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Gun violence is a uniquely American crisis. How did we get here?

It's by design to sell more guns.

By John Rosenthal | Updated January 27, 2023 Boston Globe

The first major mass shooting in the United States occurred on Jan. 17, 1989, with an assault weapon at an elementary school in Stockton, Calif., where [five children were killed and more than 30 teachers and students were wounded](#). Americans were appalled, and by 1994 Congress finally enacted a federal ban on assault weapons and ammunition magazines over 10 rounds. That ban, which was supported by every major law enforcement organization, [reduced the number of mass shootings](#) with the 19 specific banned weapons by 66 percent. Sadly, the ban expired in 2004 and hasn't been renewed. Since 2014, there have been 4,077 mass [shootings](#) — defined by Gun Violence Archive as four or more people shot — and there are nearly two deadly massacres every single day. Since Feb. 14, 2018, when 34 students and teachers were shot, 17 fatally, at Marjory Stoneman High School in Parkland, Fla., there have been at least [2,741](#) mass shootings — with over [40 more](#) just since Jan. 1. In total, over [214,946](#) Americans have died from gun violence in the five years since Parkland. Over 1.5 million Americans have lost their lives to largely preventable gun violence since 1975, more than all 30 [developed](#) countries combined.

America is the gun violence capital of the developed world. Other nations require responsibility and accountability on the part of gun owners, dealers, manufacturers, and law enforcement. But in the United States, inherently dangerous, easily concealed handguns and increasingly more prevalent military-style assault rifles and pistols, designed for war, are unregulated at the federal level.

Unlike US toy gun manufacturers, which must comply with a multitude of federal manufacturing and safety standards and can be sued for violations, real firearms [are exempt from national manufacturing and consumer safety requirements](#). Incredibly, [Congress has also prohibited lawsuits](#) against the gun industry. Further, only federally licensed gun dealers in the United States are required to perform criminal background checks for gun sales, while private gun dealers, who are [estimated](#) to sell up to 50 percent of firearms each year, can legally do so without background checks or detection.



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Last year more than [44,000](#) Americans were killed and over [38,000](#) were injured with firearms, and gun violence is now [the leading cause of death](#) for children ages 1 to 19 in America. Every [30 minutes a](#) child or teen is shot and every [three hours a child or teen dies from gun violence](#). We could fill [Fenway Park three times over](#) with the more than 120,000 kids and teens [killed by guns](#) since 1994 when Stop Handgun Violence built the large billboard on the Mass. Pike next to Fenway. Since 1975, more Americans [have been killed with firearms](#) than all US service men and women killed in all foreign wars combined.

This is a uniquely American public health and safety crisis. No other developed country intentionally allows unrestricted access to easily concealed handguns and military-style assault weapons. There are sensible steps Congress can take to help prevent gun violence without violating the rights of law-abiding gun owners:

- Renew the federal ban on new military-style assault weapons and large-capacity ammunition magazines, designed for war, and buy back those currently owned. The previous US ban dramatically reduced these weapons used in crimes between 1994 and 2004. [Australia](#) and [New Zealand banned and bought back all assault weapons](#) after major mass shootings there.
- Renew the federal ban on large-capacity ammunition magazines holding more than 10 rounds. There's a three- and five-round limit, respectively, on hunting duck and deer to protect those populations. There's no limit on the number of rounds to hunt humans.
- Regulate guns like automobiles, including mandating manufacturing standards, consumer safety features, renewable licensing, safe storage, and insurance. There's a license requirement for hunting animals but not for hunting humans or buying guns in most states.
- Revoke gun industry immunity from lawsuits.

Republicans in Congress must stop ignoring gun violence prevention regulations that have proven in many states to dramatically reduce preventable gun injuries and deaths without banning guns. Unlike in the United States, elected officials in other countries have prioritized gun safety over special interest campaign contributions from the unregulated gun industry.

Gun violence is a uniquely American manufactured crisis, and incredibly, it's by design to sell more guns and increase profits. Inaction results in more unregulated gun sales, more gun violence, more fear, and more preventable gun injuries and deaths. If Congress didn't care in October 2017, when 450 people were shot and 58 killed in minutes with dozens of assault weapons at the largest mass shooting to date at a concert in Las Vegas, what's it going to take for Republicans in Congress to prioritize human life and gun safety over gun industry campaign contributions and profits?



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Even after the Supreme Court's decision, Massachusetts gun laws may be safe — for now

While both laws give police some discretion in issuing firearm licenses, the discretion in the New York law was based on the applicant's stated reason for carrying a firearm outside the home.

