding gun safety legislation in Ohio has frequently asserted that safe storage mandates, including CAP laws, undermine the ability for self-defense against intruders. However, research<sup>10</sup> contradicts this assertion, showing that unsecured firearms are less effective at deterring intruders and more likely to be used in a homicide or suicide by someone within the household, significantly increasing risks to families.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, secure gun storage in homes reduces the chance of injury to children and teens in the household by 85%.<sup>12</sup> Beyond opposition to safe-storage mandates, critics have argued that gun violence laws more broadly are ineffective because firearms are frequently obtained illegally; however, research indicates that legislative measures such as Universal Background Checks and enhanced gun-tracing efforts can meaningfully interrupt unlawful procurement.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> RAND Corporation. 2026. "The Effects of Child-Access Prevention Laws." [https://www.rand.org/research/gun\\_policy/analysis/child-access-prevention.html](https://www.rand.org/research/gun_policy/analysis/child-access-prevention.html)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Office of Governor Mike DeWine. 2019. "Proposals to Reduce Gun Violence, Increase Mental Health Prevention, Treatment." <https://governor.ohio.gov/wps/portal/gov/governor/media/news-and-media/20190806>

<sup>9</sup> RAND Corporation. 2023. "Background Checks: Research Review." <https://st-cp.com/wp-content/uploads/bsk-pdf-manager/2024/04/Effects-of-Background-Checks-on-Mass-Shootings.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. 2023. "How Safe and Secure Gun Storage Reduces Injury, Saves Lives." <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/2023/how-safe-and-secure-gun-storage-reduces-injury-saves-lives>

<sup>11</sup> Anglemeyer, Andrew, Tara Horvath, and George Rutherford. 2014. "The Accessibility of Firearms and Risk for Suicide and Homicide Victimization Among Household Members: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis." *Annals of Internal Medicine* 160(2): 101–110. <https://doi.org/10.7326/M13-1301>

<sup>12</sup> Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund. n.d. "Responsible Gun Storage." <https://www.everytown.org/solutions/responsible-gun-storage>

<sup>13</sup> Braga, Anthony A., Philip J. Cook, and others. 2012. "The Sources of Guns to Criminals in the United States." *Journal of Urban Health* 89(5): 992–1003. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3154243/>

The loss of 11-year-old Queenie Reed reminds us that the stakes of these debates are not abstract but human and immediate. Ultimately, gun violence is a preventable crisis, with Ohio's children bearing the costs of legislative inaction and prolonged social discourse.



*Students and parents gather at one of CDF's 2023 National Day of Social Action demonstrations against gun violence.*

