

Building a National Collaborative on Gun Violence Research



The Urgent Need for Research on Gun Violence

America is facing an epidemic of gun violence. On average, 96 people are killed with guns each day in the United States; for every one person killed with guns, two more are injured.ⁱ Even more startling is that Americans are 25 times more likely to be shot and killed than in 22 other high-income countries.ⁱⁱ Since 1999, more than 187,000 students have experienced a shooting on campus during school hours.ⁱⁱⁱ

Because federal funding for research is quite limited, we lack basic information about the causes of gun violence and how to prevent it.^{iv} We don't know, for example, how household gun ownership has changed over time, or how many people routinely carry concealed handguns. We don't know whether carrying a gun increases or decreases the risk of firearm assault. **Bottom line: We don't have the information we need to craft evidence-backed gun policies to address gun violence and make our schools and country safer.**

We cannot overstate the price our country has paid for the lack of federal support for research on gun violence. We have lost an opportunity to test policies and interventions that might have saved lives. Were this any other public health crisis, the nation would have rallied all available resources to reduce the incidence of harm and lost lives. In the absence of federal leadership, a number of states, universities, research organizations, and foundations have taken important steps to support research on gun violence.^v

While these efforts are commendable, they don't meet the need for a national, coordinated effort aimed at building the empirical basis for policy decisions. We believe it is time for philanthropy to come together to advance gun violence research in a systematic and coordinated manner.

Our Proposal: A National Collaborative on Gun Violence Research

To that end, we are spearheading a national collaborative on gun violence research, to which we are committing \$20 million over five years. Our goal is to raise \$30 million more from funders, who, like us, recognize the dire need for research that can help reduce gun violence. Given our collective resources, expertise, and commitment to evidence, philanthropists have an opportunity to make a meaningful impact on scale with the enormity of the issue.

We envision that the majority of the collaborative's funds will go toward producing policy-relevant research and disseminating key findings to a wide variety of audiences. The goal is to inform state and federal gun violence policies and interventions and to increase public safety, while protecting individuals' constitutional rights. The collaborative will work with RAND Corporation, a highly respected nonprofit, nonpartisan research institution that has been a leader in the field of gun violence research. Alongside an independent advisory committee, RAND will oversee the research agenda and provide grants management support.

MULTIPLY IMPACT

Leveraging investments from multiple funders will allow the collaborative to pursue a wide and deep research agenda that better approaches the scale of the gun violence problem. Working together, funders can implement numerous national research projects—rather than independently funding a few projects that would have a small chance of moving the needle.

Funders will work with RAND Corporation to identify solutions to problems through targeted research and a Request for Proposals (RFPs). They will also help grow the network of organizations and funders dedicated to research on gun violence.

INTERMEDIARY

We chose RAND Corporation to serve as the collaborative's intermediary because the organization is viewed as a trusted source of expertise and analysis—RAND researchers apply the highest standards for scientific rigor and objectivity to ensure independent recommendations. RAND staff represent more than

350 disciplinary backgrounds and have a broad range of expertise, including project and grants management.

Most important, RAND Corporation possesses subject matter expertise on this topic. In 2016, RAND launched the *Gun Policy in America* research initiative, an effort aimed at advancing policy-relevant research on the effects of state gun policies. *Gun Policy in America* serves as a resource for policymakers and the public who want information on the development of effective gun policies. To date, *Gun Policy in America* has developed policy analysis tools and research syntheses, grounded in science, aimed at clarifying the effects of current and proposed firearms measures.^{vi} The initiative has already become an important resource in gun policy science.

NATIONAL RESEARCH ADVISORY COMMITTEE

The overall direction of the collaborative's research agenda will be determined by an advisory committee, comprised of 12 to 15 research experts and practitioners from across the nation. We will seek representation from law enforcement, government, community, education, health, the private sector, and academic sectors. The committee will be led by a chair who has an independent reputation and possesses the strong leadership skills necessary to facilitate participation and buy-in, promote future investment at the federal level, and manage complex partnerships.

SETTING THE RESEARCH AGENDA

Although there is currently no national coordinated group working on a research agenda to learn about the effectiveness of interventions and policies, improve data collection and access, and test new approaches, there are a number of outstanding universities and nonprofits conducting research. To leverage this expertise, the research advisory committee will include or consult with prominent researchers from well-respected institutions to help establish a national research agenda focused on studies with clear and direct policy relevance.

The National Academies has already drafted a blueprint for one such research agenda. In the wake of the 2013 Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, where 20 children and six adults were shot and killed, President Barack Obama released a national plan for addressing gun violence. The President's plan directed the CDC to identify the most pressing research problems in the field. In turn, the CDC partnered with the Institute of Medicine

and the National Research Council of the National Academies to develop a three-to-five year research agenda.^{vii}

As a starting point, the research advisory committee has both the National Academies' research agenda and the work begun by RAND's *Gun Policy in America* program. Among other areas, the National Academies' agenda focuses on these topics for investigation:

- 1. Characteristics of gun violence:** Identify the research questions necessary to improve our understanding of the characteristics of both fatal and nonfatal gun violence.
- 2. Interventions and strategies:** Identify the research questions necessary to improve our understanding of the effectiveness of interventions and strategies to prevent or reduce gun-related injuries. These may include, but should not be limited to, research questions related to the impact of public education campaigns, youth access to and use of guns, safe storage practices, general access to guns, and improved personal protection.
- 3. Risk and protective factors:** Identify research questions that will assess potential risk and protective factors, such as the socioeconomic and socio-cultural environment.^{viii}

SOLICITATIONS AND GRANT MAKING

In addition to conducting original gun policy research, RAND Corporation will carry out grant making functions to execute on the research agenda. After the research advisory committee determines the research agenda, RAND staff will solicit, review, and score letters of interest and full proposals. To maintain objectivity, the research advisory committee will serve as the award decision authority; funders will not decide who receives grants. Afterwards, the intermediary will execute the grant awards through a charitable investment account (e.g., donor advised fund), and monitor grantee progress and spending.

