

Testimony of Gregory Jackson, Jr.
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U.S. House Judiciary Subcommittee on Crime and Federal Government Surveillance Hearing
on "The Right to Self Defense"
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Good morning Chairman Biggs, Ranking Member McBath, and members of the committee. Thank you for inviting me to be part of this important hearing. I am Greg Jackson, formerly Deputy Director of the first-ever White House Office of Gun Violence Prevention and a Special Assistant to President Biden.

I have worked to end gun violence for over a decade through advocacy organizations, local government, and most recently at the federal level. Like many Americans, I didn't find this issue by choice, but by tragedy. Growing up in rural Virginia, many of my childhood memories involve hunting or shooting targets with my father. I was taught the responsibility, power, and heritage of gun ownership in our family's history. But in April 2013, my life changed forever when I was caught in the crossfire and shot as an innocent bystander while walking home. The bullet that struck me hit two arteries leaving me with only a 50% chance of survival. After six surgeries, months of therapy learning to walk again, I sit before you today with physical and emotional wounds that still require medical treatment 12 years later.

Since I was shot, more than a million Americans have been shot or killed by guns—students in elementary schools, worshipers in churches, senior citizens in grocery stores, fans at Super Bowl parades, children in parks and everyday Americans in their neighborhoods. With more than 140,000 Americans being shot a year, gun violence shatters lives through mass shootings, interpersonal conflicts, domestic violence, self harm, homicides, suicides and heartbreaking accidents.¹ Gun violence is the leading cause of death for youth in America,² and homicide is the leading cause of death for pregnant women in America,³ and now is a leading cause of newly disabled Americans.

This crisis is pervasive, and while there is no single solution to stop all shootings, I have advanced a bipartisan public health approach—making historic progress and saving countless lives without violating the Second Amendment.

In 2020 and 2021—during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic—gun violence surged drastically, with gun homicides increasing by 45 percent and gun suicides increasing by nearly 10 percent nationwide.⁴ In the spring of 2022, the nation was reeling after back to back mass

¹ Everytown for Gun Safety. (October 2024). *Gun Violence in the United States*. Retrieved from https://everystat.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/USA_2024-October.pdf.

² Office of the Surgeon General. (2024). *The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on Firearm Violence: A Public Health Crisis in America*. Retrieved from: <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/firearm-violence-advisory.pdf>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. (October 2022). *New Analysis: Guns Drove the Increases in Homicides and Suicides from 2019 to 2021*. Retrieved from: <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/new-analysis-guns-drove-the-increases-in-homicides-and-suicides-from-2019-to-2021>.

shootings. The first, on May 14th at a grocery store in East Buffalo, New York, claimed the lives of 10 and injured three others. The second, on May 24th at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas where 19 kids and 2 teachers were killed and 17 more people were injured.

These tragic shootings and so many before inspired bipartisan negotiations leading to the passage and enactment of the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA), breaking a near-30 year logjam on gun violence prevention legislation in the Congress. This bipartisan bill made several significant changes to the law, including requiring enhanced background checks for 18 to 20-year-olds, clarifying which gun sellers must be federally licensed, establishing federal laws on firearms trafficking and straw purchasing, and prohibiting individuals convicted of domestic violence against a current or former dating partner from possessing firearms for five years.

This law also provided historic \$15 billion for mental health, school safety, and violence prevention programs, strengthening both community and law enforcement strategies to reduce violence. This law sent \$750 million to states for the newly-created Byrne State Crisis Intervention Program (SCIP) for the implementation and establishment of state crisis intervention court proceedings and Extreme Risk Protection Order or “red flag” laws; \$250 million was provided over five years for the Office of Justice Program’s (OJP) Community Based Violence Intervention and Prevention Initiative (CVIPI) to support community-based, evidence-informed violence intervention work; \$1 billion for the Department of Education for school safety programs, crisis intervention programs, and school personnel training to help prevent youth suicide; \$1 billion to hire and train school-based mental health professionals; and nearly \$1 billion for several mental health and trauma-related support programs in the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). Each of these represent some of the largest investments in prevention, intervention, and mental health services for youth in our nation’s history.