# The Impact of Gun Violence

## Firearm-Related Child Deaths Continue to Rise.

Trends in Firearm-related death rate per 100,000 children in Ohio from 2012-2023

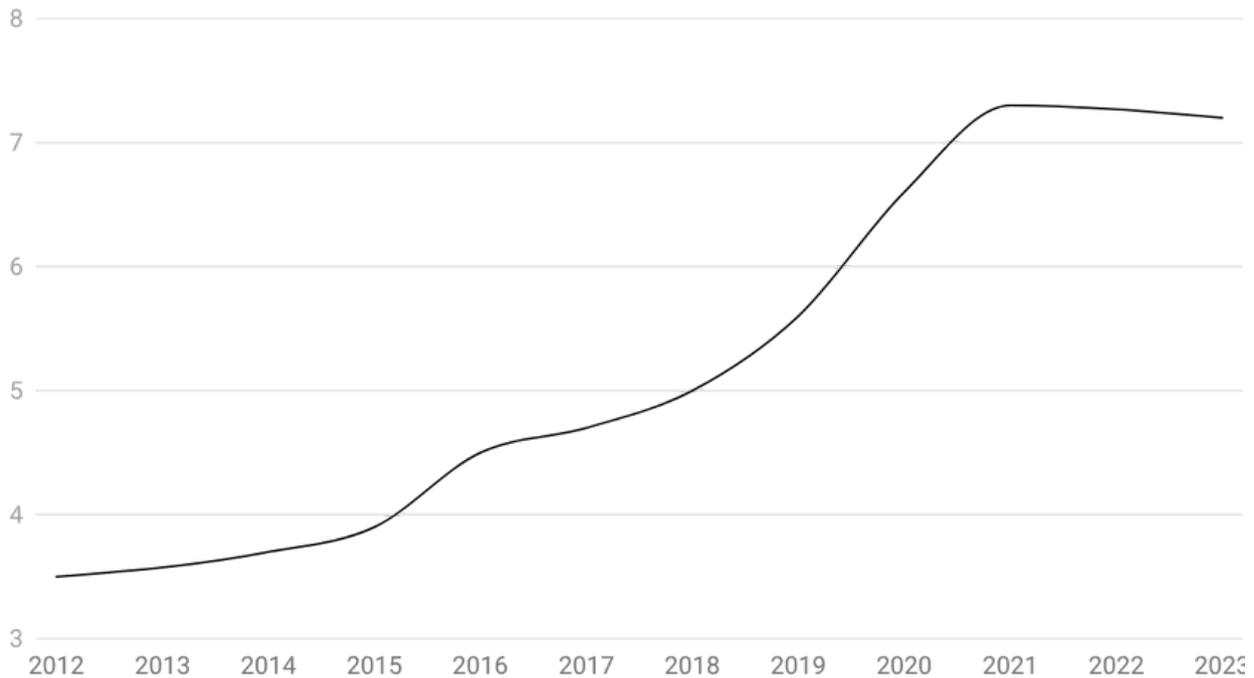


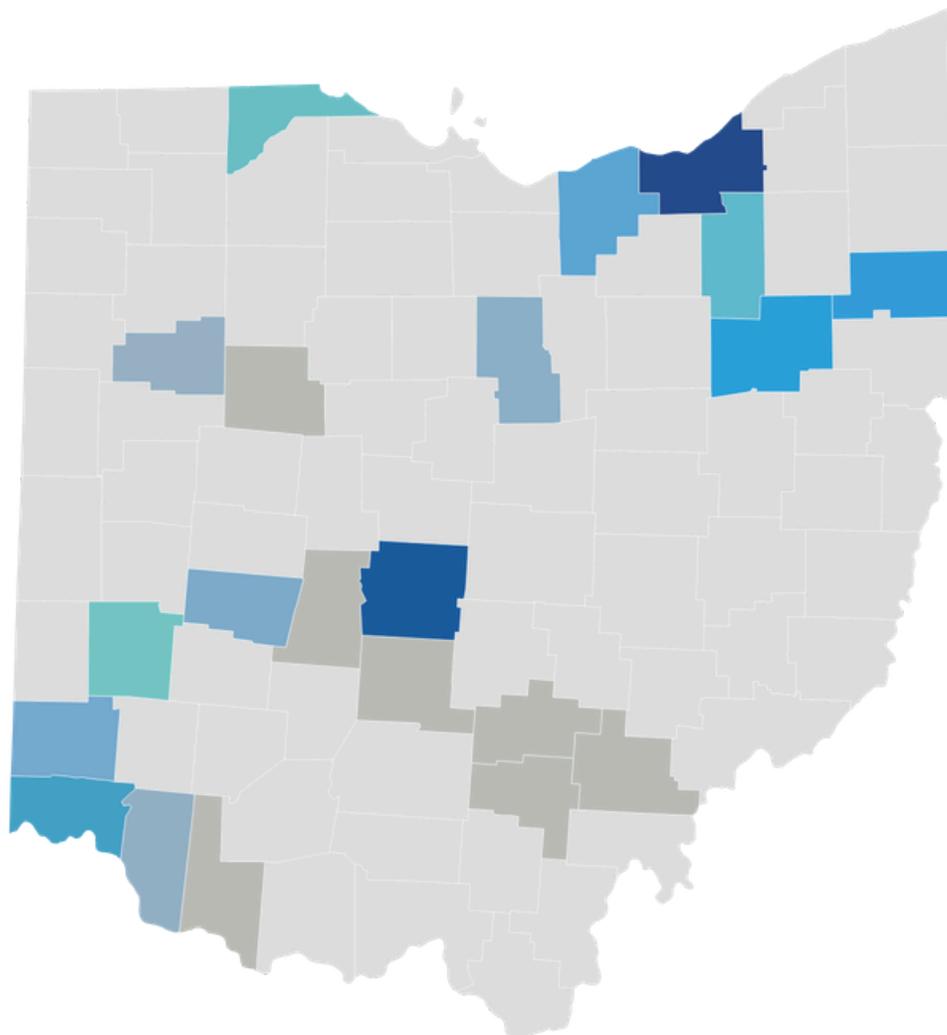
Chart: CDF-OH • Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, Multiple Cause of Death by Single Race Files via CDC WONDER Online Database 2021-2023, America's Health Rankings • Created with Datawrapper

Ohio has seen a consistent rise in firearm-related child deaths in recent years. The consequences, however, do not fall evenly across the state. Patterns of firearm use and harm vary by geography and demographics: youth in metropolitan areas face higher risks of firearm homicide, and youth in rural and suburban areas face higher risks of unintentional injury and firearm suicide. Yet, wherever families live, the danger is severe. As such, Ohioans across the state have voiced frustration with legislative inaction and missteps. As one community member put it, "It's so frustrating to have to keep looking at the news, and seeing what we're seeing, and knowing that our young people are the most important energy in our community, and yet we're losing them to something so stupid... And I know that they are out there, afraid, and stressed..." (Cleveland).

This inaction has shifted much of the prevention burden onto community members, organizations, schools, and faith-based institutions—many of which are building innovative but temporary, under-resourced solutions. Despite their commitment, these groups emphasize that sustained legislative support is essential for their work to be effective and lasting. “We want to do this work,” said one minister from Columbus, Ohio, but they need the backing of lawmakers to do it well. Therefore, to assist legislators in understanding the necessary investments for preventing gun violence, the following section examines how it manifests in various regions of Ohio and highlights community-led initiatives aimed at tackling the issue.