By David Hogg and John Rosenthal | Updated June 23, 2022 Boston Globe

The Supreme Court decision issued Wednesday strikes down the New York law that required "proper cause" to carry a loaded concealed firearm in public. This is a devastating ruling for New York and gun violence prevention as a whole. Data, research, and common sense [prove that strong gun laws save lives](#). States with strong gun laws have lower gun death rates, and opening the door for more people to carry firearms in high-density urban areas will result in more lost lives.

That said, we believe the court has left the Massachusetts firearm licensing process intact. Massachusetts has had strong firearm licensing laws in place since the 1990s. Individuals must receive training before applying to their local police chief for a license to carry a firearm outside the home. The police chief then does a comprehensive background check on the individual and denies an applicant only if the individual is shown [to lack "suitability" for carrying a concealed firearm in public](#).

Massachusetts police chiefs have limited discretion and take their firearm licensing decision responsibility seriously. Only 3 percent of "concealed carry" applicants in Massachusetts [are denied a license](#). From the conversations we have had with police chiefs across the Commonwealth, we know that in situations where applicants are denied a license there are known risk factors that concern the chief. For example, one case made national news when a police chief denied a license because the police had been called to the man's home [multiple times for domestic violence](#). The applicant later stole a firearm from a friend and killed his 6-year-old son.

We believe the Massachusetts law is fundamentally different from the New York law the Supreme Court struck down. While both laws give police some discretion in issuing firearm licenses, the discretion in the New York law was based on the applicant's stated reason for carrying a firearm outside the home. Meanwhile the licensing discretion in the Massachusetts law is based on the applicant's suitability to carry a firearm.

Of course, people should not be leaving their homes armed to the hilt and ready to engage in gun battle. That said, Massachusetts gun licensing laws are focused on keeping guns out of the hands of dangerous people with a known history of violence, not dictating their purpose for owning a firearm. This is similar to the way the state regulates dangerous drivers without considering their purpose for driving. Massachusetts has mandatory background checks, safety training, and renewable licensing. These laws have withstood challenges multiple times and have helped urban Massachusetts become the national leader for gun violence prevention,



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without banning guns other than military assault weapons and cheap guns without safety features.

We don't believe that the New York decision changes anything for our effective and proven gun safety laws and regulations. Others on the court, including Justices Brett Kavanaugh and Samuel Alito, seem to agree. Alito, writing a concurrence for the court, points out the narrow nature of the opinion: "Our holding decides nothing about who may lawfully possess a firearm or the requirements that must be met to buy a gun." The Massachusetts suitability standard is essentially an "objective standard" requirement that must be met to buy a gun.

Alito went on to say: "Nor does it decide anything about the kinds of weapons that people may possess. Nor have we disturbed anything that we said in *Heller* or *McDonald v. Chicago*, 561 U. S. 742 (2010), about restrictions that may be imposed on the possession or carrying of guns." The court's opinion clearly does not strike down other cornerstones of Massachusetts' laws — our bans on dangerous weapons like assault weapons, high-capacity magazines and bump stocks, and our domestic violence prohibitions. In fact, even though the case rules that states may not use discretion based on an individual's purpose for carrying the firearm in issuing licenses, they have explicitly reserved the right of states to create and maintain sensitive places where firearms cannot be carried.

But will the Supreme Court end there?

In 2020, the court ruled that a challenge by these same plaintiffs to another New York law was moot. Two years later, the court's ideology has shifted even further to the right, and we have received this harmful, yet narrow, decision.

For now, Massachusetts is still protected by the strong gun laws we have fought so hard for, but we will not stop fighting to improve and strengthen these laws. We must continue to build on the successful framework of laws that Massachusetts' leadership has championed on a bipartisan basis and replicate these laws around the country as we prepare for the next gun lobby challenge.

David Hogg is cofounder of [March For Our Lives](#) and a college student. John Rosenthal is cofounder of [Stop Handgun Violence](#) and a sportsman/gun owner.



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When it comes to gun control, our children are Generation Abandoned

Common-sense gun safety legislation routinely dies in the US Senate because of the filibuster. The Biden administration could get around the filibuster through executive orders, such as the recent one on ghost guns.

By David Hogg and John Rosenthal | Updated May 24, 2022 Boston Globe

Consider the fact that children born between 1997 and 2012 have never spent a day in school without the fear of being shot.

