



Words We Use

How we talk about our work and gun violence prevention

How to use this document: Gun violence prevention is a big tent movement, made up of diverse groups of people with all sorts of experiences. We may differ in religion, race, gender, sexual orientation, life experience, income-level, location or world view, but we're united for the common cause of ending gun violence, and the language we use to describe our work must be inclusive of all of us.

WHO WE ARE

Everytown for Gun Safety is the nation's largest **gun violence prevention** organization, with nearly 6 million supporters. We successfully fight for gun safety everywhere from city councils to corporate boardrooms to Congress, and work to beat back the gun lobby's extremist agenda at every turn. Under the Everytown for Gun Safety umbrella are its grassroots volunteer networks, Moms Demand Action and Students Demand Action, and the bipartisan coalition, Mayors Against Illegal Guns. Working with the grassroots networks are thousands of gun violence survivors, who are part of the Everytown Survivor Network.

- **Avoid the term "gun control."** That term is a conversation-stopper for many gun owners who support gun safety laws but bristle at "control." We are working to build a movement that's inclusive of gun owners and non-gun owners alike, so our messaging must work for everyone. We use the term **"gun safety."**
- **"Gun owners" or "NRA members" are not the problem.** Gun owners and NRA members often support stronger gun laws and can be powerful voices in this movement. In fact, many of our supporters are gun owners and they are important messengers. When naming the barriers to progress, our polling shows that it is better to use the term **"gun lobby"** or, if we are referring directly to the NRA, we can call out the **"NRA's extremist leadership."**
 - ◆ And while most gun owners are men, be careful not to use language that plays into toxic masculinity. Language like "gun nuts," or language that

explicitly ties gun ownership and masculinity can play into stereotypes we'd rather dismantle. People are more movable if we treat them with respect.

→ **Say “nearly 6 million supporters” rather than “nearly 6 million members.”**

Similarly, it's best to refer to yourself as a “volunteer” with Moms Demand Action or Students Demand Action, rather than a “member,” to emphasize our strong volunteer network. If you need to describe the number of volunteers we have, the easiest thing to say is “We're a movement with nearly 6 million supporters and hundreds of thousands of volunteers.”

Moms Demand Action and **Students Demand Action** volunteers are committed to taking on the NRA's deadly agenda. We know that common-sense gun laws and a culture of gun safety go hand-in-hand with responsible gun ownership. **We all want to keep our families safe.**

→ **In anything public-facing, we are “Moms Demand Action” or “Students Demand Action” — never “Moms” or “Students.”** It's easy to shorthand to “Moms” or “Students” but that terminology can be confusing to people outside of this movement. In speaking publicly (or on social media!) always use the full brand name (or tag the brand on social). Additionally, we shouldn't use the abbreviation “MDA” as that acronym belongs to another nonprofit.

→ **When describing your work in public-facing materials, avoid getting too “in the weeds.”** Volunteers should describe their work, rather than using their title in their Moms Demand Action/Students Demand Action group, with the exception of chapter leaders. We've found that people better understand, “I'm a volunteer with the North Dakota chapter of Moms Demand Action and I help manage social media for our group” better than, “I'm the social media lead for the North Dakota chapter of Moms Demand Action.”

→ **Starting a conversation with a shared value such as, “we all want to keep our families safe,” is typically better than proactively bringing up the Second Amendment.** While we do support responsible gun ownership, we've found that beginning a conversation with a shared value will lead to a more thoughtful dialogue than starting with the Second Amendment.

HOW WE TALK ABOUT GUN VIOLENCE

Every day, 100 Americans are shot and killed and **200 more are wounded**. Our hearts go out to those whose loved ones were **shot and killed** or whose **lives were taken** or **forever changed by gun violence**.

→ **As an organization, we don't refer to those killed by gun violence as being “lost to gun violence.”** We speak factually and directly about these terrible tragedies.

This is something we have heard from survivors, but we respect that individual gun violence survivors may prefer to say "lost to gun violence." As an organization, we stick with the message frame above but support survivors saying what feels comfortable to them.

