

# **GUN VIOLENCE AND LGBT HEALTH**



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Sophia Geffen & Elizabeth Kelman

## INTRODUCTION

On June 12, 2016, the deadliest mass shooting in modern U.S. history left 49 people dead and another 53 wounded in a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida on Latin night. This devastating act of violence did not occur in isolation and it does not have a singular root cause. Many factors may have been at play, including terrorism, anti-gay prejudice, internalized homophobia, racism, anti-LGBT political rhetoric, and easy access to firearms, including assault-style weapons.

Gun violence is a pervasive public health problem in the United States; it claims 33,000 lives every year, including 1,500 children.<sup>1</sup> Almost 85,000 more are non-fatally injured. While gun control activism is not a new struggle and gun violence has the potential to impact all Americans, the burden of gun violence falls disproportionately on marginalized communities. Half of all gun homicides occur among men age 15 to 24 and two-thirds of these victims are Black.<sup>2</sup>

**Guns are the second-leading cause of death for Americans one to 25 years old.**

This issue brief will outline the argument for gun control as an LGBT public health issue in three parts. First, hate violence claims the lives of LGBT people at a disproportionate rate, especially LGBT people of color, transgender women, and gay men. Second, the high suicide rates in the LGBT community might be reduced by lower gun prevalence and more stringent ownership and storage requirements. Third, the political outlook of most LGBT community members aligns with those in favor of gun control. It is for these reasons that the LGBT community should support stronger state and federal gun control measures.

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## A REASONABLE GUN CONTROL AGENDA

Broadly defined, gun control measures are a means of improving public health. Although much of the public focus on gun control is to prevent massacres such as the one that occurred in Orlando, those highly publicized events are rare occurrences. Of the approximately 33,000 deaths via guns each year, nearly two-thirds—about 21,000—occur by suicide. Another third—approximately 11,700—are homicides. The remainder—approximately 1,000—are either due to accidents or a cause that cannot be determined.<sup>3</sup>

A reasonable gun control agenda would reduce the deaths of LGBT people by guns each year that occur via suicide and homicide. Such an agenda would include a reinstatement of the Congressional ban on assault weapons, which ended in 2004, on the basis that they are unnecessary for personal protection and serve only to inflict a large amount of human harm very quickly. Assault weapons are semi-automatic, military-style weapons that routinely hold 15-30 bullets and can be modified to hold up to 100. A reasonable gun control agenda would also include state and federal bans on the purchase of guns by those who have been convicted of domestic abuse or hate crimes or who are included on the “no fly” list maintained by the U.S. government’s Transportation Security Administration; expanded background checks; and the promotion of safer gun design and storage. Finally, gun control policy should be evidence-based, but Congress has banned the Centers for Disease Control from researching the causes of gun violence since 1996.<sup>4</sup>

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The theory that higher gun density/prevalence will deter criminals and prevent crime has been debunked. In fact, according to a 2013 analysis in the *American Journal of Public Health*, more guns lead to more innocent deaths via murder, accident and suicide.<sup>5</sup> We can learn from other countries with stricter gun control and lower levels of gun violence. In the wake of a massacre in Tasmania

that took the lives of 35 individuals, a conservative federal government in Australia implemented stricter gun control laws, which included bans on certain weapons and a mandatory gun buyback program.<sup>6</sup> As a result, Australia went from having 13 mass shootings between 1979 and 1996 to none in the succeeding 19 years. Rates of gun suicide and gun homicide fell. The U.S. murder rate is now four times greater than that of Australia.<sup>7</sup>

Gun control alone will not solve the problem of hate violence or suicide, but it will certainly make it less deadly. Over the past 50 years, there have been 127 instances of mass shooting, with 874 victims.<sup>8</sup> Twenty elementary school children were killed in Newtown, 12 lives were taken at the Washington Navy Yard, and there were nine victims who were killed while worshipping at a historic African American church in Charleston.<sup>9</sup> It is unfortunate that it has taken the Orlando massacre to rally the LGBT community around gun control, but we need to seize this window of opportunity and commit to protecting the lives of the most vulnerable members of the LGBT community through sensible, evidence-based gun policies. Gun control should be a policy priority for the LGBT community, alongside the fight for legal equality through non-discrimination legislation.