From Columbine in 1999, to Sandy Hook in 2012, to Parkland in 2018, [nearly 180,000 kids have experienced a school shooting](#). Children in this age-group, popularly known as “Gen Z”, might better be thought of as “Generation Abandoned” - because the adults of America, and their elected representatives, have done nothing to remedy this shocking man-made public safety crisis. No place is safe – schools, churches, parks, grocery stores – in this mass-shooting-a-day culture that is unique to this country. The 10 people murdered at a Buffalo supermarket are just the latest high profile casualties and they will not be the last with a Congress more committed to gun industry campaign contributions than public safety from preventable gun violence.

For decades, adults of all political persuasions have faulted the “broken mental health system” and raised other (mostly partisan) distractions and grievances, and then done nothing to fix any of them.

No consumer protection regulations for gun manufacturers. No limits on military-style assault weapons. No limits on oversize ammunition magazines. No background checks required for private and online sales.

On Valentine’s Day 2018, the students at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, most of them toddlers when Columbine occurred, joined the nearly quarter-million youngsters who’d already been through the nightmare of a school shooting. These Parkland teens discovered, to their disgust, that nothing had changed since Columbine.

The [March for Our Lives](#) movement - comprising those Gen Z kids - set out to succeed where previous generations had failed, and their successes have been remarkable. Student activists registered more than 100,000 people to vote in the 2018 midterms, and youth turnout set new records. Candidates supported by gun violence prevention organizations were able to [win in 88 of 129 races](#) in 2018. The movement helped [50 new gun laws](#) get passed at the state level (including 14 by Republican governors) and helped secure funding (after a 26-year hiatus) for the federal government to study gun violence.

Despite these encouraging results, a huge roadblock remains. Common-sense gun safety legislation routinely dies in the U.S. Senate because of the filibuster. Hiding behind the



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misrepresentation of the Second Amendment - and being supported by gun lobby dollars - these politicians apparently consider 100 gun deaths every day and a mass-shooting-a-day an acceptable loss, even when it is their own constituents who are the victims.

The Biden Administration could get around the filibuster through executive orders, such as the [recent one](#) on ghost guns. President Biden could establish an Office of Gun Violence Prevention similar to the ones we have for climate, labor and transportation safety. He could fund more violence intervention and mental health programs. To date, little has happened.

Roughly 84 percent of voters, including 77 percent of Republicans, and a majority of gun owners [support universal background checks](#). Nobody is calling for abandonment of Second Amendment rights. Even former Supreme Court Justice Scalia [determined](#) that such rights are “not unlimited.” Federal and state courts have consistently held that reasonable restrictions on how guns are sold are not unconstitutional.

We know that sensible gun laws save lives without banning all guns. Urban Massachusetts has proven it! Since 1994, the state’s gun death rate is down 40 percent. It remains the lowest in the nation and it was accomplished on a bipartisan basis. According to an in-depth study by the *Boston Globe*, if the rest of the country followed our lead, we could save 27,000 lives a year.

At the end of the day, gun violence is preventable. The fact that it continues is a measure of bad public safety policy and special interest politics. In deep blue cities and deep red counties, our struggles are not identical, but they are common *American* struggles. Complacency and inaction has resulted in over one million dead from largely preventable gun violence since 1975, and have already left our kids a far more dangerous world. The next Parkland or Sandy Hook is a matter of *when*, not *if*.

The national focus should be on responsibility and accountability for firearms which are inherently dangerous consumer products. It’s a small policy that we can all agree on to move this issue forward and save even just one life.

What kind of a society are we if we lack the will to protect our own children?

David Hogg is the Co-Founder of March For Our Lives and a college student; John Rosenthal is the Co-Founder of Stop Handgun Violence and a sportsman/gun owner.



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Warren's bill models Massachusetts' effective gun laws

Warren's evidence-based, data-driven legislation, which replicates the Commonwealth's effective gun violence prevention efforts, would save lives.

By John Rosenthal | Updated February 19, 2020 Boston Globe

Massachusetts is a national leader in gun violence prevention. We treat guns like automobiles — requiring responsibility and accountability on the part of gun owners, gun dealers, gun manufacturers, and law enforcement.

This includes gun safety training and renewable gun licensing and registration, just like for automobiles. We also require mandatory background checks for all gun sales, safe storage, and local police chief discretion in licensing to keep guns out of the hands of individuals with a known history of violence. Massachusetts prohibits military-style assault weapons, high-capacity ammunition magazines, and dangerous accessories like bump stocks and silencers. We have the first-in-the-nation gun manufacturer consumer protection standards and common-sense gun dealer regulations for all guns sold in the Commonwealth. Finally, when a gun owner becomes a threat to themselves or others, we have an extreme-risk protection order law that allows family members and law enforcement to petition the court to temporarily remove firearms from at-risk individuals during such moments of crisis.

