MAKING OUR COMMUNITIES SAFER

A Guide to Understanding and Engaging Americans on the Need for **Stronger Gun Laws**

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PURPOSE

Americans are having an unprecedented conversation on how gun violence is impacting our communities — and what can be done to prevent gun tragedies and save lives. Candidates around the country now define themselves as gun violence prevention champions and embrace commonsense gun policies.

And our leaders are acting to help keep guns out of the wrong hands. In January of 2016, the White House took the most significant federal action for gun safety since the signing of the Brady Bill two decades ago when it worked to narrow the loophole to require background checks for most gun purchases at gun shows and online. Since the tragedy at Sandy Hook, state lawmakers have passed 125 commonsense gun laws in 41 states. States that have enacted the strongest gun laws reduced gun violence by 40 percent.

But there is still more to do. Each year in our country, there are more than 33,000 gun deaths and more than 130,000 people shot. Even as Americans demand more be done to reduce gun violence, the gun lobby is doubling down on their efforts to keep our elected officials in their grip. But the tide is turning. By using the right arguments and language to bring more Americans into our movement, galvanize our allies, and fight back against the gun lobby, we can win this fight.

Americans for Responsible Solutions conducted extensive national public opinion research and designed this guide to help legislators, candidates, and advocates communicate more effectively on the need to strengthen our gun laws and save lives.

TALKING ABOUT GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION IN 30 SECONDS



LEAD WITH VALUES

With freedom comes responsibility. Responsibility means commonsense measures to keep guns out of the hands of felons, domestic abusers, and the dangerously mentally ill, and safely storing guns to keep them away from children.

DEMONSTRATE NEED FOR STRONGER GUN LAWS AND THEIR EFFECTIVENESS

Background checks have stopped over 2.4 million gun sales to prohibited people, like felons, domestic abusers, and the dangerously mentally ill.⁴ Unfortunately, **loopholes in our laws allow up to 40 percent of gun sales to still go unchecked**,⁵ allowing gun violence to become the new normal.



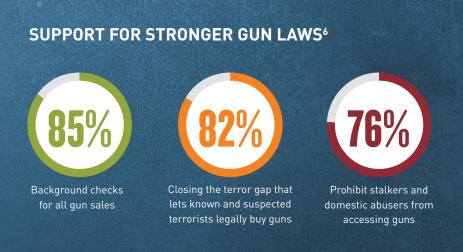
We need commonsense gun laws that close these loopholes, reduce gun violence, and save lives.



UNDERSTANDING THE MINDSET

Most policies that reduce gun violence are **overwhelmingly popular**. Even among conservative leaning voters, Republicans, gun owners and National Rifle Association (NRA) members, policies like background checks for all gun sales enjoy majority support. Among all voters, support exceeds 80 percent.

While most voters want stronger gun laws, support often lacks intensity because people are unaware of the impact these laws can have, and many are persuaded by the gun lobby's spin that these laws will do nothing to reduce gun violence. They believe that mass shootings and random violence are the "new normal." The purpose of this guide is to help address that challenge and create intensity – not simply build support – among the overwhelming majority who support efforts to reduce gun violence.



EXECUTIVE ACTIONS

- A majority (73%) of voters who said they had heard of the executive actions supported it.⁷
- While the President's recent executive actions narrowed the loopholes in our gun laws by defining who is "engaged in the business" of selling firearms, **they didn't close the loophole.** Many people can still legally sell a gun to a complete stranger without a criminal background check, no questions asked.

In the past, gun violence prevention advocates have made arguments relying largely on statistics and policy (i.e. "Americans are 25 times more likely to die from gun violence than people in other industrialized countries,"⁸ and "we need to close the loophole that allows criminals to easily buy guns."). As this guide shows, there is certainly a time and place for these arguments. But our opponents make an argument grounded in values like freedom and the right to defend one's family. Gun violence prevention advocates need to meet the gun lobby on this playing field and make a values-based counterargument.

RESPONSIBILITY

As a nation, we value responsibility. Part of being responsible means agreeing to commonsense solutions that help keep guns out of the wrong hands and prevent senseless tragedies.

"With freedom comes responsibility. That applies to our freedom of speech, freedom of the press, and certainly to our right to bear arms. Responsibility means safe storage to keep guns away from children, and it means supporting some commonsense measures to keep guns out of the hands of dangerous people like felons, domestic abusers, or the dangerously mentally ill."