## VIOLENCE AGAINST LGBT PEOPLE

Despite recent strides in social acceptance and civil rights, the LGBT community in the US remains all too familiar with hate violence. In terms of total numbers, the majority of hate crimes are motivated by race, religion, and disability.<sup>10</sup> However, on a per capita basis, LGBT people are more likely to be targets of hate crimes than any other group in America.<sup>11</sup> In 2014, the most recent year for which data is available, 18.6% of reported hate crimes were perpetrated on the basis of the victim's sexual orientation, and 1.8% were perpetrated on the basis of the victim's gender identity.<sup>12</sup> Gay men report being victims of violent hate crimes at a higher rate than any other targeted group.<sup>13</sup> Anti-LGBT hate crimes are more violent and result in hospitalization more often than those based on race/ethnicity, religion, or disability.<sup>14</sup> The National Coalition of Antiviolence Programs noted a 20% increase in reported LGBT homicides from 2014 to 2015.<sup>15</sup>

LGBT people who are racial/ethnic minorities, undocumented immigrants, and/or young are disproportionately affected by hate violence. Police are also less likely to classify violent crimes as hate crimes

committed against members of these groups on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Of the 24 anti-LGBT homicides reported to NCAVP in 2015, 62% were people of color, 54% were transgender women of color, and 79% were 35 years old or younger. Less than half were reported to the police, and only a tiny fraction of those reported were officially designated as hate crimes.<sup>16</sup>

National research on gun violence prevention was defunded in 1996, when Congress cut the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's budget by the exact amount used for gun-related public health research. When funding was restored, it was allocated elsewhere, with wording that stated, "none of the funds made available for injury prevention and control at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention may be used to advocate or promote gun control."<sup>17</sup> The CDC interpreted this as a warning against studying guns in any fashion. Congress has blocked multiple recent proposals for dedicated funding for gun violence research. The National Institute of Justice (an arm of the US Department of Justice) funded just three gun violence studies over the course of 13 years.<sup>18</sup> As such, national data is limited; quality statistics on gun violence affecting LGBT people have to be cobbled together from nonprofit anti-violence programs and federal crime reporting.

**Under federal law and in most states, individuals who have been convicted of violent hate crime misdemeanors remain free to buy and own guns.**

Approximately 43,000 hate crimes in the US between 2010 and 2014 involved the use or threat of a gun.<sup>19</sup> When a gun or other deadly weapon is used in a hate crime, it is classified as aggravated assault. Anti-LGBT hate crimes are more likely to be aggravated assaults than hate crimes motivated by bias against any other group; 15% of anti-LGBT hate crimes in 2014 were classified as aggravated assault, compared to 3% of those based on religion and 12.5% of those based on race.

Felons are prohibited from purchasing guns, but under federal law and in most states, individuals who have been convicted of violent hate crime misdemeanors remain free to buy and own guns.<sup>20</sup> Only Minnesota, Oregon, and New Jersey explicitly prohibit those convicted of hate crime misdemeanors from owning guns.<sup>21</sup> Maryland, Delaware, and Massachusetts have laws addressing hate crimes and gun ownership, but

their policies only apply to certain types of misdemeanor hate crimes.<sup>22</sup>

As communities of color and faith-based organizations have argued for decades, hate violence will still occur with increased gun control, but any solution to this kind of violence must address the ease with which prejudiced, malintentioned people can acquire firearms, particularly those designed to kill humans. Hate violence is far more deadly when carried out with guns.

## LGBT SUICIDE

Gun violence also affects the LGBT community in the form of suicide. Nationwide, more Americans kill themselves with a firearm than are murdered with one, by a ratio of almost 2:1. Data on suicide death rates for sexual and gender minorities is not available in the US, since sexual orientation and gender identity are not reported on death certificates. However, studies show that sexual and gender minority Americans report substantially higher rates of suicide attempts than their cisgender and heterosexual peers, both in adolescence and adulthood.<sup>23</sup>

Though the most common suicide attempt method in the US is intentional drug overdosing, less than three percent of these attempts result in death.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, suicide attempts involving firearms are fatal 90% of the time.<sup>25</sup> As such, even though other attempt methods are more frequent, half of the nearly 50,000 annual US suicide deaths are committed with guns.<sup>26</sup> Pulling a trigger is immediate and irreversible, even though suicide attempts represent what is nearly always a passing crisis. When the attempt method is less immediate (e.g. poisoning/pills, cuts, suffocation), suicidal individuals have time to reconsider, call for help, or be found and saved.