- **We describe people who have personally experienced gun violence as survivors.** Unless the person prefers to identify in another way, we refer to anyone who has personally experienced gun violence - whether they witnessed it, were threatened or wounded with a gun, or had a loved one taken or wounded with a gun - as a survivor.
- **We know that for every person shot and killed, two more are wounded.** We are committed to consistently honoring those who have survived a gunshot, as well as those killed by one. The toll of gun violence is significant: according to a national poll, 58 percent of Americans care for someone who has experienced gun violence, or has experienced it themselves.
- **We avoid naming the shooters.** Our goal is to focus on the victims and survivors of shootings and avoid giving shooters the notoriety they may seek to gain from acts of gun violence.
- **Mass shootings in Parkland, Newtown, Las Vegas and so many other places are horrific tragedies. But the scope of gun violence goes far beyond these instances.** When we discuss mass shootings, it's more considerate of the community impacted to avoid phrasing that uses the name of the town/city interchangeably with the tragedy. For example, talking about how "Parkland sparked a new movement" is less respectful than saying that the "the shooting at a Parkland high school sparked a new movement." While many call the date of a particular tragedy its "**anniversary**," we know that these are very difficult days for survivors and recognize that by keeping our language solemn and factual. Thus, we commemorate these occasions as the one/two/three etc "**year mark**" of the shooting.

ON SUICIDE

In a moment of crisis, access to a gun can be the difference between death and life. Gun suicide is **preventable** through secure storage, extreme risk laws, waiting period laws, and other tools. Nearly two-thirds of gun deaths are suicides, so we cannot end gun violence without ending America's gun suicide crisis. Someone who **died by gun suicide** or **shot and killed himself/herself/themselves** is a victim of gun violence, too.

- **We avoid the term "committed suicide" and prefer to talk about people who "died by gun suicide."** "Committed suicide" is a stigmatizing and silencing term to suicide survivors. "Committed" is a word we use when describing crimes. Using it in this context can be shaming to those whose loved one died by suicide.

- **When talking about suicide, emphasize that this is a preventable crisis. Access to a gun in a moment of crisis may be the difference between life and death.** Ninety percent of suicide attempts with a gun end in death; but without a gun, four percent of suicide attempts result in death. This isn't a hopeless fight, and that's important to emphasize.
- **When talking about gun suicide attempts that resulted in death, do not refer to those as "successful."** Be clear on the outcome of a suicide attempt (ie, "He shot and killed himself;"), but speak of it **factually**, rather than referring to it as "successful" or "unsuccessful" depending on if it resulted in death.

ON GUN VIOLENCE IN CITIES

Gun violence affects cities at disproportionate rates. The 50 cities with the highest murder rates represent only 6 percent of the U.S. population, but 31 percent of gun murders. Highlighting this heavy burden in a context that recognizes its discriminatory causes — and elevates proven community-based solutions — is a critical part of reducing gun violence in the U.S..

Let's first review national stats for context:

- Every year, more than 37,000 people are killed with guns. Approximately one-third of these deaths are firearm homicides — about 13,000 annually.
- The majority of gun homicides are in urban areas, with half of all gun homicides in 2015 taking place in just 127 cities.

Within cities, a small percentage of neighborhoods and people are more likely to be involved in gun violence than others. The majority of these neighborhoods are characterized by high rates of poverty and racial segregation. While the vast majority of residents are not directly involved as perpetrators, the effects of gun violence reverberate throughout their communities.

This means that when we talk about gun violence in cities, we are primarily talking about gun homicides and assaults, and addressing these forms of violence in cities must be a key part of the strategy to end gun violence in the U.S.

Everytown is engaged in a wide range of efforts to end gun violence in cities. These include pursuing accountability for gun trafficking; fighting gun lobby backed efforts to prohibit local officials from enacting gun safety policies; creating CityGRIP, an interactive online platform that helps mayors, city officials, reporters and advocates explore gun violence prevention strategies; and more. We are also committed to expanding and strengthening our partnerships with organizations and individuals leading on the front lines to address **city gun violence**.

To combat city gun violence, we must approach it from different angles and embrace the hard work of local partners. We're committed to supporting effective community-based violence intervention and prevention programs*, including through direct support and through technical assistance. We're honored to partner with them on the effort to fight gun violence in all its forms.

- **We avoid the term “urban gun violence,”** because that's often perceived to be code for “violence in Black communities.” If we're talking about gun violence in urban areas, we prefer “city gun violence.” We work to address gun violence in all its forms — including gun homicides and assaults taking place day-to-day**, unintentional shootings and gun suicides.