A NATION OF LAWS

Connect the message that **background checks are effective** (e.g. background checks have stopped over 2.4 million gun sales to prohibited people, like felons, domestic abusers, and the dangerously mentally ill)⁹ with the notion that **we are a nation of laws.**

"America is a nation of laws. These laws allow us to maintain safety for our community. Since background checks were made law, they have stopped over 2.4 million gun sales to prohibited people like felons, domestic abusers, and the dangerously mentally ill. Unfortunately, a loophole allows up to 40 percent of gun sales to still go unchecked. If we want law enforcement do their jobs and uphold the law, we need to enact stronger gun laws."

THE UNACCEPTABLE "NEW NORMAL"

Attack the "new normal" of gun violence and promote the value that **saving lives** is worth it.

"Almost every day, we read about shootings and violence and people dying. Unfortunately, gun violence has become the new normal. No single law will end gun violence, but if we can save just a handful of lives, it will be worth it."

THE LEGACY WE LEAVE BEHIND

To elevate intensity and urgency, talk about the importance of the legacy we leave behind, and creating a safer world for our children and grandchildren.

"As adults, we have a responsibility to **make our country a safer place to live** for our children and grandchildren. If we can't agree to demand that our children's lives be prioritized over powerful special interests, what good are we? We owe it to our children to do something to ensure that the America they raise their children in is one with less gun violence – not more."

"The world is a scary place these days. I want my children and grandchildren to live in a safe, democratic country where they are free to pursue their dreams. I want the U.S. to remain the strongest country in the world. I don't see how anyone could oppose this thinking."

> – Female, Age 68, Georgia, independent

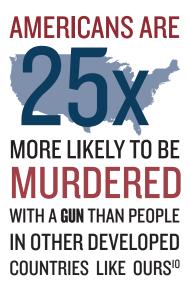
THE DO'S AND DON'TS OF TALKING ABOUT GUN VIOLENCE

O'S	😣 DON'TS
Talk about reducing crime, reducing gun violence, gun violence prevention or preventing gun tragedies	Use the phrase "gun control"
Attack the gun lobby	Attack the NRA or the Second Amendment
Prove the impact using key facts	Overstate the impact (e.g. "this will end gun violence")
Tell victim and survivor stories that directly connect to the policy you are promoting	Rely entirely on victim and survivor stories, or use stories that are not connected to the policy you are promoting
Use statistics that define the problem and reveal effectiveness and need for commonsense gun laws	Overload the argument with numbers
Talk about closing loopholes like criminal background checks, stronger, responsible or commonsense gun laws	Talk about stricter or new gun laws
Talk about background checks, and keeping guns out of the hands of felons, terrorists, stalkers and domestic abusers, and the dangerously mentally ill	Talk about creating a national gun registry, or banning or confiscating guns – none of which are policy priorities or have widespread support among gun violence prevention organizations

BUILDING THE ARGUMENT FIVE STEPS TO TALKING ABOUT GUN VIOLENCE PREVENTION



When considering gun violence, **Americans primarily think of mass shootings** and rarely believe that there is any specific way to prevent them. But mass shootings account for only a small portion of all gun violence. We need to remind people what gun violence looks like in our communities, including tragedies involving domestic violence, unintentional shootings, and suicide.



- Every year, more than 33,000 Americans are killed with guns, and more than 130,000 are shot.¹¹
- From 2005-2015, 71 Americans were killed in terrorist attacks on U.S. soil.¹² 301,797 were killed by gun violence during the same period.
- In the three years following the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary, a child under 12 was killed by intentional or accidental gunfire every other day.¹³
- There are more than 50 gun suicides every day in the U.S., making it the most common, and lethal, means of suicide.¹⁴

Many Americans also remain confused about our current laws. Many people **assume our gun laws are stronger than they actually are,** which reinforces their belief that gun laws must be ineffective. Factually identifying the weaknesses and loopholes in our laws helps reframe the issue as "closing loopholes," rather than creating new laws.

UNDER CURRENT FEDERAL LAW

- Prohibited purchasers, including convicted felons and people with dangerous mental illness, can buy a gun online or at a gun show without a background check, no questions asked.
- Many dangerous people, including people convicted of stalking or domestic abuse against a dating partner, can legally purchase and own guns.
- Individuals suffering from dangerous mental illness, but not committed to an institution, can legally purchase and own guns.
- Known and suspected **terrorists** can legally purchase and own guns.

First, clearly define your goal: to **decrease the chances of guns falling into the wrong hands** while respecting the right of law-abiding citizens to own guns.

