

# The Boston Globe

FRIDAY, MARCH 23, 2018

WHAT  
MARCHERS  
SHOULD  
DEMAND

OPINION

7 STEPS,

27,000  
LIVES IN THE BALANCE



It is America's destiny to live with guns forever. The Second Amendment saw to that. Today's weapons are cheaper and more deadly than the expensive, unreliable ones the Founders knew — and more ubiquitous: There are enough guns in the country for everyone to have his or her own.

The framers also wrote that regulation is necessary for security. They were right — as Massachusetts knows. This state regulates weapons thoughtfully, to the point that it has the lowest rate of gun deaths in the nation: about 3.5 per 100,000 residents. The national rate is 11.8. In states like Alaska,

Louisiana, and Alabama, the rate is north of 20. That's just fatalities. For every person killed with a gun, two to three more are injured.

If all states were to lower their gun death rates to that of Massachusetts, more than 27,000 lives in America could be saved annually. The best way to make that happen? Seven common-sense laws, all of which are consistent with the Second Amendment, and all of which have been shown to work.

Many factors contribute to the prevalence of gun deaths. Rates of gun ownership — also relatively low in Massachusetts — and factors such as geography, education, and availability of health care all contribute. Yet the death rate in Massachusetts is low not just because of good hospitals and favorable demographics, but also because

our laws foster a more careful coexistence with guns. Our laws could and should go further, but they recognize this much: Focusing on the cause of death — the weapons — is the best chance we have to keep more people alive.

Saving lives is a choice. It's a choice the people of Massachusetts have made on a bipartisan basis, bit by bit, over decades. In the wake of the latest in a long line of mass killings, people all over the country appear ready to make similar choices.

Some 67 percent of the country supports tougher gun laws, the highest level of support in more than three decades.

The goal is simple: Save lives. In Massachusetts, we know that this goal is achievable if there is the will to do so.

This special section shows how to do it.

SEE  
THE MATH  
ON THE  
BACK PAGE

VOL. , NO.

Suggested retail price  
\$2.50

#7steps



# STEPS

## TO SAVE LIVES

Laws aren't a panacea. They're a tool for public safety and require both maintenance and sound judgment from people charged with implementing them successfully. In the 24 years since Massachusetts adopted tougher regulations, the gun death rate has fallen 40 percent.

The state's gun safety system starts with mandatory background checks and licensing by people like Canton Police Chief Kenneth Berkowitz, who has approved many gun permits but,

critically, says he rejects about one per month.

It continues with gun dealers like Mike Weisser, of Ware Gun Shop, who gets to know his customers and has refused to sell firearms to people before their background checks clear — even if that takes longer than the federally mandated three days.

It culminates with prosecutors like Suffolk County Assistant District Attorney Greg Henning, who strictly enforces the state's strong laws around possession and storage. "The possession of a firearm is at the precipice on the edge of violence," Henning says. "It's a finger pull away. That can be intentional or negligent, but it can be deadly."

And it is voters — including the next generations of voters who attend schools where active shooter drills are a reality — who can help make the safety system even tighter. Charlotte Lowell, age 17, can't vote yet. But she's helping to lead the March for Our Lives scheduled for Saturday. "This isn't a partisan movement, it's a common-sense movement," she says.



### EMPOWER LOCAL COMMUNITIES

All violence is local. Most people who are shot are shot by someone they know. And no one knows more about a community's security than the people charged with preserving it.

Several years ago, the Arlington Police Department received an application for a gun license from a man who checked out. "We ran him through all the databases, everything looked good. We printed out his permit and left him a voicemail to come down to the station and pick it up," recalls Arlington Police Chief Fred Ryan. "Instead of the applicant, one of his family members called us to say that he was having suicidal thoughts and seeing a therapist for it. We denied him the license."

**Chiefs of police are the right people to decide if a gun license should be issued to those who live in their communities.** And they should be able to deny licenses to people they deem a threat to themselves or others. Subject to appeal, of course, this law gives police chiefs discretion and communities the power to make themselves safer.

**Massachusetts passed such a licensing process for handguns in 1994 and extended it to shotguns and long guns in 2014. Gun licenses must be renewed, just like driver's licenses.**

"It's hard to get a gun license here, and that's a good thing," said Greg Henning, head of the gang unit at the Suffolk district attorney's office. "It means that law enforcement has the time and the ability to do a background check. . . . They have the discretion and the ability to contemplate whether issuing a license is appropriate." Discretion is the better part of valor for a reason.

#7steps





## PROTECT CONSUMERS

If you manufacture or sell any toy gun in the United States, federal law requires a “6mm-wide blaze orange tip or a blaze orange stripe 1-inch thick on both sides of the barrel.” That’s to help police distinguish between a real weapon and a toy.