- **Avoid the term “gang violence,” unless there is a very specific reason to use it.** The term is often used inaccurately and in attempts to shift blame to the victims of gun violence by insinuating those victims “had it coming” or that their lives have less value. We must not use it as a blanket term for city gun violence. If speaking about the specific circumstances of a shooting, be precise about what happened and only use verified information. Instead, use “group violence.”

- **We avoid calling communities “vulnerable”, “at risk”, or “needy.”** Use language that centers people's power — not diminishes it. For example, you could say “Black communities in New Orleans have been historically under-valued, under-resourced and under-invested in, and that has led to more gun violence.”

*What do we mean by “violence intervention and prevention programs?” Great question! Community-based violence intervention programs apply a localized, public health approach to gun violence prevention that are well-suited to address gun violence in the hardest hit neighborhoods. These programs identify individuals who are at the highest risk of shooting or being shot, and work to reduce violence through targeted interventions that include de-escalating potentially violent conflicts, providing case management support services and transforming community norms around violence.

** We prefer “day-to-day” or “daily gun violence” rather than “everyday gun violence.” “Everyday gun violence” is too casual — and we want to emphasize that what happens every day is, in fact, terrible.

GUN VIOLENCE IN AND AGAINST SPECIFIC GROUPS

While gun violence affects every American, the weight of this crisis is not felt equally.

Gun violence in America disproportionately affects Black communities. Black Americans represent the majority of gun homicide victims and are 10 times more likely than white Americans to die by gun homicide. Black children and teens are 14 times as likely as their white peers to die by gun homicide.

Gun violence disproportionately impacts Hispanic* communities. Hispanic people in the U.S. are twice as likely to die by gun homicide compared to white people

*We use the term Hispanic here because it's the language the Center for Disease Control uses when tracking gun homicides.

- **Always be clear and specific with your language.** For example, it's better to talk about "gun violence in Black communities," than to say "gun violence in communities of color" when what you mean is Black communities. The experiences of communities of color vary widely, and lumping them all together erases some experiences.
- **Gun violence in America includes shootings by police, which disproportionately affect Black communities.** According to [Mapping Police Violence](#), police shoot and kill over 1,000 people each year in the line of duty. Any shooting by police can deepen distrust and fear of police, and can have a devastating impact on the victims, their loved ones and whole communities. Sometimes, police shootings are referred to as "officer-involved shootings." We use "shootings by police" to factually describe what happened without using language that may soften what happened.
- **Gun violence is a women's issue.** When talking about how gun violence affects women and domestic violence, be careful not to assign the "victim" label to people who may not see themselves as victims, particularly survivors of domestic violence. Additionally, consider using person-first language when talking about the perpetrators of domestic violence. In some cases, "abusive partner" may feel more accurate to the person who survived it than "abuser." Minimizing someone's power in these situations can add trauma where we want to reduce it.
 - ◆ When talking about the boyfriend loophole, it's better to talk about how the law should apply to "all people, regardless of marital status," rather than "unmarried women," which, while accurate, can be coded with some moral superiority. It's best to speak factually without language that could be perceived as judging the people we want to uplift.
- **When hate comes armed, it can be deadly.** The vast majority of hate-motivated acts of violence* are directed against Black, Indigenous, Latino/a/x, and various communities of color, non-dominant religious groups and LGBTQ people. In an average year, over 10,300 hate crimes involve a gun—more than 28 each day.
 - *Many acts of hate-motivated violence occur against members of communities, like Black communities, that may have a deep distrust in law

enforcement and the criminal justice system. Thus, these crimes may go unreported, which is why we choose “hate-motivated violence” or “hate violence” over hate crimes, outside of conversations on the specific legal context of hate crimes.

POLICY-SPECIFIC LANGUAGE

Note: This section does not include all of the policies for which we advocate, rather, it highlights a few policies for which we have specific, recommended language.

We work to **keep guns out of the hands of people who shouldn't have them** by passing laws that require a background check on all gun sales and keep guns out of the hands of domestic abusers and people who have shown serious warning signs that they could be a risk to themselves or others.