Next, offer a simple policy or set of policies, and clearly connect each policy to an existing problem, and your stated goal.



Offer Solutions That

Policy Gap

Connect to an Existing

PROBLEM: Right now, a loophole in our federal gun laws allows convicted felons and the dangerously mentally ill to easily obtain guns at gun shows and online without a background check.

SOLUTION: Require background checks on all gun sales so it's harder for dangerous people to get guns.

PROBLEM: Right now, a loophole in our federal gun laws allows stalkers and many domestic abusers to legally purchase and possess guns.

SOLUTION: Classify people convicted of misdemeanor stalking or domestic violence against a dating partner as "prohibited purchasers," so they can't pass a background check.

PROBLEM: Right now, there is a gap in our federal gun laws that allows suspected or known terrorists to legally purchase and possess guns.

- SOLUTION: Close the "terror gap" to combat the threat of active shooter terrorism.
- **PROBLEM:** Right now, there is little that family members or law enforcement can do to keep guns away from someone who, because of mental illness or violent behavior, may harm themselves or others.

SOLUTION: Enact Extreme Risk Protection Orders, so families and law enforcement have the tools they need to keep people in crisis from accessing a gun.



Voters want laws that will make a difference and need to know that these policies are effective and will save lives.

STATES THAT HAVE PASSED UP TO COMMONSENSE GUN LAWS HAVE REDUCED GUN VIOLENCE BY 40%

- Background checks have stopped over 2.4 million gun sales to prohibited people, like felons, domestic abusers, and the dangerously mentally ill.¹⁵ Unfortunately, loopholes in our laws allow up to 40 percent of gun sales to still go unchecked.¹⁶
- In states that require criminal background checks on all handgun sales, 46 percent fewer women are fatally shot by their partners, 48 percent fewer police are killed with handguns and 64 percent fewer guns traced to crime are trafficked out of state.¹⁷





Voters recognize that **no law will prevent every tragedy** and language suggesting as much ("We can end violence") quickly loses credibility. So don't overstate the potential impact. Redefine success as saving lives and building safer communities.

"This law **won't prevent every incident of gun violence,** but it will save lives, and it will make our communities safer places to live." "Small changes to our gun laws **won't prevent every criminal** from getting a gun, but they will prevent many – and that's worth it."

Use words that help highlight the urgency of the issue:



Highlight the threats to our current laws:

Raise the Stakes & Create Urgency

- If we continue to stand by and do nothing, our nation's epidemic of gun violence is only going to get worse. The gun lobby is not only blocking commonsense gun violence prevention laws, they're working to repeal the existing laws that help make our communities safer.
 - After the gun lobby successfully convinced legislators in Missouri to repeal its permit to purchase law, firearms homicides increased by 25 percent.¹⁸
- While the President's executive actions narrowed the number of people who can sell guns without a background check, the next president could revoke that action and Donald Trump has said that he would.
- Between 2004 and 2014, more than 2,000 terror suspects legally purchased guns, and terrorists are aware of the loopholes in our laws. In 2011, an Al-Qaeda spokesman posted a video in which he said America is "absolutely awash with easily obtainable firearms," and, more recently, ISIS has been encouraging "lone wolf" terror attacks on US soil.¹⁹

TALKING THE TALK

"To me, gun control evokes a notion of taking away guns...Like they are controlling us, versus it being a choice."

- Minnesota voter

P DEFINE THE OPPOSITION: THE GUN LOBBY

- Talk about the "gun lobby" instead of the NRA. Many voters associate the NRA with hunting, target shooting, and firearms safety training – not with lobbying or elections – and they are relatively popular in many parts of the country.
- Define the gun lobby as a special interest group they pretend to be champions for the rights of gun owners, but in reality they exist to protect the profits of the firearms manufacturing industry.
- □ Clearly state that the gun lobby and the politicians who cater to them are the reason why our leaders are failing to enact policies the vast majority of Americans support.

AVOID THE TERM "GUN CONTROL"

The term **"gun control"** has been turned into an effective political weapon that the gun lobby uses against us.

So remove "gun control" from your vocabulary and replace it with:

- ✓ commonsense gun laws
- ✓ reducing gun violence
- ✓ gun violence prevention
- 🗸 🗸 preventing gun tragedies

"[Doctors] might see the effect on actual gun violence in their job. I'm not sure if they are pro- or anti-guns because I am sure there are doctors that are both. I would trust this person's opinion on how to make guns safer, so less people have to die. They see the things they do to our bodies when they enter us, so they might have some good ideas."