Research at both the community and population levels has shown that sexual minority youth are much more likely than their heterosexual peers to have suicidal thoughts and to attempt suicide.<sup>27</sup> Sexual minority youth are more than four times as likely as heterosexual youth to make a seriously injurious or life-threatening suicide attempt.<sup>28</sup> Studies of suicide amongst transgender youth have been small scale, but indicate extremely high rates—nearly half of transgender youth report having attempted suicide.<sup>29</sup>

Suicide rates are similarly elevated among LGBT adults. More than 40% of transgender adults and 10-20% of

sexual minority adults report having attempted suicide at least once in their lives.<sup>30</sup> These statistics are alarmingly higher than the 4.6% lifetime suicide attempt rate for the overall US adult population.

## Stricter gun control measures at the state level have been shown to strongly correlate with lower suicide rates.

Stricter gun control measures at the state level have been shown to strongly correlate with lower suicide rates.<sup>31</sup> Tighter state laws lead to lower gun prevalence in those states, and lower prevalence of households with guns is correlated with reduced overall suicide rate, through fewer suicides involving firearms.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, firearm ownership rates, independent of suicide attempt rates, are responsible for most of the variation in suicide mortality across the 50 states.<sup>33</sup> Given the extraordinarily high rate of attempted suicide in the LGBT community, less easy access to guns would represent one step forward.

## LGBT POLITICAL BELIEFS ALIGN WITH THE GUN CONTROL PLATFORM

The political beliefs of the majority of the LGBT community are in line with the issue of gun control. Adults who identify as sexual and gender minorities comprise about 5% of all voters nationwide, and are significantly more likely to identify as liberal and as Democrats.<sup>34</sup> While non-LGBT Americans are nearly evenly divided in their politics, 63% of LGBT voters are Democrats and 21% are Republicans.<sup>35</sup> LGBT voters are twice as likely as non-LGBT voters to identify as politically liberal.

Despite the universal nature of gun violence, attempts to enact gun safety legislation is a highly partisan issue, with Congressional Republicans stymying all attempts at federal policy change that might reduce the numbers of deaths and injuries by guns that take place each year. On June 15, 2016, Democrats in the U.S. Senate, led by Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut, staged a 15-hour filibuster to force Republican leadership to allow a vote on two gun safety measures. One would prohibit anyone on the FBI “no fly” list from purchasing a gun, and one would require background checks for those seeking to purchase firearms at gun shows or online. Both measures failed to pass. Only two Republicans supported the bill to ban those on the FBI “no fly” list from purchasing guns,

and just one Republican supported the bill to expand background checks.

Many Republicans refused to support these bills because they agree with the National Rifle Association's (NRA) stance on gun ownership and the Second Amendment. The NRA claims to be "America's longest-standing civil rights organization" and argues that any restriction on the purchase and possession of a gun is a threat to Second Amendment freedoms.<sup>36</sup> The Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution guarantees that "a well-regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed."<sup>37</sup> However, we no longer need an armed civilian militia to protect our freedom. The NRA ignores how much the U.S. has changed since 1787 and, consequently, the context of gun ownership which necessitates better control measures to protect citizens from gun violence. Despite 74% of NRA-member households' favoring expanded background checks for private gun sales and sales at gun shows, Republicans in Congress continue to reject these bills with the support of NRA leadership.<sup>38</sup>

There is already movement in the LGBT community to support ongoing gun control advocacy efforts. Within days of the Orlando massacre, the Human Rights Campaign, the nation's largest lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer civil rights organization, adopted a new policy resolution "that the safety of LGBTQ people in the United States requires the adoption of common-sense gun violence prevention measures."<sup>39</sup> Equality California, the nation's largest statewide LGBTQ rights organization, launched "Safe and Equal," a campaign "to end gun violence by advocating for tougher common sense gun safety laws at the federal and state levels."<sup>40</sup> Other LGBTQ rights organizations around the country, together representing more than 2.2 million people, pledged in an open letter to join the movement to end gun violence.<sup>41</sup>