As a result of our effective gun laws and regulations, we have experienced a 40 percent reduction in the rate of gun deaths since 1994 and, with the exception of isolated Hawaii, Massachusetts now has the lowest gun death rate in the United States. However, even with all of these effective policies in place, we continue to suffer from frequent gun violence.

Just four days into the year, Bryan Omar Mendez was shot and killed in Lynn, becoming the Commonwealth's first known gun casualty of 2020. Six days later, another man died in Holyoke and a father and son died in Framingham. The next night, another man was killed, this time in Boston. These fatalities do not capture additional crimes where a gun is commonly used, such as to threaten partners during a domestic violence incident and in armed robberies.

Unfortunately, even with a strong set of state policies, Massachusetts is a victim of the lax gun policies of our neighboring states as well as gaping loopholes in federal law. Nearly 70 percent of the Commonwealth's crime guns come from out of state.

US Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts recently filed the Gun Violence Prevention and Community Safety Act, which includes a comprehensive set of measures that would reduce preventable gun violence and protect the Second Amendment. It is a thoughtful and data-driven approach to gun violence prevention on a national level



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without negatively impacting law-abiding gun owners.

The bill includes a federal licensing process but would allow states like Massachusetts to continue to manage their own licensing programs and provide funding to do so. Research by Johns Hopkins University has shown that after implementing firearm licensing laws, states experienced a 40 percent reduction in firearm homicide and a 15 percent reduction in firearm suicide.

This bill would close existing loopholes by expanding background checks to all gun sales, including sales that take place between private parties and at gun shows, and require completing a background check before a transfer. Under current law, a gun sale proceeds if the FBI cannot complete a background check within three days. Polling indicates that 97 percent of Americans support background checks for all gun sales, yet it's estimated that thousands of gun sales each year are transacted by private dealers who are not required to perform a background check.

Responding to calls from student activists and the March for Our Lives movement, this bill would raise the age to purchase firearms and ammunition to 21. This is a policy that could have prevented the deaths of 17 students and staff members in the Parkland school shooting in Florida, murdered by a 19-year-old with a legally purchased assault weapon.

Warren's bill would also fund research by the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Justice, which researchers across the United States have advocated for over a decade. Funding would be provided to violence-intervention programs that could save states those costs associated with the justice system and incarceration when they are fully implemented.

This bill tackles firearm suicides, which account for two-thirds of firearm deaths each year. By requiring waiting periods, we could expect a 7-to-10 percent firearm suicide rate reduction. By requiring safe storage of firearms, youths would be prevented from accessing firearms in a moment of crisis. Finally, Warren's bill includes extreme-risk protection orders, similar to Massachusetts, a policy that has the support of law enforcement and the mental health community.

We are proud of our proven success in gun violence prevention in Massachusetts. Warren's evidenced-based, data-driven legislation, which replicates the Commonwealth's effective gun violence prevention efforts, would save lives, for an untold number of families, and make Massachusetts and America safer.

John E. Rosenthal is the co-founder of Stop Handgun Violence.



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Unreasonable for gun lobby to oppose Stop Handgun Violence billboard

By John Rosenthal | April 10, 2015 Boston Globe

Last week, Stop Handgun Violence unveiled its latest gun safety billboard campaign that said, "We're not anti-gun, we're pro-life: Massachusetts Gun Laws Save Lives." The new message briefly went up on dozens of donated billboards across Massachusetts only to come down two days later after the local NRA affiliate, Gun Owners' Action League, argued that the billboards were misleading.

Initially the gun lobby took issue with the white truce flag in a gun barrel, even though both Stop Handgun Violence and GOAL supported Speaker DeLeo's gun legislation last year. Also given that many Stop Handgun Violence Board members and supporters, including myself, are gun owners and what could be more pro-life than gun violence prevention, the pro-life phrase didn't seem to be the issue. That leaves the statement, "Massachusetts Gun Laws Save Lives." GOAL argued in an Associated Press story that "gun-related crimes have increased since the state passed a package of gun laws in 1998."

When I cofounded Stop Handgun Violence in 1994 and began a public awareness campaign to reduce gun violence without banning most guns, there were 309 gun deaths in Massachusetts that year. In 2013, the most recent year that data is available from the National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there were 213 gun deaths.