> – Female, Age 28, Iowa, Independent

BALANCE STORYTELLING WITH STATISTICS

Evocative storytelling can make the impact of gun violence more personal, but it can't be the only way we make our case.

- Provide some emotional heft with victim and survivor stories (especially children) that speak to the senselessness and preventable nature of the tragedy. Anytime a child dies it's sad. What provides the weight the motivation for action to this argument is that it doesn't have to happen. The tragedy is not only in the deaths, but in the political and cultural debates that fail to prioritize the lives of kids. Grown-ups keep fighting, they keep running for office, they keep collecting their campaign donations, while kids keep dying: that's the tragedy.
- Also use stats to demonstrate how commonsense gun laws can reduce gun violence. People support commonsense gun laws, but their enthusiasm for them is dampened by their skepticism that such laws will have much impact. This skepticism is a major reason for the gap in enthusiasm between our side and opponents. The best way to overcome this obstacle is to **highlight statistics that show that these laws do in fact save lives.** There is no need to go overboard on stats. One broad and compelling one – such as that states that have passed commonsense gun laws have reduced gun violence by up to 40 percent – is sufficient.

POWERFUL SPOKESPEOPLE

People who are considered **"experts" are the strongest messengers,** including law enforcement, judges, prosecutors and emergency room doctors and nurses who have witnessed the toll of gun violence first-hand.

Victims and survivors, especially those whose stories connect to specific policies, are powerful messengers. But **relying on victims' and survivors' stories alone can amplify feelings of hopelessness**, and alienate our harder targets, who are sensitive to the implication that they don't care about kids or people personally impacted by gun violence.

Mothers have also been powerful advocates for stronger gun laws, but we need to show through our messengers that they are not the only ones who want to reduce gun violence. We can strengthen our message by expanding the coalition of voices to include more **men, gun owners, hunters, and experts.**

USING THE RIGHT IMAGERY

Too often, we spend so much time **worrying about the language** when the bulk of communication – political, commercial, personal – is delivered visually. Images that relate most directly to our message can elevate the impact of our language.

- "We need background checks on all gun sales to make our communities safer."
 - > Effective image: guns for sale at a gun show
 - Images of our most powerful messengers can also be effective (law enforcement, E.R. doctors, and other "experts")
 - Less effective images: images pointing to the aftermath of a shooting, including candlelight vigils, crime scenes, and mug shots.



"She is an ER nurse/ technician, grossly overworked, but like the doctor in the picture above, she helps save lives. She makes people feel safe and cared for. She has probably gone through many traumatic experiences with gun violence, and almost certainly reacts positively to laws that support gun control. Again, like the doctor. I would trust and value her opinion on the issues of gun violence."

> - Female, Age 28, Florida, Independent

KEY AUDIENCE

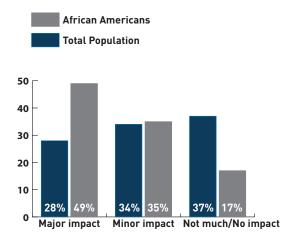
TALKING WITH GUN OWNERS

Gun owners understand that gun violence is a multi-causal issue with no one solution. We learned through our focus groups that it is helpful to acknowledge that a **lack of access to mental health care and firearms education and training contribute to gun violence.** Acknowledging this point allowed us to move on to a conversation about the gun violence prevention policies we could all agree on.

Most gun owners already believe it is entirely possible to strengthen our gun laws to keep guns out of the wrong hands without automatically threatening rights, but they need reassurance. Make it clear that this is not about taking guns away from law-abiding gun owners, or infringing on the Second Amendment.



If many or all of these proposals become law, do you believe it would have a major impact, minor impact, not much of an impact, or no impact at all in reducing gun violence in the United States?



AFRICAN AMERICAN VOTERS

- African American voters are more likely to personally experience gun violence, either themselves or through a friend or family member (64% compared to 47% of all voters).
- African American voters strongly support stronger gun laws, and are more likely to believe that these laws will have an impact.
- In terms of messaging, where African American voters differ from voters overall is in their intensity of their belief that Americans have lost respect for life, and in a world where gun violence has become the new normal, anything that can save some lives is worth it.

"If gun violence legislation was passed, and they would get stricter on background checks and permits, then it would eliminate guns circulating so easily in the community."