GOVERNANCE

Representatives from the collaborative will actively oversee RAND and the research advisory committee. Regular updates will be provided to funders on the development of the research agenda and the progress of each project. The collaborative will work together to disseminate findings to a wide audience.

Conclusion

As horrific mass shootings become all too frequent in this nation and as gun violence continues unabated, the philanthropic community has an opportunity—indeed, a responsibility—to direct its resources toward supporting scientific research into causes and solutions. In light of the fact that the federal government has spurned its obligation to support scientific research, the need is all the more urgent for a national philanthropic consortium on gun violence to take the lead—not to further a political agenda but to support rigorous research. That research, we believe, will be the foundation for policy decisions aimed at reducing this infuriating and inexplicable crisis afflicting our nation.

We have ample precedent. Philanthropic support for research into tobacco use, vehicle safety, and the causes and prevention of various illnesses led to dramatic societal change. This research helped save lives. Despite the current political stasis, basic facts about guns and gun safety—facts that remain elusive—will eventually reap incalculable benefits. Our investment in rigorous research will lead to more effective public policies. Our investment will save lives.

We hope you will join us in this cause.

ⁱ Everytown. Gun Violence by the Numbers, 2016. Retrieved from <https://everytownresearch.org/gun-violence-by-the-numbers/>.

ⁱⁱ Grinshteyn, E. & Hemenway, D. “Violent Death Rates: The US Compared with Other High-income OECD Countries, 2010,” American Journal of Medicine, 2015. Retrieved from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26551975>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cox, J. & Rich, S. “Scarred by school shootings.” March 25, 2018, The Washington Post. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/local/us-school-shootings-history/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.90b35c0d4e34.

^{iv} Research on gun violence has been stymied by an amendment to a 1996 congressional spending bill that prevents the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) from using money to “advocate or promote gun control.” The so-called Dickey amendment—named for former congressman Jay Dickey, an Arkansas Republican—became a priority for the National Rifle Association after public-health researchers in the 1990s produced several studies suggesting, among other things, that having a gun in the house increased the risk of homicide and suicide. The amendment didn’t explicitly ban research on gun violence, but when lawmakers also lowered the CDC’s budget by the exact amount the agency spent on gun-violence research, the message was clear: The federal government does not deem gun violence to be a public-health concern worthy of support. In 2011, Congress enacted similar language restricting research on gun violence across the entire Department of Health and Human Services. Following the school shooting in Parkland, FL, Congress added language to the 2018-19 federal budget providing that, notwithstanding the historical interpretation of the Dickey Amendment, the Secretary of Health and Human Services has stated the CDC has the authority to conduct research on the causes of gun violence. To date, the CDC has not provided funding for this purpose. Nearly 600,000 Americans have been killed by guns since the Dickey Amendment was enacted.

^v Last year, the University of California-Davis launched a new Firearm Violence Prevention Research Center with \$5 million in state money over five years. (Ollove, M. “Limits on Federal Gun Research Spur States to Step In,” February 27, 2018, Huffington Post. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/limits-on-federal-gun-research-spur-states-to-step_us_5a95774be4b0d02ea9314569.) And more recently, the governors of New York, New Jersey, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Delaware, and Puerto Rico formed a partnership to combat gun violence that includes the nation’s first Regional Gun Violence Research Consortium. (Hutchins, Ryan. “7 Governors Launch ‘Unprecedented’ Effort to Study Gun Violence.” April 25, 2018. Politico. <https://www.politico.com/states/new-york/city-hall/story/2018/04/25/7-governors-launch-unprecedented-effort-to-study-gun-violence-384339>.) Several foundations, including Joyce Foundation and the MacArthur Foundation, have joined forces. They are members of the Fund for a Safer Future. The Fund for a Safer Future is composed of 20 donors and supports organizations, research institutions, and advocates seeking to strengthen policies that reduce gun violence. Each year the Fund provides about \$2 million in grants, a portion of which is allocated towards research.

^{vi} Jansen, B. “Do gun policies save lives? Lack of research means we just don’t know.” March 2, 2018. USA Today. Retrieved from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2018/03/02/rand-corp-urges-more-scientific-studies-gun-policies-violent-crime/383083002/>. Accessed March 2, 2018.

^{vii} Peterson, K., McKay, B., & S. Armour. “School Killings Spur Effort to Renew Government Gun-Violence Research,” February 28, 2019, Wall Street Journal. Retrieved from https://www.wsj.com/articles/school-killings-spurs-effort-to-renew-government-gun-violence-research-1519848280?shareToken=st957613892e6c4ecdb4e412201b865e88&reflink=article_email_share.

^{viii} Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council of the National Academies, “Priorities for a Public Health Research Agenda to Reduce the Threat of Firearm-Related Violence,” 2013, National Academies Press, Washington D.C. Retrieved from <https://www.nap.edu/catalog/18319/priorities-for-research-to-reduce-the-threat-of-firearm-related-violence>.