- When we talk about people who shouldn't have guns, we mean people like domestic abusers, people prohibited from having guns due to mental illness, and people with felony convictions. Use person-first language when describing someone suffering from mental illness. This means, rather than using a descriptor like **“mentally ill people,”** it's better to say **“people who are prohibited from having guns due to mental illness.”** There's a common misconception that people with mental illnesses are dangerous, when, in fact, they are more likely to be the victims of crime than perpetrators of one.
- **We avoid “ban,” “restrict,” “control” or “confiscate” because these words can be conversation-stoppers for responsible gun owners, who are largely on our side.** We want to be clear that we work to keep guns away from specific people who should not have access to firearms. When talking about firearm hardware that should be illegal, we talk about **“prohibiting bump stocks”** or **“ending the sale of assault weapons.”**
- **When describing people prohibited from buying a gun, be careful with words like “felons” or “criminals.”** Many people with a criminal record are prohibited from gun ownership, as are people with felony convictions, and that can be an important point to make. However, it is also important to remember that our criminal justice system disproportionately targets communities of color so in certain instances it may be better to use person-first language and lean towards talking broadly, such as talking about **“people who shouldn't have guns.”** If you are going to talk about people with felony convictions, make sure the context is appropriate and facts are accurate.

Just like we saw in the Aurora and Parkland mass shootings, there are often serious warning signs that someone may pose a threat to themselves or others. **Extreme risk laws**, also known as **red flag laws**, allow family members and law enforcement to ask a judge to temporarily suspend a person's access to guns if there is evidence they may try to hurt themselves or others. We can't prevent every tragedy, but when a person is in crisis,

temporarily removing guns from a dangerous situation could save their life or the lives of others. Although we use “extreme risk law” and “red flag law” interchangeably in this document, it’s best to align your language with what a campaign for these laws is called at the local level where you live.

- **Sometimes these are called “red flag laws” because it reinforces an effective way to talk about this proposal:** As a measure that gives family and law enforcement away to intervene when there are clear “red flags” or “warning signs” — often a pattern of violent or unstable behavior — that someone may be a threat. The orders issued by judges under these laws are generally called “**Extreme Risk Protection Orders**” or in other states, “**Gun Violence Restraining Orders.**”
- **Just as we never refer to Moms Demand Action as “MDA,” never refer to extreme risk laws as “ERPO” or “GVRO” laws.** These abbreviations mean very little to those who don’t already know what the law is, so be sure to use language that makes sense to the widest audience.
- **We talk specifically about “temporary removal of” and “temporarily blocking/preventing/suspending access to” firearms because we want to be clear about the nature of these orders.** Under these orders, a person is *temporarily* prohibited from purchasing and possessing guns; any guns they already own would be held by an authorized party while the order is in place. Avoid playing into the NRA’s messaging by skipping phrases that misrepresent our goals such as, “**taking guns away**” or “**confiscating guns**”— it’s more accurate to talk about “**temporary removal**” or “**temporarily preventing access**” when there’s a clear risk.
- **Some audiences may find it helpful to know that red flag laws require “due process.”** Voters’ primary concerns about this proposal revolve around a perceived potential for abuse. Talking about “due process” requirements can help ease those concerns, as there are checks and balances built into the process, including punishments for lying and abusing the process — and because hard evidence that indicates a serious threat to public safety is required before a judge issues an order.

Extreme risk laws are also a **suicide intervention** tool. When a loved one is in crisis, it’s easy to feel like there’s nothing you can do. But there is one thing you can do: temporarily keep your loved one from accessing a gun. Most people who attempt suicide do not die — unless they use a gun. **Ninety percent of suicide attempts with a gun end in death;** but without a gun, four percent of suicide attempts result in death. **We can’t always stop a loved one from hurting themselves,** but extreme risk laws give families the ability to make a bad situation far less lethal.

- **Overall, Americans have fatalistic views on suicide, and our messaging must overcome that incorrect assumption.** We describe extreme risk laws as a “**suicide**

intervention” tool, rather than **“suicide prevention”** because it emphasizes the quick action that can be taken to save a life. We also lead with a statistic that can chip away at those fatalistic views. As we talk about suicide intervention, it’s important to emphasize that the presence of a gun really can mean life or death in moments of crisis. Finally, we acknowledge what’s true: this law will not stop every gun suicide, but it can prevent many. By speaking honestly about the data, we can win over skeptics.

We support **requiring background checks on all gun sales**, and so do the vast majority of Americans, including a majority of gun owners and NRA members. Background checks are the foundation of any effective gun violence prevention strategy.