### Child Firearm Deaths by County

Geographic Distribution of Firearm-Related Deaths (All Intent) Among Ohio Youth Ages 0–19



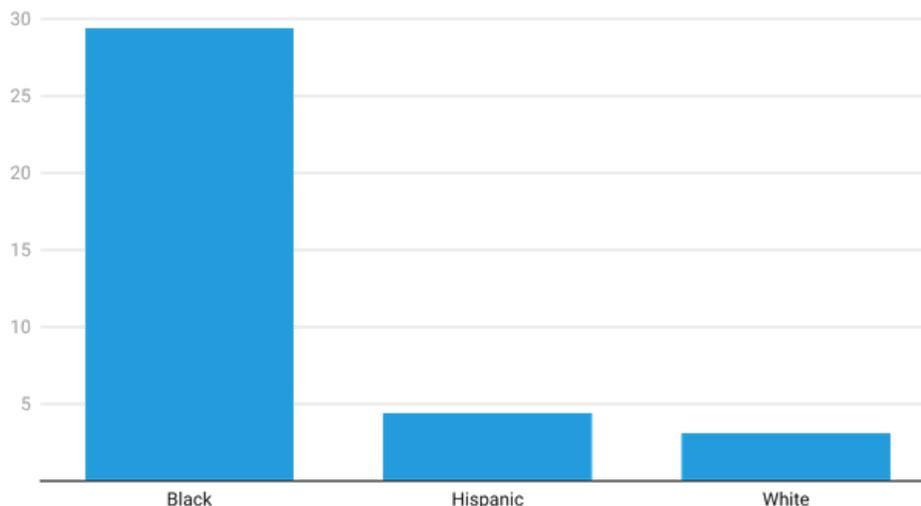
Data for some counties are suppressed or unavailable due to reporting limitations.

Map: CDF-OH • Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. National Vital Statistics System, Mortality 2018-2023 on CDC WONDER Online Database, released in 2024. Data are from the Multiple Cause of Death Files, 2018-2023, as compiled from data provided by the 57 vital statistics jurisdictions through the Vital Statistics Cooperative Program. Accessed at <http://wonder.cdc.gov/ucd-icd10-expanded.html> on Jan 27, 2026 2:02:39 PM  
• Created with Datawrapper

## Urban and Metropolitan Communities

### Firearm Death Rates Are Higher Among Black Children.

Firearm-related deaths per 100,000 children in Ohio, by race (all intents)



Insufficient data were available to report outcomes for American Indian/Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and multiracial children.

Chart: CDF-OH • Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, Multiple Cause of Death by Single Race Files via CDC WONDER Online Database 2021-2023, America's Health Rankings • Created with Datawrapper

### Presentation of Violence

Particularly at risk of experiencing gun violence are those living in urban and metropolitan high-poverty areas,<sup>14</sup> many of whom are Black children.<sup>15</sup> For these communities, historic and systemic exclusion from government support and resources has exacerbated crime, cultivating an environment where Black youth face a higher likelihood of dying from homicide than the expected state rate.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the lack of economic investment in these areas leaves many young people vulnerable to seeking aid from those who seemingly have the next most apparent means of power, local gang members.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, numerous incidents of gun violence involving young individuals in these communities are linked to gang affiliation or arise from street violence.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Cunningham, Rebecca M., et al. 2023. "Trends and Disparities in Firearm Deaths Among U.S. Children and Adolescents, 1999–2022." *Pediatrics* 152(3): e2023061296. <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/152/3/e2023061296/193711>

<sup>15</sup> Goldstick, Jason E., Rebecca M. Cunningham, and Patrick M. Carter. 2024. "Firearm Mortality Trends Among Black Children and Youth." *JAMA Network Open* 7(...): eXXXXX. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11931740/>

<sup>16</sup> Ohio Department of Health. 2024. "Child Fatality Review 2023 Report." <https://odh.ohio.gov/wps/wcm/connect/gov/c7a59e2a-8aae-44d4-b534-21baeee4bff3/CFR+2023+Report+FINAL+12.3.24.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> Mendez, L., and P. K. Kerig. 2023. "Gang Membership Among Adolescents from Distinct Racial and Ethnic Backgrounds: The Roles of Neighborhood Conditions and Victimization." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 38(11-12): 7556–7577.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605221145717>

<sup>18</sup> Street violence and gang violence are not synonymous as used in this report. Gang violence refers to violence committed in support of, or in recognition of, affiliation with an organized group. By contrast, street violence involves gun-related harm carried out by individual actors, often in response to personal disputes or conflicts. This distinction is important for understanding the dynamics and impacts of gun violence in marginalized communities. As explained by several community members interviewed for this report, not all gun violence is gang-related, and policymakers and other authorities should be careful to acknowledge this distinction in their responses to affected communities (Author's Note, No external source)

Presentation of gun violence in this way should not be understood as a reflection of community character, culture, or an inherent propensity for violence, but rather through an understanding of historical and sociological barriers to success: concentrated poverty, disinvestment, and systemic inequities that place some neighborhoods at greater risk while affording others greater protection. As community members emphasized, this violence “doesn’t happen in a vacuum”; it is shaped by policy choices, not by who communities are. Recognizing these root causes is essential to developing effective, non-stigmatizing prevention strategies.

