

**Testimony of Major Sabrina Tapp-Harper**  
**Commander, Domestic Violence Unit, Baltimore City Sheriff's Office**  
**United States House of Representatives Committee on the Judiciary**  
**Preventing Gun Violence: A Call to Action**  
**February 6, 2019**

Thank you, Chairman Nadler and members of the House Judiciary Committee for inviting me here to testify today. My name is Major Sabrina Tapp-Harper, and I am the Commander of the Domestic Violence Unit of the Baltimore City Sheriff's Office in Baltimore, Maryland. I am here today to talk about the dangers that weak gun laws pose on our communities, specifically for women and families who are victims of domestic violence.

The data is clear: victims of domestic violence are at increased risk of gun violence in this country. In the United States, women are 11 times more likely to be killed with a gun than women in comparable countries.<sup>1</sup> Much of this fatal violence against women is committed by intimate partners. According to the FBI, almost half of murders of women were committed by a current or former husband or a boyfriend -- 10 times as many as by a male stranger.<sup>2</sup> According to the American Journal of Public Health, the presence of a firearm in a domestic violence situation increases the risk of homicide for a woman by 500%.<sup>3</sup> These numbers miss many of the

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<sup>1</sup> D. Hemenway and E.G. Richardson, "Homicide, Suicide, and Unintentional Firearm Fatality: Comparing the United States with Other High-Income Countries, 2003," 70 *Journal of Trauma* 238-42 (2011), available at doi: 10.1097/TA.0b013e3181dbaddf.

<sup>2</sup> Bureau of Justice Statistics. *Homicide Trends in the United States, 1980-2008*. 2011. Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics. 2011 NCJ 236018

<sup>3</sup> Campbell JC, Webster DW, Koziol-McLain J, et al. Risk factors for femicide in abusive relationships: results from a multisite case control study. *American Journal of Public Health* 2003;93:1069-97.

murders committed by ex-boyfriends, who are seldom accurately categorized, and who may account for another 300-400 of the 1000 intimate partner murders each year. The Violence Policy Center found that a gun was the weapon used in over half of murders in which the weapon was known.<sup>4</sup>

Dr. Jacqueline Campbell's research has shown that gun access by a batterer is the single best predictor of whether a woman would be killed by him, increasing the risk of her murder more than five-fold.<sup>5</sup> Abusers also use guns to terrorize their victims. While commanding the Domestic Violence Unit in the Baltimore City Sheriff's Office, one petitioner directed deputies to an assault rifle that had been buried in the ground for 10 years, and was still fully operable when recovered. The respondent in this case was federally prohibited from owning firearms. Domestic abusers hide weapons in any place they can. I know of deputies, directed by the petitioner, who have recovered hidden firearms in washing machines and air conditioning units.

In a study of over 400 women in domestic violence shelters in California, two-thirds of the women who reported a firearm in their home said their intimate partner used a gun against them, with over 70% threatening to shoot or kill her and 5% actually shooting at her. That same study found that only 1 in 20 abused women who has access to a gun reported ever having used it in self-defense against her abuser.<sup>6</sup> Another study found that among California handgun purchasers, women

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<sup>4</sup> Violence Policy Center. When Men Murder Women: An Analysis of 2015 Homicide Data - Females Murdered by Males in Single Victim/Single Offender. [www.vpc.org](http://www.vpc.org)

<sup>5</sup> Campbell, Webster, Koziol-McLain, et al.

<sup>6</sup> Sorenson, SB and Wiebe, DJ. Weapons in the lives of battered women. American Journal of Public Health, 2004 94: 1412-1417.

who purchased guns had a 50% increase in risk of homicide—all of which could be attributed to homicide by an intimate partner.<sup>7</sup> Having access to a gun did not make these women safer.

It is worth noting that mass shootings—those shootings involving the death of 4 or more people—disproportionately affect women. In an analysis of such shootings conducted by the research arm of Everytown for Gun Safety, in at least 54% of mass shootings, the shooter murdered or injured a current or former partner or family member, and most of these shootings took place in homes.<sup>8</sup>

Background checks and laws restricting domestic abusers from owning weapons appear to be effective. Another analysis by Everytown for Gun Safety found that states with stronger gun laws, including the states that require a background check on every gun sale, reported lower rates of intimate partner gun homicides of women than the states with weaker gun laws.<sup>9</sup> There is also evidence that state laws to strengthen firearm prohibitions against domestic abusers reduce intimate partner homicide. **In multiple studies, researchers found that states with statutes restricting those under domestic violence restraining orders from accessing firearms experience fewer intimate partner homicides, driven by a reduction in homicides committed with firearms.**<sup>10, 11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Wintemute, G; Wright, M.A.; Drake, C.M. (2003). Increased risk of intimate partner homicide among California women who purchased handguns, *Annals of Emergency Medicine*. 41(2), p 281-283, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Everytown for Gun Safety, *Mass Shootings in the United States: 2009-2017*.

<https://everytownresearch.org/reports/mass-shootings-analysis/>

<sup>9</sup> Everytown for Gun Safety, *Guns and Violence Against Women: America's Uniquely Lethal Domestic Violence Problem*. <https://everytownresearch.org/reports/guns-and-violence-against-women/>

<sup>10</sup> April M. Zeoli, et al., "Analysis of the Strength of Legal Firearms Restrictions for Perpetrators of Domestic Violence and Their Association with Intimate Partner Homicide," *American Journal of Epidemiology* 187, no. 11 (2018).

<sup>11</sup> Vigdor ER, Mercy JA. Do laws restricting access to firearms by domestic violence offenders prevent intimate partner homicide? *Evaluation Review* 2006; 30:313-46.

Law enforcement officers in this country are most often tragically killed in traffic-related incidents and domestic-related matters. *Greater love hath no man this, that a man lay down his life for his friends...* Those of us who do this important work each day need strong laws that restrict firearm access to the most dangerous based on the best available evidence and strong enforcement of the existing laws. This would include policies like closing loopholes that exempt private gun sales and gun shows from background checks; ensuring that all states have laws restricting gun possession and gun sales to those subject to domestic violence restraining orders and domestic violence misdemeanors; ensuring that states with such laws are removing firearms when allowed and strictly enforcing the law; and amending federal laws to include dating partners, who research indicates perpetrate a substantial portion of intimate partner homicide of women.

We all have a responsibility to act on the facts, supported by research data to establish the legal parameters to keep us all safe. Thank you for inviting me here today to share my views on this critically important public safety issue. I am happy to answer any questions you may have. Thank you.