- **We avoid the term “universal background checks,” simply because it isn’t as clear. We use the term “background checks on all gun sales.”** As it stands now, federal law doesn’t require a background check on gun sales by unlicensed sellers* and neither do most states. That means that people who shouldn’t have guns can easily get one simply by buying it from an unlicensed seller - including strangers met online or at gun shows** - with no background check and no questions asked.

*We prefer “unlicensed sellers” over the term “private sellers.” We avoid “private sellers” because framing it as a privacy issue avoids the more important point - closing this loophole is a vital public safety issue.

**You may have heard of the “gun show loophole,” but we try to speak in broader terms when we can. The unfortunate fact is that the problem is just bigger than that now, because the internet has become one big gun show. We talk about “requiring background checks on all gun sales” because that terminology is more all-encompassing.

- **We all want to keep our families safe.** That’s why we fight for policies that are proven to reduce gun violence, protect children, and make our communities safer. No one law can stop all tragedies, but there are basic steps we can take that can make a difference. We take care not to over-promise what any one law can accomplish, lest we lose credibility with listeners.

We work to stop **permitless carry**, which allows people to carry **hidden, loaded guns in public places, without a permit or safety training**, and is a gun lobby priority in almost every state.

- **The gun lobby calls this “constitutional carry” — we call it “permitless carry.”** The NRA’s term for permitless carry is misleading and inaccurate. That’s why we more accurately say “permitless carry,” because that’s what this is — dismantling states’ permitting systems to let people without a permit or any training carry hidden, loaded guns in public places.

We know there are places where people should never be allowed to carry guns — like places that serve alcohol, or places where children play and learn. We believe that

carrying concealed handguns in public should require a permit and safety training. **We all want to keep our families safe** — that's why we listen to the law enforcement, community partners and families in our communities who oppose allowing loaded guns in places where they pose a heightened risk to safety, like schools. The fact is that teachers or professors do not turn into highly trained law enforcement officers in an emergency, and introducing guns into schools increases risks to students – particularly Black students. We also oppose allowing loaded guns in bars or places where alcohol is served. Common sense tells us that guns and alcohol don't mix, and the research tells us that drinking alcohol leads to higher levels of aggression. We work with business owners in our communities to keep guns out of these areas.

- **These are not “gun-free zones.”** The gun lobby claims that people in areas where guns are prohibited are “sitting ducks” in so-called “gun-free zones,” but that isn't true. In fact, research shows the exact opposite: when more people are allowed to carry guns in public, violent crime rates rise, and most mass shootings take place in private places, like homes. We all want to keep our families safe, and that's why we listen to law enforcement officers — armed and trained for emergencies — who overwhelmingly agree that armed citizens in places like schools would make their jobs harder.

We fight tooth and nail against **guns on campus** and guns in schools legislation and know that every time there's gunfire on school grounds, it traumatizes that community.

- **We avoid calling it “campus carry.”** That's a term created by the NRA to make guns on campus sound less scary and if we use it, we're playing into how they want this branded. **“Guns on campus”** is much more accurate because it gets at what this actually is — forcing colleges to allow guns on campuses where they don't belong.
- **Broadly, we track “gunfire on school grounds” rather than “school shootings.”** Every time a gun goes off on school grounds, it's traumatic for that community. But we want to avoid conflating the trauma of a shooting that wounds or kills staff or students with the trauma of a gun going off when thankfully no one is wounded or killed. For that reason, we track every incident of gunfire on school grounds, but we do not refer to all incidents of gunfire on school grounds as “school shooting.”

A CULTURE OF GUN SAFETY

We are committed to promoting a culture of **secure firearm storage**. When a child shoots someone, that's #NotAnAccident, it's an **unintentional shooting** and a **preventable tragedy**.

- **We don't refer to shootings by children as “accidental shootings;” we talk about unintentional shootings by children** because we know that when a child has access to a gun, that didn't just happen - it often happened because an adult gun owner didn't

store their gun securely. The NRA wants to train kids to 'do the right thing' if they come upon a gun, but, as the research has shown, no matter what you tell kids, they will still pick up the gun. The responsibility is always on adults to store guns securely. These are preventable tragedies, not accidents.

- **We avoid “safe storage” and talk about “secure storage” instead.** While we fully support responsible gun owners who practice secure storage, we also want to acknowledge the inherent risks in having a gun in the home. Thus, we want to avoid the implication that there’s a fully safe way to have one in the home.