## **Psychological Harm**

The threat of gun violence not only has pronounced physical effects for marginalized youth in metropolitan communities, but it may also contribute negatively to the psychological development of young children. Even when not directly victimized by gun violence, these groups are more likely to witness or be indirectly affected by firearm-related violence.<sup>19</sup> This may lead to heightened risk for depression and suicidal ideation, factors that can, in turn, exacerbate gun violence and perpetuate an infinite cycle of harm.<sup>20</sup>

## **Policing and Community Safety**

Because of how gun violence presents in these communities, many prevention investments have been channeled into policing budgets. Studies<sup>21</sup>, however, demonstrate that policing alone is insufficient. Increased investment in community-based interventions is necessary not only to reduce mortality rates, but also to improve quality of life for marginalized communities in Ohio, and cultivate communities free of gun harm:

“The inevitable conclusion is that there is a need to develop a new model that would bring community stakeholders together in a collaborative, problem-solving mode, to prevent individuals from engaging in gun violence...This model would go beyond a single activity and would blend several strategies as building blocks to form a workable systemic approach.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. n.d. “Gun Violence and Youth/Young Adults: Literature Review.” <https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/model-programs-guide/literature-reviews/gun-violence-and-youth-young-adults#0-0>

<sup>20</sup> Rutgers School of Public Health. 2024. “Frequent Exposure to Gun Violence Is Associated with Depression, Suicide and Mental Health.” <https://sph.rutgers.edu/news/frequent-exposure-gun-violence-associated-depression-suicide-and-mental-health>

<sup>21</sup>American Psychological Association. n.d. “Gun Violence: Prediction, Prevention, and Policy.” <https://www.apa.org/pubs/reports/gun-violence-prevention>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Several of the Ohio residents interviewed confirmed this. One community leader in Cleveland, frustrated with both the financial and social investments into programs like those operated by her organization, stated that, "A lot of the funding that typically gets funneled into public safety around violence is toward police departments, thinking that is the only option, but we do have community organizations that are doing well, and if we keep putting money into policing and only thinking that is the absolute answer to the violence issues, we are ignoring programs that do work."

Myesha Watkins, administrator for the Cuyahoga County Office of Violence Prevention, also stressed this point: "Law enforcement responds to violence; it does not prevent it. Prevention requires a coordinated public safety approach, one where law enforcement shares data and works alongside community organizations to engage people who are most at risk, provide mentorship and opportunity, and intervene before harm occurs." Prevention, she continued, is long-term work that depends on trust, relationships, and sustained investment in the community, not just those who police it.

Violence prevention practitioners in Ohio, however, do not hold a singular view on the role of law enforcement in public safety. These differing perspectives do not reflect disagreement about the importance of safety, but rather differing assessments of how it is best achieved. For some groups, coordination with police is seen as necessary to access resources, ensure rapid response, and share information. Others emphasized that policing is necessary, but that changes should be made in how law enforcement approaches prevention and investigation. Among these suggested changes is that law enforcement should consider nonpunitive options that remove firearms from circulation without unnecessarily criminalizing families. Sgt. William Bell, a police officer for more than 20 years and the director of Safety Services for Cincinnati Public Schools, explained this: "If there's something that would allow a parent to call the police and say, 'My child found a weapon,' and turn that weapon in...that should be able to happen. Right now, if a weapon is turned in, the police are going to ask where it came from and what it was used for. And if that gun was involved in a crime, now you're a suspect simply because you turned it in. That's a lot for a family to take on when they were just trying to do the right thing." He continued, "If you can do that anonymously, then I think that starts to move things. [Law enforcement] may not have a suspect, but [they] do have a weapon that's been identified and taken off the street, which, in a way, makes it safer."

In this view, removing a gun from circulation improves safety for families and children while preserving law enforcement's ability to investigate the weapon itself, even when a suspect is not immediately identified.

For some organizations, however, particularly those working in communities most harmed by over policing, arguments have been made that true safety requires models that operate independently from law enforcement. For these advocates, community-based programs are not meant to supplement policing, but to address the root causes of violence in ways traditional enforcement cannot. Programs like Halt Violence (Halt) in Columbus, which has a mission to support teens and young adults with prior involvement in violence or the justice system, exemplify this approach. As their website reads: *'Our Street Mentors are successful because of one word—trust. The community knows that we get the streets, we get you, and we never get with the police.'* Thell Robinson III, the founder and CEO of Halt in Columbus, said that the organization's approach is necessary to change the culture and mindset of violence that exists in many communities. To effectively reduce gun violence, he emphasized the importance of community organizations that cultivate authentic relationships with individuals the police may deem as a threat and/or have committed violence and do not trust law enforcement—relationships that are difficult to form when engaging both groups simultaneously.

Drawing on his own lived experience of incarceration and exposure to violence, Robinson explained that meaningful change requires leaders and mentors who understand "the streets" through direct experience, rather than speculation or viewing communities solely through a crime-solving lens. He emphasized that relatability builds trust, allowing individuals to reflect, lower their defenses, and confront the root causes of violence: "Because they are dealing with someone relatable, we're able to pull their layers back... It's like putting a mirror in their face. Then we can get to the root of [the violence]."



*Young people gather at one of Halt Violence's 2025 community events.*

When asked about misconceptions associated with his organization's approach, he stated, "We are a safe place...We aren't condoning [violence]. We just understand the streets... but they'll look at our work and discredit it because of who we once were and because of who we're serving." He continued, explaining that there doesn't have to be a confrontation or a comparison between community groups and police departments. "We are doing work that [can save police] from coming to a neighborhood to have to put up that yellow tape," he said. "If it is really about the safety of the community, people [should] respect what we do, and I say that in all humility."

Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate that violence prevention efforts across Ohio do not follow a singular model. Instead, community-based programs exist statewide along a continuum, reflecting varying levels of engagement with law enforcement and differing local histories, needs, and relationships. Some initiatives coordinate with police as part of a broader public safety strategy, while others operate independently to build trust and intervene outside traditional systems. Regardless of approach, these programs play a critical role in preventing harm, strengthening community relationships, and interrupting cycles of violence. As Audrea Hickman of Mothers of Murdered Columbus Children explained: "I think you're always going to have naysayers; you're always going to have someone who has something to say that's contrary. I think that just comes with the territory, but our work speaks for itself."



*"We're just trying to be, as we say, 'crime disruptors' or 'interrupters', moving through our community and showing love to people...encouraging them to do the right thing...encouraging them to make better choices. There's a lot of reward that comes with that, with just knowing that we truly are making a difference"*

*Director of Family Engagement & Hospitality, Mothers of Murdered Columbus Children  
(pictured), Audrea Hickman*

## Challenges in Addressing Gun Violence

Across regions and program models, community leaders consistently identified a shared challenge: their efforts are under-resourced relative to both their impact and the demands of their work. As one Akron community member noted, many programs are “always operating on a shoestring... There is a lot of really fantastic work going on, and if it were well-resourced, it could continue to go on.” An advocate in Cleveland echoed this concern, explaining that “too often people in [positions of authority] and with [access to] dollars believe that what we’re doing is volunteering or community service, and it’s not. We are asking people to go into really dangerous situations, [and to do so] without any resources other than their proximity to people and pain.” Increased and sustained investment at the state level could address these challenges.

But while financial investment is crucial for enhancing prevention efforts, community leaders stressed that funding alone is insufficient. A shift in public perception and institutional framing is also necessary, as it significantly influences how gun violence is perceived and determines which communities receive empathy, resources, and sustained attention. Gun violence in urban and metropolitan communities is often framed as a chronic or inevitable problem, subject to heightened scrutiny and criticism, while similar incidents in rural and suburban areas more commonly elicit compassionate responses.<sup>23</sup> This uneven framing obscures the serious and distinct risks faced by young people across all communities. It can simultaneously minimize the visibility of violence in rural and suburban areas while making it more difficult for families in urban areas to grieve, access support, and heal without stigma or blame. A closer examination of rural and suburban communities is therefore essential to understanding the full scope of gun-related risks facing Ohio’s youth.

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<sup>23</sup> Berryessa, Colleen M., Michael Sierra-Arévalo, and Daniel C. Semenza. 2023. “Portrayals of Gun Violence Victimization and Public Support for Firearm Policies: An Experimental Analysis.” *Journal of Experimental Criminology* 19(4): 865–890. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11323076/>

## Rural and Suburban Populations

While young people in rural and suburban communities face different challenges than those in urban and metropolitan areas, the consequences are no less severe. In these areas, gun ownership is often the norm, with firearms being “used for hunting, recreational shooting, and for protecting rural workers from wild animals.”<sup>24</sup> The prevalence and integration of firearms into daily life mean children and adolescents face increased exposure to guns within the home, raising the risk of unintentional injury and firearm suicide.<sup>25</sup>

It is also common for youth in these areas to be taught to utilize firearms from an early age.<sup>26</sup> Though little research exists on the impact of gun violence on rural youth, national studies have contended that while firearms are exceedingly prevalent in these communities, “nearly one-third of adolescent firearm users” haven’t received formal safety training.<sup>27</sup> This is particularly concerning in Ohio, where 39% of firearm-related child deaths occur in rural areas (including suburban, Appalachian, or non-Appalachian communities).<sup>28</sup>

### Danger in Schools

The combination of mass firearm availability and gaps in safety training in these communities inevitably shapes children’s daily environments, extending firearm risks from homes into educational settings. Although just 2% of youth homicides nationwide take place on school grounds, 95% of those incidents involve a firearm,<sup>29</sup> and the majority take place in rural and suburban areas.<sup>30</sup> Within this context, Ohio ranks among the top states, holding the fifth-highest spot as of 2024 for school shooting prevalence.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. 2014. “Injury Prevention in Rural Areas (Hunter Safety).” <https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/221310>

<sup>25</sup> Anglemeyer et al. 2014.

<sup>26</sup> Moyer, R. A., et al. 2024. “Firearm Safety Training Among Adolescents.” PubMed record. <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/39238064/>

<sup>27</sup> Rowhani-Rahbar, Ali, et al. 2024. “Adolescent Firearm Carriage and Training.” Preventive Medicine Reports. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11378362/>

<sup>28</sup> Ohio Department of Health. 2024. “Child Fatality Review 2023 Report.” [https://odh.ohio.gov/wps/wcm/connect/gov/c7a59e2a-8aae-44d4-b534-21baeee4bff3/CFR+2023+Report+FINAL+12.3.24.pdf?M OD=AJPRES&CONVERT\\_TO=url&CACHEID=ROOTWORKSPACE.Z18\\_K91401S01H7F40QBNJU3SO1F56-c7a59e2a-8aae-44d4-b534-21baeee4bff3-pee8-HB](https://odh.ohio.gov/wps/wcm/connect/gov/c7a59e2a-8aae-44d4-b534-21baeee4bff3/CFR+2023+Report+FINAL+12.3.24.pdf?M OD=AJPRES&CONVERT_TO=url&CACHEID=ROOTWORKSPACE.Z18_K91401S01H7F40QBNJU3SO1F56-c7a59e2a-8aae-44d4-b534-21baeee4bff3-pee8-HB)

