

99-03

## STATEMENT OF POLICY

### Prevention of Firearm-Related Injury and Death

#### Policy

The National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) recognizes firearm-related injury and death as a preventable public health crisis. As such, NACCHO supports a comprehensive public health approach to promoting safe communities, and preventing firearm misuse, injury, and death, while acknowledging an individual's right to own and use firearms for legal purposes.

NACCHO also recognizes the disparate impact of firearm-related injury and death on vulnerable communities. Structural racism, social marginalization, and economic inequalities can increase one's risk of perpetuating or experiencing firearm violence.<sup>1, 2</sup> As such, NACCHO recommends that local health departments consider addressing the root causes of these inequities by crafting policies that address the systematic and structural causes of firearm-related injury and death.

Local health departments play an important role in preventing intentional and unintentional firearm-related injury and death. In coordination and collaboration with other local, state, and national efforts, local health departments should engage in primary prevention strategies, while addressing the intersection of related public health issues such as suicide, substance misuse and addiction, community violence, and domestic violence.

NACCHO supports legislation, regulation, or policies that promote strategies to prevent firearm-related injury and death:

- Research Funding
  - Invest in research and data collection from multiple sectors (e.g., public health, law enforcement, medical examiners, and social services) to:
    - Increase our understanding of the evidence related to the cause of firearm-related injury and death and the effectiveness of prevention strategies.
    - Improve unrestricted access to data to engage in research for evidence-based policy development.
- Firearm and Ammunition Sales
  - Extend universal background check requirements for all sales and transfers of firearms and specify satisfactory completion of the background check at the time of sale/transfer from licensed and unlicensed sellers.
  - Require firearm owners to have a firearm safety certification, register all



- firearms in confidential registries, and report the sale or transfer of firearms to the appropriate authority.
- Require all parties who sell or otherwise transfer ammunition to another party to document ammunition sales by obtaining the name of the buyer, date, and details of the ammunition transferred.
  - Require a valid firearm safety certification prior to the selling or transfer of ammunition.
  - Ban the sale, transfer, importation, manufacture, and possession of homemade firearms or “ghost guns,” which bypass federal requirements of a background check and have no serial number or cannot be traced.
- Early Intervention
    - Prevent and mitigate children’s exposure to neglect, abuse, trauma, toxic stress, and violence.
    - Promote safe, stable, nurturing relationships for children to reduce the risk of future violence.
    - Improve and expand school-based and community-based violence prevention efforts aimed at detecting and interrupting perpetual patterns of violence (e.g. promoting positive school climate, anti-bullying initiatives, and restorative justice practices).
    - Promote implementation and enforcement of Child Access Prevention Laws to encourage safe storage of firearms.
  - Mental Health and Suicide Prevention
    - Support early identification of mental illness and access to high-quality, culturally appropriate behavioral health services and support.
    - Promote the implementation and enforcement of extreme risk protection orders (ERPO), “red flag laws” or “gun violence restraining orders” that temporarily prohibit gun ownership among individuals deemed to be a threat to themselves or others.
    - Encourage voluntary self-prohibition policies that allow individuals at risk of suicide to place themselves on a “no buy list” prohibiting them from passing a background check to purchase firearms.
  - Provider Counseling
    - Implement screening practices among primary care and behavioral health providers to screen patients about firearm access during routine screenings for depression, suicide, and domestic violence.
    - Implement lethal means safety counseling and education to individuals at risk of suicide to reduce access to firearms until the risk of suicide has decreased.
  - Community-wide Collaboration
    - Develop community-wide strategies, using multi-sectoral partnerships (e.g., public health, healthcare, education, law enforcement, justice, mental/behavioral health, social services, community leaders, businesses, the gun owning community, and faith-based organizations), to identify or develop and evaluate strategies to increase firearm safety and prevent firearm injury and death.
    - Include active shooter response plans, along with effective training for first responders, within community-wide emergency and public health response plans, resources and capabilities that address preparation for, response to,

and recovery from active shooter situations in schools, workplaces, places of worship, public gathering spaces, and other settings (e.g., [See Something, Say Something](#); [Power of Hello](#)).

### **Justification**

Firearm-related deaths and nonfatal firearm-related injuries are critical public health issues, with increasing urgency over the last two decades. In 2018, there were nearly 40,000 firearm-related fatalities in the United States. Non-fatal firearm injuries account for more than double the amount firearm-related deaths, with approximately 74,000 firearm related injuries occurring each year from 2009 to 2014. Suicide is the leading cause of firearm death, with 24,432 people dying by firearm suicide in 2018, accounting for 61% of all firearm fatalities. In the same year, 13,958 people died from firearm homicides, making up 35.1% of total firearm deaths. The remaining 3.6% of firearm fatalities are accounted for by accidental or undetermined injury leading to death. In 2019, there were 417 mass shootings, resulting in over 200 deaths. Firearm-related injury and death disproportionately affect black Americans, who are 10 times more likely than white Americans to die by gun homicide, and 14 times more likely to be injured in a firearm assault.

The economic costs of firearm-related injury and death are significant. Researchers estimate that gun violence costs the American economy nearly 230 billion annually, including \$8.6 billion in direct expenses, mostly encompassing prison costs. The remaining \$221 billion in indirect costs is comprised of factors such as lost quality of life, healthcare expenses, lost wages, and psychological and emotional trauma.

There are legal loopholes that allow firearm sellers and buyers to skirt regulations on firearm trade. Federal law requires federally licensed firearm dealers to perform background checks on firearm purchases but does not impose this requirement on unlicensed sellers. Extending universal background checks to unlicensed sellers supports the restriction or the prohibition of the acquisition of firearms by high-risk persons with the potential to harm themselves or others.

Restrictions on firearm-related research, surveillance, and evaluation have made it difficult to determine the most effective strategies to prevent firearm-related injury and death. However, experts have recommended several promising strategies, including those aimed at ensuring responsible access to firearms, reducing exposure to violence, and supporting mental and behavioral well-being. Exposure to childhood trauma has been linked to several risk factors for violence, including firearm ownership and carrying, involvement with the criminal justice system, as well as aggression and impulsivity. Addressing the prevention and mitigation of childhood trauma, abuse, and neglect can interrupt cycles of violence and may reduce firearm-related injury and death.

Multidisciplinary and inter-professional collaboration is critical to establishing meaningful change that leads to the reduction of firearm-related violence. Local health departments are positioned to serve as neutral conveners and play a key role in aligning community resources, stakeholders, and professionals to develop, implement, and evaluate comprehensive plans that address risk and protective factors for firearm-related injury and death across all social-ecological levels (e.g. individual, interpersonal, community, societal).

Local health departments are integral to creating and maintaining conditions that keep people healthy and safe, including concerted efforts to prevent both intentional and unintentional firearm-related injury and death.

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### **Record of Action**

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