There are strict federal regulations for toy guns, but there are no such federal regulations for actual guns, even though badly designed weapons play a significant role in accidental shootings.

**In 1998, Massachusetts became the first state in the nation to regulate and require manufacturing, safety, and marketing standards for firearms.** “Saturday night specials,” cheap so-called junk guns, and plastic guns that can pass through metal detectors are illegal to sell, for instance. This will be an important area for legislatures to watch in an era when 3-D printing becomes more widespread.

Going forward, legislators should mandate two basic safety features that could save many lives now lost because users think the guns are unloaded. First, require that firearms be designed so that they cannot be fired when the magazine is not attached. Second, require load indicators, which show when the gun is loaded and when it is empty.



## PROTECT THE VULNERABLE

The epidemic of gun deaths today is primarily fueled by gun suicides. For instance, white male suicides accounted for 46 percent of all gun deaths in the United States in 2016, the last year for which good data are available. That year, the year of the Pulse nightclub massacre, 0.18 percent of all gun deaths came in mass shootings. We have a skewed view of the scope of our gun problem because we don’t treat all gun deaths the same way.

Overall, about two-thirds of all gun fatalities are self-inflicted. Unfortunately, humans will always take their own lives. But removing guns from the equation makes it far more difficult. **In Massachusetts, those deemed “mentally defective” are barred by law from owning guns.** Mental health adjudications must also be reported to the National Instant Background Check System. A new bill in the Legislature’s Joint Public Safety Committee, the Extreme Risk Protective Order, goes even further, allowing family members to petition the courts to temporarily remove guns from loved ones who are judged a threat to themselves or others.

Passing laws like these also presents an opportunity to educate the public in a way that could potentially change behavior — changes that could potentially save lives, said Matthew Miller, a professor at Northeastern University and co-director of Harvard’s Injury Control Research Center. We reflexively buckle up when we get into our cars not because we might get a ticket, but because the campaign that surrounded seatbelt safety convinced us of its importance.

Removing all the guns from a home where someone is struggling badly with psychiatric, emotional, or substance abuse issues could be the difference between life and death, Miller said, and broad public understanding of that fact is critical to the success of any Extreme Risk Protective Order law.

“If you are going through a hard time, and a gun is nearby, it’s just more likely that if you lose control, someone is going to die,” Miller said. “More often than not, that someone is you.”



## BAN ASSAULT WEAPONS

The federal government abdicated its responsibility to keep its citizens safe from semiautomatic assault weapons and ammunition magazines holding more than 10 rounds when it allowed a ban to expire in 2004. Since then, millions of weapons like the AR-15 have been scooped up by Americans. They are not hunting weapons, and they are ill-suited for self-defense in the home. They have no place in civilian hands.

**Governor Mitt Romney signed a permanent ban on the sale and possession of assault weapons and high capacity magazines in 2004.** Attorney General Maura Healey worked to enforce and strengthen it against copycat weapons. “This has never been about grabbing guns from people,” Healey said last year. “My actions have never been about taking away guns from people. I respect the Second Amendment, but we have a law on the books, and it’s an important law. It says that civilians can’t walk around with or be in possession of military-style assault weapons, weapons that were made for military use to kill as many people as possible as quickly as possible. That’s appropriate.”

Speaking of weapons of war that have no place in civilian hands, there’s one that all state legislators on and off Beacon Hill should ban: the .50 caliber sniper rifle. It was designed as an anti-materiel weapon for the military in the 1980s.

It’s a gun that’s designed to take out vehicles or grounded fighter jets or attack helicopters from a mile away. It’s good at doing that. And it doesn’t belong in civilian hands any more than fighter jets or attack helicopters do. Yet you can buy one without a background check in 30 states, including Maine, Vermont, and New Hampshire.

Massachusetts should join Connecticut, Maryland, California, and Washington, D.C., and ban this weapon immediately.



## STORE GUNS SAFELY

Millions of children live in homes where firearms are easily accessible, according to research. That’s why the law in Massachusetts requires that gun owners keep their guns unloaded and locked up when they are not in their direct control. There’s no better way to keep weapons out of the hands of children or a temporarily depressed teenager, short of keeping guns out of the house entirely. Little wonder that states that passed tough weapon storage laws saw their unintentional gun death rates for children under 15 plummet.

**Gun owners in Massachusetts can be charged with criminal negligence if their weapons do find their way into young hands.** Republican Governor Paul Cellucci signed this bill into law in 1998 in Massachusetts. Requiring the next generation of trigger locks and smart gun technology is an obvious and important next step.

What’s more, secure storage helps with a huge and rather obvious problem facing a country with millions of weapons — theft. Around a half a million guns are lost or stolen from private homes each year. No background check, no waiting period.