<sup>29</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. n.d. “Characteristics of School-Associated Youth Homicides— United States, 1994–2018.” MMWR. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/68/wr/mm6803a1.htm>

<sup>30</sup> U.S. Government Accountability Office. n.d. “K-12 Education: Characteristics of School Shootings.” <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-20-455#:~:text=According%20to%20a%20GAO%20report%2C%20about%20half,and%20high%2Dminority%20schools%20had%20more%20shootings%20overall>

<sup>31</sup> K-12 School Shooting Database. n.d. “Most Recent 300.” <https://k12ssdb.org/most-recent-300>

Against this backdrop, community members have raised concerns that Ohio’s legislative response has not matched the scale of the risk. Much of the concern has focused on the insufficient nature of school-centered gun violence prevention bills passed by the General Assembly. For example, in 2022, Governor DeWine signed into law legislation<sup>32</sup> expediting the process for teachers to carry firearms in classrooms as a means of protecting against active shooters. This idea was opposed<sup>33</sup> by a vast number<sup>34</sup> of educators and parents because of the liability risks for teachers<sup>35</sup> and social risks for students.<sup>36</sup> Sgt. William Bell Jr. (Bell), previously mentioned, underscored these concerns: “The idea of a teacher being armed... I don't, I don't agree with that. I think about biases...[and] the liability of a school having a person that has a weapon and misuses that weapon or accidentally discharges or loses control of it is terrifying.” He continued, “and I mean, I’m out of the realm of my children being in school. But if someone told me, ‘oh yeah, our teachers carry guns,’ I would not choose that school.”

In the absence of adequate legislative solutions, some schools have turned to alternative measures to address the risk of school shootings, including policies requiring clear backpacks, the installation of panic buttons<sup>37</sup> and metal detectors, and the use of defense training for teachers.<sup>38</sup> Bell acknowledged that some of these measures may help to reduce instances of gun violence on school property, “But with all that stuff,” he said, “you still have to have a relationship with the students, and you still have to conduct searches of the property coming in there. You still have to look at your doors, your student population, your student movement... So, the use of those things is good, but the relationship that the students have within a school are really going to be significant in terms of making sure that people are safe.” Ultimately, investment in the social functions and emotional cultivation of students is also necessary to prevent violence in schools.

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32 NPR. 2022. “Ohio Allows Teachers to Carry Firearms with Reduced Training.” <https://www.npr.org/2022/06/13/1104570419/ohio-dewine-guns-teachers>

33 National Education Association. n.d. “Arming Teachers Is Not the Answer.” <https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/arming-teachers-not-answer>

34 Learning for Justice. 2019. “School Safety and Guns Don’t Mix.” <https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/fall-2019/school-safety-and-guns-dont-mix>

35 Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund. 2022. “Arming Teachers Introduces New Risks.” <https://everytownresearch.org/report/arming-teachers-risks/>

36 Learning for Justice. 2019. “School Safety and Guns Don’t Mix.” <https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/fall-2019/school-safety-and-guns-dont-mix>

37 Axios Cleveland. 2024. “Gun Incidents in Ohio Schools.” <https://www.axios.com/local/cleveland/2024/05/06/gun-incidents-ohio-schools>

38 National Education Association. n.d. “School Gun Violence Prevention & Preparation Guide.” <https://www.nea.org/resource-library/resource-library/school-gun-prevention-response-guide/gun-violence-preparation>

Research<sup>39</sup> supports this assessment, demonstrating that an overreliance on security measures can create additional challenges for school administrators. Districts already struggling to balance students' academic and social development may face the additional burden of diverting limited resources toward costly safety expenses rather than academic enrichment programs and teacher incentives. These tradeoffs can diminish academic performance, affect students' cognitive function and behavior, and ultimately weaken overall educational outcomes.<sup>40</sup>



*A student at CDF's 2023 National Day of Social Action against gun violence holds a sign reading "Books Not Guns," alluding to the threat of violence in schools.*

As with urban communities, rural violence prevention efforts therefore highlight the importance of considering cultural experience when crafting legislation. Furthermore, they too underscore the necessity of increased funding and resources for safety education, secure storage, and social-emotional youth development.

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<sup>39</sup> Council of Economic Advisers (archived). 2025. "The Cumulative Costs of Gun Violence on Students and Schools." <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/cea/written-materials/2025/01/15/the-cumulative-costs-of-gun-violence-on-students-and-schools/>

<sup>40</sup> Cuellar, A. E., et al. 2016. "The Impact of School Policing on Student Outcomes." *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis* 38(4): 631–657. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.3102/0162373715590683>

# Financial Implications

While the pathways and impacts of gun violence vary across rural and urban communities in Ohio, its economic consequences are shared statewide. Community leaders emphasized that these costs are not inevitable, but are shaped by how, and whether, the state invests in prevention. Myesha Watkins (Watkins) of Cuyahoga County's Office of Violence Prevention explained that increased fiscal investment by the state legislature could bring meaningful relief to local governments, families, and businesses. She emphasized that intentional, sustained public investment rather than short-term or discretionary funding for prevention services could save the state money over time.

