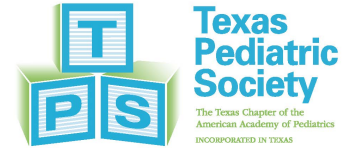




Physicians Caring for Texans



Senate Finance Committee on Article V
Written Testimony on Department of Public Safety
Texas Medical Association and Texas Pediatric Society
March 3, 2021

Chair Nelson and members of the Senate Finance Subcommittee on Article V, thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of the Texas Medical Association and Texas Pediatric Society. Our testimony today supports the inclusion of a rider to the Department of Public Safety's budget to fund a safe gun storage campaign, and we further address the importance of improving public awareness of firearm safety to prevent firearm accidents and suicide.

The U.S. has the highest firearm homicide and firearm-related suicide rates of all high-income countries.^[1] Texas had more firearm-related deaths – 3,353 – than any other state, a rate of 12.1 per 100,000 (2016).^[2] Physicians are alarmed that suicide is now one of the top 10 leading causes of death in the U.S. and one of only four causes with significant rate increases. Half of the nation's 44,000 suicides in 2016, more than 22,000, were by firearm. Like the rest of the country, Texas' suicide rate has increased; our suicide-by-firearm rate of 7.3 is higher than the U.S. rate of 6.5 (per 100,000).

Firearm mortality is the second most common cause of death among U.S. children, and firearm homicide, suicide, and unintentional discharge are the major factors in both child injury and fatality. With an estimated 400 million firearms in this country, likely hundreds of thousands of homes have at least one firearm. The American Academy of Pediatrics reports that most parents believe their children will not touch a firearm or do not know where firearms are kept or can be accessed in the home. But in 2015, 609 Texas children were injured or died by a firearm. More than 200 of these were deaths from a suicide, assault or homicide, accidental firearm discharge, or with an undetermined intent. More than half of these child deaths were homicides, and most deaths were in children aged 15-19 years.

Texas' requirements for the safe storage and security of a firearm are critical to support the prevention of theft or the misuse of firearms by adults and children. We know most parents with firearms in the home will talk to their children about firearm safety, but not all do this – which increases risk in the home, especially if adults or children within the household are prone to make an impulsive decision. The public health data tell us that children who are with an untrained or otherwise careless adult or a friend with access to a firearm are most likely to be injured or killed in an unintentional discharge.

Keeping firearms away from people who present a risk of harm or who are unable to make sound decisions provides a strong base for managing firearm safety. But having strong state laws on firearm safety will not adequately ensure protection as long as the public is not aware of the best safe gun storage measures to reduce firearm accidents. We believe sufficiently funding a statewide safe gun storage campaign in our state will be an effective measure to help prevent gun injuries and deaths.

We recognize that about 40% of the U.S. adults own one or more firearms or live in a home where a firearm is present. Our members remain focused on proven prevention and harm reduction methods in all areas of public and population health. Physicians have a role in addressing gun violence and firearm safety. We are talking to our patients about safety measures in the home including the measures that will prevent firearm mortality and morbidity. We urge you to support DPS in implementing a safe gun storage campaign to save Texas lives.

Thank you very much for the opportunity to comment. Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact Troy Alexander, TMA director of advocacy, at troy.alexander@texmed.org or Clayton Travis, TPS director of advocacy and health policy, at clayton.travis@txpeds.org.

^[1] Grinshteyn E & Hemenway D, Violent Death Rates: The U.S. Compared with Other High-income OECD Countries, 2010, *The American Journal of Medicine*; Richardson EG, Hemenway D, Homicide, suicide, and unintentional firearm fatality; comparing the United States with other high-income countries, *J. Trauma Injury, Infection, and Critical Care* 70: 238-43.

^[2] Louisiana, Alabama, and Alaska had the highest rates of firearm mortality in the country in 2016 (21.3 to 23.3 per 100,000).