## REGULATE GUN DEALERS

**In Massachusetts, gun dealers must conduct a background check for every sale, their employees must pass a background check, and their sales records are inspected every year.**

But an estimated half of all gun sales in the United States are private, meaning that there is no background check or record of sale.

Private sellers here are required to validate the license of any buyer and report the transfer to the state. But pending criminal charges from other states that would be revealed on a federal background check may not immediately result in a Massachusetts gun license being revoked. That’s why legislators like David Linsky of Natick are considering ways to close that potential loophole. An act that would require private sales to be completed at licensed dealers is pending in the Massachusetts House of Representatives.



## GET THE DATA

No rational government would ban research into a deadly public health crisis. But that’s just what Washington has done. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is prohibited from studying gun violence. Suicides are the 10th leading cause of death nationwide, and a majority are by gun.

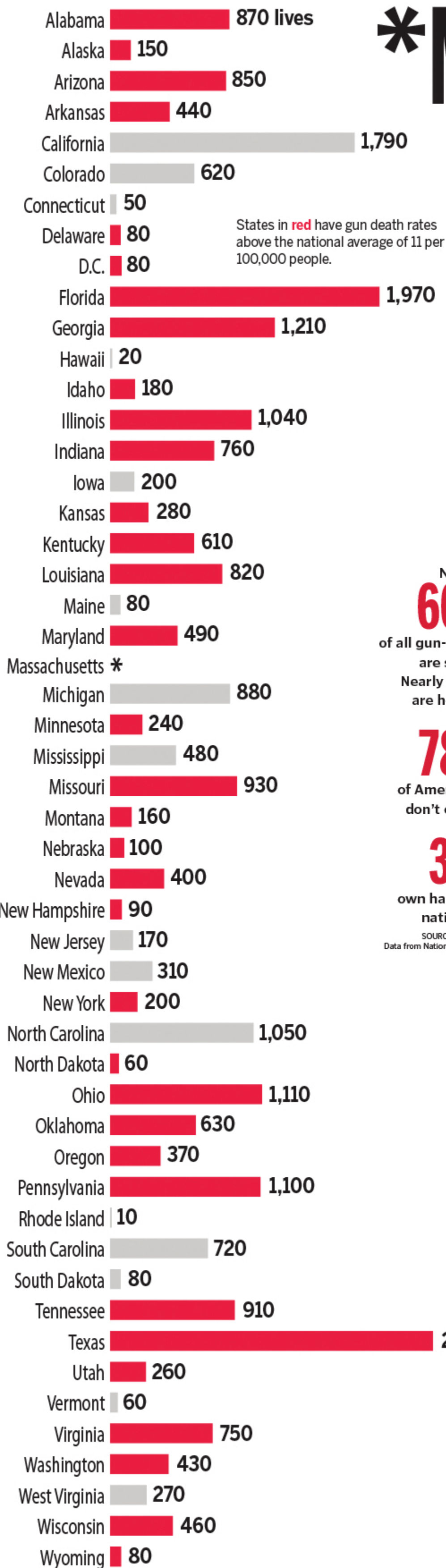
Meanwhile, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives collects lots of information at its National Tracing Center on guns and their movement. But it is prevented by law from sharing that data with researchers.

States, which have always been central to public health campaigns from seatbelt rules to smoking bans, need to lead on gun research, too. **Massachusetts tracks all weapons-related injuries and deaths through the Department of Public Health Weapons Related Injury Surveillance System.** The state should aggressively fund the study of guns and public health, an area ripe for partnering with the region’s universities.

Even something as simple as gun ownership rates on a state-by-state basis has not been the subject of a reliable survey since the CDC’s 2004 Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System survey. “We should try to let lots of different ideas flourish,” said Miller, the Northeastern professor.