After the passage of this historic law, President Biden created the first-ever White House Office of Gun Violence Prevention (OGVP). Our team was tasked with expediting the implementation of the BSCA, identifying new executive actions, expanding partnerships with leaders on the ground, and improving support for those impacted by this crisis. Our work also focused on leveraging existing federal resources to save lives. Though it may be assumed, I will state outright that our goal was never to violate the rights or perceived rights of the Second Amendment. In fact, every policy and program our office implemented was viewed through the lens of ensuring it would not violate the Second Amendment. As someone who grew up in a responsible gun owning household and as a survivor of gun violence, I can assure you that our mission was simply to do all we could within the bounds of the law to make our communities safer, save lives from gun violence, and better support those impacted by gun violence.

We started by creating the first ever gun violence emergency response protocol to support communities recovering from the toll of gun violence, like Lewiston, Maine, which suffered more casualties in one mass shooting than homicides over the past ten years. Our brave team deployed to help those suffering loss, treat those injured, help schools reopen, help impacted businesses survive, and even aid first responders traumatized by these shattering events. Our

team also held listening sessions with survivors of shootings from Parkland, Florida to Baltimore, Maryland seeking ways to enhance assistance offered to communities devastated by gun violence.

Secondly, our office partnered with agencies across government to advance new ways to reduce the crushing impact of violence. Seventy-six percent of school shootings occur with guns from the home, so the Department of Education rolled out the first national school focused Firearm Safe Storage campaign.⁵ When it became clear that there is a lack of up-to-date data surrounding gun violence, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) built a system to use emergency room and health data to illuminate gun violence across our country. When we heard from law enforcement about the growing presence of “Glock switches” fueling mass tragedy events, the Departments of Justice and Homeland Security worked together to shut down 350 websites that were illegally selling machine gun conversion devices online from China.⁶ When we met survivors now confined to wheelchairs requiring decades of medical support, we clarified with Medicaid that these individuals can receive the medical care they need, irrespective of how they were injured. When we encountered parents terrified to send their kids to school, we rolled out strategies and resources to make schools safer and harder to target by violent attacks.

During OGVP’s 16-month tenure, we supported efforts across all levels of government that resulted in real and meaningful improvements for public safety. State and local law enforcement agencies across the nation received additional resources to solve homicide and non-fatal shootings.

- The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF)’s rule regarding companies that made unfinished “frames and receivers” drastically decreased the proliferation of so-called ghost guns—unserialized, untraceable weapons that are sold in kits online and without a background check, making them attractive to people otherwise prohibited from possessing firearms.
- More than 700 people who were illegally trafficking firearms were charged for their actions because of the new statute created by BSCA.
- The enhanced background checks required for 18 to 20-year-olds prevented 1,000 sales to young people with troubling records.
- The rule clarifying who is considered “engaged in the business” of dealing firearms helped to address the single largest source of guns involved in gun trafficking investigations by cracking down on the 20,000 unlicensed gun sellers who were not running background checks as required by law.

⁵ National Threat Assessment Center. (2019). *Protecting America’s Schools: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Targeted School Violence*. U.S. Secret Service, Department of Homeland Security. Retrieved from: https://www.secretservice.gov/sites/default/files/2020-04/Protecting_Americas_Schools.pdf

⁶ United States Attorney’s Office, District of Massachusetts. (2024, 11 September). *Federal Authorities Seize Over 350 Website Domains Used to Import Illegal Switches and Silencers from China*. Retrieved from: <https://www.justice.gov/usao-ma/pr/federal-authorities-seize-over-350-website-domains-used-import-illegal-switches-and>.

- The Bipartisan Safer Communities Act also allowed law enforcement to better address the deadly nexus of intimate partner violence and guns, blocking more than 4,600 firearm sales to individuals convicted of misdemeanor crimes of domestic violence last year alone.
- We also worked across multiple federal agencies to improve the safe storage of firearms in the home and prevent young people who may be considering harming themselves or others in school or those with suicidal ideation from easily accessing a gun. DOJ, HHS, and the Departments of Education, Veterans Affairs, Homeland Security, and Agriculture all took significant steps to encourage guns to be safely stored.