The law we passed in 1998 had five main aspects. First, it required firearms training before receiving a license to own a firearm. Second, it required that all firearms be stored in a locked container or be equipped with an approved locking device, unless under the gun owners direct control. Third, it required guns meet minimum manufacturing and consumer safety standards, the first such consumer protection law covering firearms in the nation. Fourth, the law defined large capacity weapons and restricted ownership to individuals who met licensing standards. Finally, the law increased penalties for unlawful possession and use of a firearm.

Together, these provisions created a host of new criminal laws, which have been enforced and have led to more arrests for gun-related crimes. This is especially true given the fact that Massachusetts criminals can still buy guns without detection from private gun dealers in New Hampshire, Maine and Vermont without undergoing a criminal background check or even showing proof of ID.

In addition, we have made significant progress in firearm-related suicides and accidents in the last 17 years. Since 1998, the Massachusetts firearm suicide rate has decreased 46 percent. This further underscores the importance of the safe gun storage provisions of the 1998 law that were intended to make gun ownership safer by preventing in-home accidents and suicides.

If the gun lobby honestly thinks that "Massachusetts Gun Laws Save Lives" is a misleading message, I encourage them to do some soul searching for who is doing the "misleading."

John E. Rosenthal is cofounder of Stop Handgun Violence.



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Close the gun show loophole

By John Rosenthal | August 16, 2008 Boston Globe

A DANGEROUS "gun show loophole" continues to allow criminals and terrorists to legally buy and sell guns in the United States on a cash-and-carry, no-questions-asked basis. At approximately 5,000 gun shows each year in 32 states, criminals and terrorists are allowed to purchase firearms from private gun dealers without an ID or background check. Although many gun dealers are federally licensed and therefore legally required to contact the National Instant Criminal Background Check System to ensure that a prospective purchaser is not prohibited from possessing firearms, private sellers have no such requirement.

Consider the following examples.

- A manual titled, "How Can I Train Myself for Jihad" was found in September, 2001, among the rubble at a training facility for a radical Pakistan-based Islamic terrorist organization. The manual contained a chapter on "Firearms Training" and singled out the United States for its easy availability of firearms. It also named the states where Al Qaeda members in the United States could "obtain an assault weapon legally, preferably AK-47 or variations."
- In Texas, Muhammad Asrar was arrested in an investigation of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. He pleaded guilty to immigration violations and illegal possession of ammunition. The Pakistani store owner said he had bought handguns, rifles, and a submachine gun at gun shows since 1994.
- On Sept. 10, 2001, just one day before the devastating attacks against the United States, Ali Boumelhem was convicted in Michigan on a variety of weapons violations plus conspiracy to ship weapons to the terrorist organization Hezbollah. He and his brother Mohamed had purchased an arsenal weapons from Michigan gun shows without undergoing background checks.
- On April 20, 1999, in the deadliest high school shooting in US history, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold procured two shotguns, an assault rifle, and a TEC-9 assault pistol and shot 26 students in Littleton, Colo., killing 13 before killing themselves. An ATF investigation found that all four weapons had been purchased from private sellers at gun shows. Three of the guns were purchased by Robyn Anderson, a friend of both Harris and Klebold. Anderson said that she would not have purchased the guns for the teens if she had been required to undergo a background check at the gun show.
- Branch Davidian cult leader David Koresh used Texas gun shows to make large gun purchases. According to an ATF arrest warrant, Koresh and his cult made "regular purchases of weapons and ammunition [from] flea markets and gun shows." Authorities estimated that Koresh had at least 200 automatic and semi-automatic assault rifles stockpiled, plus thousands of rounds of ammunition. In 1995, four FBI agents and six Branch Davidians died in an exchange of gunfire. Seventy six people died in a fire that destroyed the cult compound.



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- Timothy McVeigh, who bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in 1995 was a "private seller" at gun shows. He along with accomplice Michael Fortier, admitted to stealing \$60,000 worth of shotguns, rifles, and handguns from an Arkansas gun collector's ranch and then reselling the stolen weapons at gun shows.

Buyers and sellers at gun shows be required to abide by the same reasonable standards that law abiding gun buyers and the majority of federally licensed gun dealers comply with. It's not too much to ask that criminals and terrorists who have been known to exploit the "gun show loophole" undergo background checks and show ID's before they buy guns in the United States. Both presidential candidates and the majority of Americans, including gun owners, support closing this dangerous loophole. It's time for Congress to act.

John Rosenthal is cofounder of Stop Handgun Violence, Common Sense About Kids and Guns and American Hunters and Shooters Association.