

“The Urgent Need to Address the Gun Violence Epidemic”
Committee on Oversight and Reform
10:00 AM, Wednesday, June 8, 2022
Statement for the Record
Rep. Gerald E. Connolly (D-VA)

Thank you, Chairwoman Maloney, for calling this hearing at a moment of peril and mourning for communities around the country. Today’s hearing is an important opportunity for this Committee—and the American people—to hear first-hand how gun violence shatters lives, upends communities, and harms our nation’s safety and public health. The overwhelming majority of Americans support the ABC’s of gun control: **“A” Assault** weapons ban, **“B” Background** checks improvement, and **“C” Closing** the gun show loophole. Republicans in Congress have obstructed efforts to pass gun violence prevention legislation supported by the majority of Americans. We cannot, however, bend to extremists in opposition to any kind of action whatsoever to curb gun violence. We must enact meaningful legislation that will save lives.

In the span of just ten days last month, our nation watched in horror as an 18-year-old gunman murdered 10 people at a Tops supermarket in a predominately African American neighborhood of Buffalo, New York. Shortly thereafter, an 18-year-old gunman murdered 19 children and two teachers at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas. In both massacres, the gunmen wielded military-style semi-automatic rifles designed to puncture and tear through flesh and wage war. Both gunmen, too young to buy cigarettes or alcohol, waited until they were 18 years of age to purchase their high-capacity murder weapons legally. These massacres—and the deaths of children, moms, dads, teachers, friends, and community leaders—were not inevitable. Congress can and must act to address the factors that facilitate these atrocities.

Buffalo and Uvalde are just the latest members in a growing list of communities ravaged by gun violence. In 2007 while I was serving as Chairman of the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors, a gunman murdered 32 people at Virginia Tech, including six of my constituents. I’ve seen the unimaginable loss felt by the communities and loved ones of gun violence victims. For nine years, that horrific massacre at Virginia Tech marked the deadliest mass shooting in American history—until it was surpassed twice in recent years: the first time when a gunman murdered 49 people at a Florida nightclub in 2016; and a second time when a gunman murdered 60 people attending a rock festival in Las Vegas. Gun violence has bloodied our nation’s schools, grocery stores, and places of worship. Inexcusably, easy access to deadly weapons of war catalyzes such violence.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), firearms killed more than 45,000 Americans in 2020. Gun homicides rose more than 35 percent between 2019 and 2020, and today, the leading cause of death for American children is gun violence. Not cancer, not car crashes—but gun violence. In 2022, mass shootings have far outpaced days on the calendar—with more than 246 senseless acts of indiscriminate violence being committed less than halfway through this year. Among young people, firearm suicide has reached its highest rate in more than 20 years. While the United States accounts for just four percent of the world population, it accounts for 35 percent of global firearm suicides. It is frustrating that the party some brand as “pro-life” are comfortable with the fact that if you are born in the United States, it is 25 times more likely that you will be killed in a gun homicide than someone born in other high-income countries.

Yet, with Senate Republicans blocking federal legislation that could curb gun violence, mass shootings have only continued to wreak havoc on communities in the wake of the still raw tragedies in Buffalo or Uvalde. Since then, gunmen have perpetrated 33 mass shootings, most recently in Chattanooga, Tennessee, where three people were murdered and 14 others shot near a nightclub.

In the 117th Congress, House Democrats have responded to these tragedies by passing comprehensive gun violence prevention measures supported by the vast majority of Americans. In March 2021, the House passed H.R. 8, the Bipartisan Background Checks Act, legislation that would prevent firearms from falling into the hands of criminals who never should have access to them in the first place. This week the House will continue our drumbeat of steady action on guns with consideration of the Protecting Our Kids Act (H.R. 7910), of which I am a proud cosponsor. This bill will raise the purchasing age for semi-automatic weapons from 18 to 21 years old and crack down on gun trafficking, straw purchases, and ghost guns. We will also consider the Federal Extreme Risk Protection Order Act, H.R.2377, legislation that will keep guns out of the hands of those who pose a threat to themselves or others. Additionally, I hope the House will soon move to ban assault weapons in H.R. 1808 and pass the **Active Shooter Alert Act, H.R.6538**, to create an AMBER Alert-style notification during a mass shooting.

This Committee has examined the forces perpetuating gun violence in America for several years. Our investigations reveal an industry unrepentant about pursuing profit over the health and safety of this nation. Recently, this Committee sent letters to five leading manufacturers of semi-automatic rifles to investigate the manufacturing, marketing, and sales of rifles used to conduct the deadliest massacres in this country's history. Gun manufacturers make and sell deadly weapons that have one violent purpose, while blocking any efforts to enact reforms and hold those responsible accountable for the massacres these guns were built to carry out.

The organization that represents many of these companies, the National Rifle Association (NRA), may be headquartered in my district, but I will never be their Representative. Because of the work of the NRA, state legislatures and the federal government have crafted special legal protections for manufacturers, allowing them to evade liability and accountability—while blocking the federal government from collecting the data and research it needs to address this public health crisis. If tobacco, gas, and pharmaceutical companies can be sued for the destructive results of their industries, gun manufacturers should not escape accountability. I am proud to earn an "F" rating from the NRA. I will not be party to an industry built on the pain and suffering of American families and communities. It is past time to put an end to the gun lobby's obstruction of firearms research and reform—and to immediately enact measures that we know will work.

Some of my colleagues have sought to redirect blame for this violence elsewhere – first responder errors, mental health, or video games—while ignoring the one factor that unites every incident of gun violence in this country: the ubiquitous availability of the weapons used. Weapons used in Uvalde, Buffalo, and Virginia Tech were purchased legally. No other country in the world has more guns than citizens, and no other country has repeatedly failed to address gun violence as many times as we have. Those supporting the gun industry are hoping that Congress and the American people have become numb to the public health crisis posed by gun violence. They anticipate we will quietly move on. That strategy may have worked in the past, but the overwhelming majority of Americans agree that it is long-past time to enact meaningful gun reforms. We cannot allow ourselves to be a nation that allows its children to fear

for their lives each day at school; that is complacent when racial hatred fuels indiscriminate massacres; that prioritizes gun industry profits above American lives.

It is past time for Congress to enact common-sense and meaningful gun control legislation to prevent more senseless acts of violence. 80 – 90 percent of Americans support universal background checks, 77 percent of Americans believe a family member should be able to petition a court to issue an extreme risk protection order, while 70 percent believe police should be able to file a similar petition. Bans on assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines have an approval rating of over 60 percent. With the support of the vast majority of Americans, we cannot rest until we pass meaningful legislation that will save American lives. Gun control measures can and do work, and I will continue to fight for meaningful action that effectively addresses this deadly and ongoing epidemic.