



New US initiative to prevent gun violence welcomed

Thwarted by Congress, President Joe Biden has created the first White House Office of Gun Violence Prevention. Susan Jaffe reports from Washington, DC.

With Congress unable to ban even the most dangerous firearms made for war zones, US President Joe Biden announced a new strategy to deal with gun violence afflicting the nation: creating the first White House Office of Gun Violence Prevention. Frustrated by the congressional impasse, Biden essentially conceded that the new Office was not the best solution for reducing the unrelenting toll of gun violence in the USA.

"I'll continue to urge Congress to take common sense actions that the majority of Americans support, like enacting universal background checks and banning assault weapons and high-capacity magazines", Biden said in his announcement. "But in the absence of that sorely needed action, the Office of Gun Violence Prevention along with the rest of my Administration will continue to do everything it can to combat the epidemic of gun violence that is tearing our families, our communities, and our country apart." Biden has also called for safe storage of guns and expanded red-flag laws to prevent people who might be a threat to themselves or others from purchasing or possessing a firearm.

In 2022, more than 48 000 Americans—or about 132 each day—died from a firearm-related injury, which was the leading cause of death among those under 20 years old, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). This year, 39 707 Americans have died in gun-related violence as of Dec 3, including 624 mass shootings where four or more people died, according to the Gun Violence Archive.

Overseen by Vice President Kamala Harris, the Office will coordinate and expedite efforts throughout the

federal government to deal with the problem of gun violence, develop new initiatives the Biden Administration can undertake, and help implement the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act. The most comprehensive gun violence prevention legislation in 30 years, the 2022 law improves school-based mental health services, expands background checks for people younger than 21 years seeking to buy a firearm, funds community violence interventions, and enables federal prosecutors to go after firearms traffickers.

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Rob Wilcox, one of the Office's two deputy directors, offered this example of its coordinator role: the Safer Communities law provides \$750 million so that state crisis intervention programmes can implement state red-flag laws that temporarily prohibit potentially dangerous people from having guns. "Before this Office started, that money had not been sent to the states yet", he said. "We want every state to pull this money down and to use it for evidence-based life-saving interventions."

About 5 weeks after the Office opened, its new Director Stefanie Feldman dispatched a response team to Lewiston, ME, after an army reservist murdered 18 people and injured 13 others before killing himself. The team helped to coordinate federal resources to help pay funeral costs, provide business loans, and place trauma specialists in schools. She compared the Office's role to the federal agencies that help to deliver aid after a hurricane or

other natural disaster. "Gun violence is the ultimate superstorm affecting communities across the country", she told reporters.

Wilcox said the response team included the Office's other deputy director Greg Jackson, who led "a delegation of over 100 federal public servants to focus not just on the law enforcement side...not just for the families who needed immediate victim services, but also to bring resources to bear to help the schools", where traumatised students were coping with the tragedy. The team also responded to the needs of the veteran and Deaf communities, and worked with the Small Business Administration so that local businesses—many of which closed while authorities pursued the shooter—could access low-interest, emergency loans.

In addition to responding to mass shootings, Wilcox pointed to agencies like the Departments of Justice, Health and Human Services, and Education that each work on separate community violence projects with their grantees. "What we're able to do is break down those silos, and come up with a better approach that will ensure the coordinated and strategic investment of these resources into the communities that need them most."

Gun violence prevention is a big issue that crosses many sectors, said Georges Benjamin, Executive Director of the American Public Health Association. "We need to get the Consumer Product Safety Commission the authority to regulate guns...to make them safer", Benjamin said. Another challenge is getting every public entity that collects data on firearm use to share them so that the White House Office can translate

them into policy. The Federal Bureau of Investigation, CDC, and Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives all have data “but it just doesn’t get put together in a meaningful way to make decisions”, he said.

The White House Office could also coordinate enforcement of existing laws, so that someone who should not have a firearm does not get one, said Benjamin. After almost every mass shooting, “we find something that, had we known earlier, would have been able to stop or at least mitigate that mass shooting”, he said.

Rebecca Cunningham, Vice President for Research at the University of Michigan, called the establishment of the Office “a step forward”. She said there is much work to be done not only in policy but also at the community level to promote urban and rural community-based interventions and increase funding for new research on gun violence prevention. “There’s also work to be done in building data systems that could actually help us understand the intricacies of injury and death and their sequelae and what those costs and impacts are”, she said.

Gun violence is “a nuanced problem”, said Trevon Bosley, co-chair of the board directors for March for Our Lives, the student group formed by survivors of the 2018 Parkland, FL, school shooting in which 17 pupils and staff were killed. Based in Chicago, IL, Bosley, aged 25 years, became involved in the violence prevention movement following the firearms-related deaths of his cousin and brother. “One piece of legislation won’t solve everything.”

Bosley hopes the new Office will assist local violence prevention groups, such as the one he helped to create, with logistical challenges, including how to access funding from the Bipartisan Safer Community and other resources.

Needed research

Since 2020, the National Institutes of Health and the CDC have equally shared \$25 million to conduct research on firearm injury and mortality. But next year’s budget approved by the Republican-controlled House of Representatives cut that funding.

Arthur Evans, Chief Executive Officer of the American Psychological Association, hopes the Office will work on increasing funding for gun violence prevention research. “We should have much more research, particularly around mass shooters; who these individuals are and what are the precipitating factors that led to their actions. There is a little research out there, but not nearly enough”, he said. “There’s this notion that the people who are committing mass shootings are people who are mentally ill”, he continued. “But the reality is the rates of mental illness—particularly for serious mental illnesses—are roughly the same around the world. But we have many more mass shootings here in the US than in any other countries. So mental illness does not explain the significantly higher rates of mass shooting in the US.”

Obstacles

In addition to Republicans in Congress, the courts have also created obstacles to Biden’s agenda for gun violence prevention, including efforts to keep guns out of the hands of dangerous people. Last year, the US Supreme Court reined in the Government’s ability to limit gun ownership and might add further restrictions. In November, the US Supreme Court heard arguments in a case about constitutionality of a 1994 federal law that prohibits people with a domestic violence restraining order from having firearms. A man’s girlfriend obtained the order from a Texas state court after he threatened her. He then threatened another woman with a gun and shot guns

five times in public. His lawyer argued that the federal ban violates his right under the Second Amendment to own guns. According to the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, the presence of a gun in a domestic violence conflict increases the risk of murder by 500%. A ruling in the case is expected next spring.

State and lower federal courts are likely to follow the Supreme Court’s gun decision issued last year. In November, an Oregon judge blocked a measure approved by voters in 2022 that would have banned high-capacity magazines and mandated that gun purchasers pass criminal background checks. Also in November, a federal appeals court overturned Maryland’s requirements for obtaining a licence to own a handgun.

But the Lewiston mass shooting did change at least one congressman’s views on gun control. While the shooter was still at large, Representative Jared Golden, a Maine Democrat, joined local officials to answer reporters’ questions. When it was Golden’s turn to speak, he offered an apology. “I opposed efforts to ban deadly weapons of war, like the assault rifle used to carry out this crime”, he said. “The time has now come for me to take responsibility for this failure, which is why I now call on the US Congress to ban assault rifles, like the one used by the sick perpetrator of this mass killing in my hometown of Lewiston. I ask for forgiveness and support as I seek to prevent these terrible shootings.”

Yet, when Maine’s Republican US Senator Susan Collins, who stood next to Golden, was asked if she also supported a ban on assault weapons, she demurred, saying banning high-capacity magazines would be more effective. After a pause, she added, “There is always more that can be done.”

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