- African American woman, Baltimore

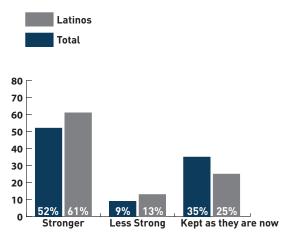
LATINO VOTERS

- Latino voters can be important allies in the debate around guns and reducing gun violence. They are more likely to support stronger gun laws and more likely to believe these laws will have an impact that voters overall.
- They have positive impressions of the Second Amendment, and while they are more likely to support stronger gun laws overall, that support is not as strong or as automatic as African American support.
- □ Latino voters **value responsibility** and believe that the freedom to own a gun comes with a heavy responsibility.

"I grew up hunting with rifles. I was taught safety as a young adult, and we always emphasize safety. I have nephews - teenagers - and they also know how to handle guns properly."

- Latino man, Las Vegas

Latino support for stronger gun laws compared to voters overall:





WOMEN VOTERS

- Women are significantly more likely than men to support stronger gun laws.
- We still have work to do on increasing intensity among many women voters.
- When talking to women, it is helpful to focus on our responsibility as adults to create safer communities for our children and grandchildren.

GET INVOLVED

Start or join a conversation on social media to 'share the facts' and add your voice to the call for stronger gun laws.

- □ Americans are **25x more likely to be killed with a gun** than people in other developed countries like ours.
- Background checks work. Since 1994, background checks have stopped over 2.4 million gun sales to prohibited people, like felons, domestic abusers, and the dangerously mentally ill.
- Background checks save lives. In states with background checks on all handgun sales, 46% fewer women are shot to death by their partners, and 48% fewer police are killed with handguns.

STAY INFORMED

Connect with Americans for Responsible Solutions:

- @resp_solutions
- www.responsiblesolutions.org

METHODOLOGY

Focus groups conducted by Anzalone Liszt Grove Research:

August 3rd, 2015, Aurora, CO: Gun-owning women voters Exurban/suburban voters

August 4th, 2015, Edina, MN: Exurban/suburban voters Millennial voters

August 5th,2015, Londonberry, NH: Gun-owning women voters Millennial voters

September 9th, 2015, Las Vegas, NV: Hispanic voters African American voters

September 10th, 2015, Baltimore, MD: Hispanic voters African American voters

Online qualitative discussion boards were conducted by Global Strategy Group

between September 29th and October 1st, 2015 among 70 progressive respondents and independent and Republican women who were either mixed or supportive of stronger gun laws, but had not taken action on it. Respondents were drawn from across the country.

Surveys conducted by Greenberg Quinlan

Rosner Research: A national survey conducted among 850 likely 2016 voters conducted by live interviewers from November 16-19, 2015.

CITATIONS

This survey is subject to a margin of error

An online survey taken among 1200 likely

probability based samples are not subject

A national survey among 800 likely 2016

voters with 3 oversamples composed

of 100 African American, Hispanic, and

interviewers from January 13-20, 2016.

of +/- 3.46 percentage points at the 95

percent confidence interval. Margin of

error is higher among subgroups.

This survey is subject to a margin of error

adults aged 18-29 populations by live

of +/- 3.36 percentage points at the 95

percent confidence interval. Margin of

2016 voters from December 2-8, 2015.

Online surveys use a panel and non-

to margin of error.

error is higher among subgroups.

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2. Rudolph, Stuart, Vernick and Webster. Association between Connecticut's Permit-to-Purchase Handgun Law and Homicides. American Journal of Public Health. August, 2015.

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4. Bureau of Justice Statistics. Background Checks for Firearm Transfers, 2012 – Statistical Tables. December 2014.

5. Mayors Against Illegal Guns. Felon Seeks Firearm: No Strings Attached. September 2013.

6. Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research.
Survey of 800 likely 2016 voters with oversamples of 100 among the African American, Hispanic, and adults aged 18-29 populations. January 13-20, 2016.

7. Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research. Survey of 850 likely 2016 voters. November 16-19, 2015.

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20. Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research. Survey of 800 likely 2016 voters with oversamples of 100 among the African American, Hispanic, and adults aged 18-29 populations. January 13-20, 2016.

21. Greenberg Quinlan Rosner Research. Survey of 850 likely 2016 voters. November 16-19, 2015.





In our nation's conversation about making our communities safer, words matter. With the right shared language, we can do more to enact responsible change and save lives.

- GABBY GIFFORDS & MARK KELLY