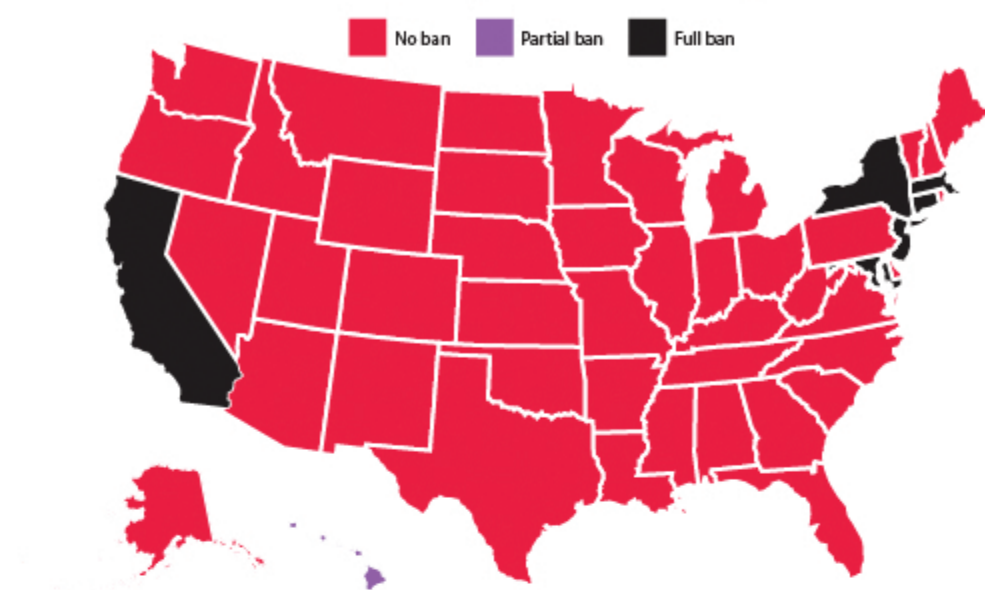
# HOW TO SAVE 27,000 LIVES



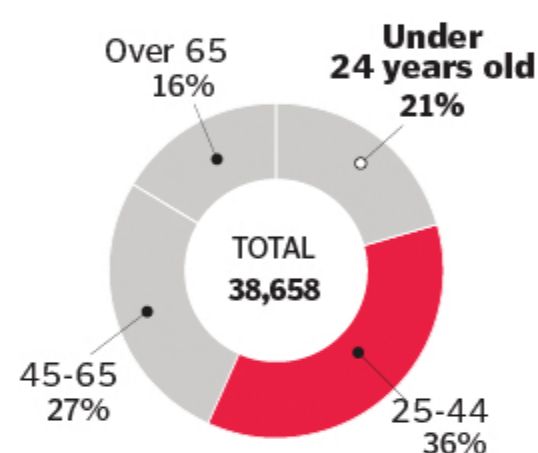
States in **red** have gun death rates above the national average of 11 per 100,000 people.

**\*M**assachusetts had the lowest gun death rate in the country: 3.5 per 100,000 people in 2016. This chart shows how many lives would be saved each year if each state and the District of Columbia lowered its gun death rate to 3.5 per 100,000. Alabama, for example, had 1,046 gun deaths in 2016. If Alabama had the same rate as Massachusetts, an estimated 870 more people a year would live.

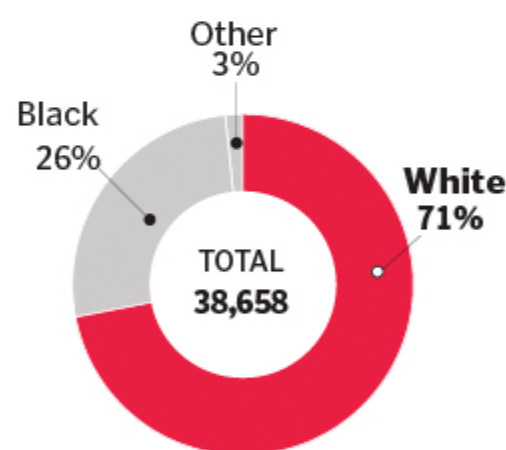
## Assault weapons ban by state



## Gun deaths by age



## Gun deaths by race



SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2016.  
Note: Latinos can be a member of any race.

Nearly **60%**  
of all gun-related deaths  
are suicides.  
Nearly 40 percent  
are homicides.

**78%**  
of American adults  
don't own a gun.

**3%**  
own half of all guns  
nationwide.

SOURCE: Azrael et. al  
Data from National Firearm Survey 2015.

# BETTER LAWS HELP EVERYONE

Implementing Massachusetts-style gun safety laws in states across the country is neither altruistic nor paternalistic.

Philip Markoff, the "Craigslist Killer," was accused of killing Julissa Brisman in 2009. Markoff had driven to New Hampshire from Quincy and bought a gun and ammunition using a stolen ID and a sheet of paper saying he was a New Hampshire college student. He was accused of using them to kill Brisman and stage two armed robberies. He took his own life in prison awaiting trial.

In his time as a prosecutor, Greg Henning has observed that the guns used in shootings typically weren't bought from a gun dealer in Massachusetts. "They're either stolen or originate in another state."

Toughening gun laws in other states helps keep weapons out of dangerous hands in Massachusetts, too. We know, for instance, that guns seized in Massachusetts have been traced to several states with looser laws, including New Hampshire, Maine, Florida, and Georgia. A compact among the New England states would be a promising idea to consider, synchronizing their laws in the interest of saving lives in the region.

"By enforcing laws here and having similar firearm laws in other states, you can start to stem the tide," Henning said.

More than 30,000 gun deaths per year is too high a price to pay for the absolute right to own an arsenal. The best — and the least — we can do is make it safer to live with the arsenal that will always be with us.

**#7steps**