Gun violence poses a substantial threat to the LGBT community; it is in the best interest of the community to take a stand against it. Stronger gun control could also benefit from the significant mobilizing capacity of the LGBT community. According to an op-ed by Jennifer Carlson & David Pettenicchio in *The Washington Post*, the community is organized and "part of a social movement with infrastructure and political know-how largely unmatched within the gun-control movement."<sup>42</sup> With roots stemming from the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis, the LGBT community has learned to address both legal reform and cultural transformation.

By personalizing the political, the LGBT rights movement has made remarkable progress in recent decades, including winning the right to legal marriage in all 50 states.

In just 20 years, support for marriage equality among the U.S. public has doubled from 30% to 60%.<sup>43</sup> Researchers partially attribute this increase to the "contact hypothesis," or the changes in negative attitudes generated by a heterosexual's interpersonal contact with gay men and lesbians.<sup>44</sup> LGB activists have long encouraged others to come out to friends, family, and acquaintances, both for their own mental health and to increase social and political acceptance of sexual minorities. Groups such as Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America<sup>45</sup> have been employing a similar strategy to put a personal face to gun violence. The LGBT community has also brought the deaths of transgender women, particularly transgender women of color, to the forefront through vigils and social media.<sup>46</sup>

The Orlando victims were members of a closely-knit community of young people occupying a space that was intended to make them feel safe. By sharing their stories and making clear the relationship between these deaths and the need for gun control, LGBT and gun control activists have the potential to rally new supporters for sensible gun laws.

[The next chapter of this cultural and political movement must include protecting the basic safety of the community via sensible gun laws that protect public health.](#)

The LGBT community advocates so that even the most marginalized members can enjoy the same rights and privileges as straight cisgender American citizens. This includes nondiscrimination laws and protection from religious exemption legislation that causes third party harm to LGBT people.<sup>47</sup> These measures would guarantee LGBT people's right to equal protection of the laws and make a statement that in our society discrimination against sexual and gender minorities is unacceptable. From a public health perspective, these measures address the social determinants of health. By reducing inequality, we will be treating the root cause of health disparities. However, as long as prejudice against LGBT people persists, they are at risk of violence. The next chapter of this cultural and political movement must include protecting the basic safety of the community via sensible gun laws that protect public health.

## TAKE ACTION

### *From your seat:*

- **Learn more** about gun violence
  - Watch [The Interrupters](#) documentary
  - Read about different types of gun laws from the [Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence](#). Make sure to check out your state's scorecard [here!](#)
- **Find out** what gun bills in your state are up for debate, and call your state legislators to let them know you support tighter gun laws
- **Call** the Congressional switchboard at 202-224-3121 and ask to speak with your representatives' offices.
  - Tell Congress to re-fund public health gun violence research at the CDC and to pass common sense gun control measures, such as background checks and a ban on assault weapons.
- **Dedicate your vote** to a victim of gun violence at <https://ghostvote.com/>
- **Make a donation** to an organization that fights gun violence locally or pushes for tighter gun laws, like one of these:
  - [Cure Violence](#)
  - [Everytown for Gun Safety](#)
  - [Moms Demand Action](#)
  - [Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence](#)
  - [Americans for Responsible Solutions](#)
- **Divest** your retirement portfolio: find out if your 401(k) or 403(b) is invested in gun companies at <http://unloadyour401k.com/>

### *In your home:*

- **Protect** your family and friends by [suicide-proofing](#) your home

### *In your community:*

- **Get involved** in your state's affiliate of [States United Against Gun Violence](#)
- **Organize** a free screening of [Living for 32](#) at your community center, place of worship, workplace, or school.
- **Commit** your organization to joining a coalition to end gun violence. For example:
  - [Coalition to Stop Gun Violence](#) (CSGV)
  - Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence
  - [Gays against Guns](#)
  - [Disarm Hate](#)

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