The funding made available by BSCA was put to incredibly important use. The Department of Education made the single largest investment in school-based mental health in history to hire and train 14,000 desperately-needed counselors, psychologists, and social workers. Additionally, Byrne SCIP grants enabled states to build out state crisis intervention programs, including red flag laws. Twenty-one states and the District of Columbia currently have red flag laws, which empower families and law enforcement agencies to petition courts for a civil order to temporarily suspend a person's access to firearms before they commit violence or harm themselves. Red flag laws are one of the most powerful tools available to help prevent violence when a person is showing clear warning signs of being at risk.

Nearly three years since the law's passage, there is CLEAR evidence that this law, the funding it provided to states, schools, law enforcement and communities, and the many other initiatives have had a significant impact on gun violence.

In 2023, most cities across the country began experiencing historic reductions in violent crime, reversing the trend seen during the first several years of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) Uniform Crime Reporting data indicated a 3 percent decline in violent crime and a nearly 12 percent decline in murder from 2022 to 2023.⁷ In the following year, from 2023 to 2024, violent crime decreased by 10.3 percent and murder decreased almost 23 percent.⁸ These declines did not happen by chance; they are the result of an intentional, coordinated, comprehensive effort to reduce gun violence involving multiple federal agencies that accelerated significantly with the creation of OGVP in September 2023.

Lastly, increased investment in CVI programs has helped to reduce gun violence and make communities safer. Community violence intervention (CVI) are strategies targeting the individuals who are at highest risk of violence, including outreach-based violence intervention programs that employ people in impacted communities to conduct direct street-level outreach and conflict mediation, negotiate cease-fires, and attempt to shift the culture of conflict resolution; hospital-based violence intervention programs (HVIPs) that help interrupt cycles of violence by bringing trauma-informed victim and survivor services to violently injured individuals

⁷ The Violent Crime Reduction Steering Committee. (2025, 16 January). *Implementation of the Department of Justice's Comprehensive Strategy for Reducing Violent Crime*. Retrieved from <https://www.justice.gov/archives/media/1384801/dl>

⁸ Ibid.

and their families or social circles in the hospital setting; and cognitive behavioral therapy-integrated mentorship programs that link at-risk individuals to mentors from their community who have similar lived experiences, as well as other types of programs. Baltimore, Maryland experienced a 21 percent decline in homicides in 2023 after creating an Office of Neighborhood Safety and Engagement and utilizing a Group Violence Reduction Strategy involving “intentional collaboration between law enforcement, social services, and community members.”⁹ San Antonio, Texas is another community that reduced crime—specifically, violent crime decreased by 37 percent in 2023—after utilizing federal dollars from the American Rescue Plan Act to support social services and violence intervention strategies.¹⁰

All of these efforts have resulted in an America that experiences fewer deaths and injuries from gun violence today than 5 years ago during the pandemic. There is still so much more work to be done, but it is critical that our state, local, and federal governments do not stray from the path that has meaningfully improved public safety. Unfortunately, we have already experienced a major setback with the shuttering of the White House Office of Gun Violence Prevention in January, but Congress can take action to pass legislation to create an office that sustains beyond administrations by passing the Office of Gun Violence Prevention Act introduced by Representative Frost and Senator Murphy. Every person indeed has a right to self-defense, but we cannot allow harmful policy proposals that would enable people who should not have firearms—like domestic abusers and people convicted of violent felonies—to easily access them during times of crisis. Gun violence can continue to decrease if we invest in prevention and intervention, support survivors of violence, and enforce long standing laws intended to prevent people with a history of violence from possessing weapons.

Thank you.

⁹ Andone, D. and Tucker, E. (2024, 29 September) “This is not luck. This is a systemic approach’: These major US cities are trying to curb violent crime — and it’s working,” *CNN*, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/09/29/us/us-violent-crime-rates-down-dg/index.html>

¹⁰ Ibid.