## The High Cost of Gun Violence

A 2017 study by the Urban Institute found that surges in gun violence can negatively affect both housing markets and business growth, significantly reducing the expansion of "new retail and service businesses" and slowing property appreciation. It can also lower credit scores, decrease rates of homeownership,<sup>41</sup> decrease access to employment, and lead to a decrease in tax revenue.<sup>42</sup> Accordingly, even modest reductions in gun violence can yield economic benefits. For example, a report<sup>43</sup> commissioned by the city of Columbus's Office of Violence Prevention estimates that a 20% reduction in gun violence could result in more than \$100 million in annual savings for the city. Presumably, the state at large, which, according to recent estimates, spends a cost ranging between 7.3<sup>44</sup> and 19.9<sup>45</sup> billion dollars could see similar reductions. Moreover, decreased instances of gun violence could also be beneficial for individual families in the state who may experience increased healthcare expenses, lost income, and "spend an additional \$1,878 in the first four months" if their child is injured by firearm.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Urban Institute. 2017. "Gun Violence Affects the Economic Health of Communities."

<https://www.urban.org/research/publication/gun-violence-affects-economic-health-communities>

<sup>42</sup> Cost of Violence Project. 2023. "The Cost of Violence in the United States."

[https://costofviolence.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/NationalCoVReport\\_022123.pdf](https://costofviolence.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/NationalCoVReport_022123.pdf)

<sup>43</sup> City of Columbus. 2025. "Cost of Gun Violence – Columbus Office of Violence Prevention."

<https://www.columbus.gov/files/sharedassets/city/v/1/mayor/initiatives/violence-prevention/columbus-cogv-digital-final.pdf>

<sup>44</sup> Giffords Law Center. 2017. "The Economic Cost of Gun Violence in Ohio."

<https://files.giffords.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Cost-of-Gun-Violence-in-OH.pdf>

<sup>45</sup> Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions. 2025. "Ohio: State Gun Violence Data." <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/center-for-gun-violence-solutions/gun-violence-data/state-gun-violence-data/ohio>

<sup>46</sup> Giffords. 2025. "The Economic Cost of Gun Violence in America." <https://giffords.org/analysis/the-economic-cost-of-gun-violence-in-america/>



*(pictured) Myesha Watkins at a violence prevention event.*

Watkins noted that when considering investment into violence reduction, a dedicated line item in the state budget for violence prevention teams would not only be ideal, but fiscally responsible and foundational to the state’s economic development. As she explained, “treating violence prevention as temporary or expendable” does the state a disservice. By intentionally investing in community programs that provide mentorship, resources, and opportunities, Ohio could reduce costs while creating safer conditions that attract businesses, support workforce participation, and strengthen local economies, ultimately saving taxpayers money.

# Recommendations

Considered wholly, these findings reflect that gun violence is not just a public safety and health crisis, but also a significant and preventable economic burden. To combat these impacts, we recommend that the Ohio General Assembly do the following:

## Reimagine Public Safety Through Sustained Investment in Community-Based Prevention

Community members across Ohio consistently emphasized two priorities: addressing gaps in local funding and rethinking how public safety dollars are allocated. Rather than launching new or duplicative programs, they urged the General Assembly to make long-term, stable investments in proven, community-based initiatives—particularly local nonprofits and mental health providers. Residents stressed that communities themselves possess the insight and expertise needed to lead this work. As one Cleveland resident noted, “We absolutely have enough wisdom in our community to be able to share, help develop, and build effective programs.” However, this knowledge cannot translate into lasting impact without sustained investment. Another Cleveland community member highlighted the challenge of short-term funding, explaining that some city or county governments support initiatives for only a single year. “Having funding in perpetuity,” they said, “similar to other public safety systems, is imperative to the longevity of community safety.”

Representatives from some community-based intervention programs also expressed concern about the measures of success attached to current grants. One, cosigned by others, expressed that community organizations are often asked to “do unrealistic things that other systems aren’t being tasked with...like every year we have to go to the table and beg and plead that we saved one life while being asked why we didn’t save more.” Local governments should consider reevaluating the metrics used to assess the success of these programs, and the General Assembly should keep this in mind while developing new grant programs for local municipalities.

## Opportunities

- Establish a dedicated line item in the next state budget for community-based violence prevention and invest in these programs at levels comparable to traditional public safety approaches, such as policing.
- Provide multi-year grant opportunities to support staffing, program stability, and continuity for local organizations.
- Ensure equitable distribution of resources across urban, suburban, and rural communities, while allowing flexibility to tailor strategies to local needs and conditions.
- Reevaluate funding requirements and success metrics for existing grant programs to assess violence prevention efforts using realistic, long-term public health metrics rather than short-term enforcement outcomes.
- Create grants for local municipalities to establish offices of violence prevention.

## Establish Anonymous and Non-Punitive Pathways to Surrender Firearms

The General Assembly should pass legislation that allows law enforcement to accept firearms through “no questions asked” drop-offs, secure lockboxes, and scheduled community events. Police would still be able to investigate the firearm itself, but families turning in a gun would not be treated as suspects simply for doing so. This approach helps remove unsecured guns from communities, reduces fear around coming forward, and builds trust between law enforcement and the public—especially in situations where a child brings a gun into a family’s possession. As Sgt. William Bell put it, “If a young person brings a gun home, their parents should be able to call and say ‘my kid found this gun, I’m turning it in’—and the police department should say, ‘OK’, and take it with no questions asked.”

## Establish Gun Violence Prevention Working Groups to Foster Connection and Encourage Collaboration.

Many community members expressed that there is a need for collaboration between law enforcement, community groups, and the youth themselves, stating that there is a need to “break down silos.” Many expressed that violence prevention efforts could operate more effectively if there were opportunities to connect groups with differing expertise and goals. Community members from Akron explained that creating these spaces has been a game-changer for their young people: “One of the things we did was require entities to come together, to know each other, to learn from each other and collaborate... to create the structure to evaluate impact.”

## Opportunities

- Enact HB 351, an effort to establish the Ohio Taskforce on Gun Violence

## Create a Statewide Office of Violence Prevention and Provide Support and Resources to Local Congregations, Violence Prevention Offices, and Community Groups.

Several churches and community organizations stated that it would be helpful for the state to create literature and other easily accessible materials on violence prevention that could be shared with their members. The presence of these resources could “help bring cohesiveness across churches and organizations supporting in this space,” the minister mentioned earlier in this report remarked. A similar suggestion to “enhance education on gun safety, especially at elementary schools and childcare centers” was also highlighted in the 2023 Ohio child fatality report<sup>47</sup>, which included suggestions from local child fatality review boards.

## Opportunities

- CDF-Ohio supports the full enactment of HB 358, which would distribute multilingual firearm safety materials through schools and public spaces. Similar to the Parental Firearm Safety Notification (PFSN) laws enacted in states like California<sup>48</sup>, the enactment of HB 358 would assist in preventing children from accessing firearms, reducing the risk of firearm-related injuries and fatalities
- Create a statewide office of violence prevention to facilitate the distribution of violence prevention materials and resources.

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<sup>47</sup> Ohio Department of Health. 2024. “Child Fatality Review 2023 Report.” <https://odh.ohio.gov/wps/wcm/connect/gov/c7a59e2a-8aae-44d4-b534-21baeee4bff3/CFR+2023+Report+FINAL+12.3.24.pdf>

<sup>48</sup> REAL Journey Academies. 2024. “Pupil Safety: Parental Notification of Firearm Safety Laws.” REAL Journey Academies News & Announcements.

<https://www.realjourney.org/apps/news/article/1954794#:~:text=AB%20452%20requires%20that%20all,firearm%20Drelated%20injuries%20and%20fatalities.>

## Enact Child Access Prevention (CAP) Mandates

As of 2023, in Ohio, local Child Fatality Review boards found that most firearm deaths involved firearms that were “unlocked, easily accessible, or not fully secured because children knew a safe combination or location of a key.”<sup>49</sup> Accordingly, we recommend that the General Assembly enact a statewide CAP mandate that would prohibit parents or caregivers from possessing firearms for a defined period if a child is harmed due to their negligent storage of a gun. While Ohio law currently prohibits furnishing firearms to minors, it lacks specific penalties for failing to securely store guns around children. A CAP law of this kind would fill that gap and help reduce incidents of gun-related child deaths, both from suicide and homicide. We also advocate for legislation requiring that free gun locks be provided with every new firearm purchase.

### Opportunities

- CDF-Ohio supports H.R. 148, the Safe Firearm Storage Resolution, as an important step toward promoting responsible and child-safe gun ownership through the encouragement of safe storage practices. However, we believe that voluntary measures alone are insufficient. We therefore recommend enacting a Child Access Prevention (CAP) mandate *requiring* firearms in homes to be securely stored to prevent unsupervised access by children.

## Expand background checks for private firearm purchases.

Expanding background checks for private firearm transfers between individuals to mandate one by the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) could help to improve safety and protect Ohio’s youth. On the need for increased mental health background checks on firearm purchases, Thell Robinson of Halt Violence, mentioned earlier, expressed, “What’s alarming now [is that] a lot of the youth that I work with went and got these guns legit. But the problem is some of them may have been of age, but they don’t have their mental right. If you got the wrong gun in the wrong hands, it can definitely be detrimental. If something is in the works on that, it would definitely be a blessing in the community.”

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<sup>49</sup> Ohio Department of Health. 2024. “Child Fatality Review 2023 Report.” <https://odh.ohio.gov/wps/wcm/connect/gov/c7a59e2a-8aae-44d4-b534-21baeee4bff3/CFR+2023+Report+FINAL+12.3.24.pdf>

# Conclusion

Tangible solutions to gun violence in Ohio cannot wait. Children and families across the state are calling upon the General Assembly to take immediate action that is tailored to local context, grounded in community input, and free from stigma and assumptions.

Together, we must ensure that every child has not only the chance to grow up with dignity, hope, and joy as envisioned by Children's Defense Fund, but also the chance to grow up at all.

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