



Gun Violence Prevention: A Systems Perspective from AAMFT



American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy

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Regardless of one's personal beliefs about gun ownership, most people agree on one principle: human life is precious. Gun violence¹ in the United States has reached levels that demand thoughtful, coordinated, and sustained solutions. Moving beyond polarized debate requires a broader understanding of how gun violence develops — and how it can be prevented.

Gun violence is not caused by a single factor. It emerges over time from the interaction of individuals, relationships, institutions, communities, and culture. For this reason, we approach gun violence as a public health issue shaped by interconnected systems. Effective prevention must address those systems together.

The Scope of the Problem

Gun violence, also referred to as firearm violence, remains a persistent and deadly problem in the United States. [Recent national data](#) show tens of thousands of deaths annually involving firearms, including suicide, homicide, unintentional injury, and mass shootings. Suicide accounts for the majority of firearm deaths each year. Mass shootings represent a smaller portion numerically but have profound psychological and social impacts.

Community gun violence — defined by the [Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health](#) as interpersonal gun violence occurring in communities between individuals who are often not related — disproportionately affects under-resourced communities. Black Americans, particularly young Black men, experience significantly higher homicide rates due to community gun violence compared to other racial groups.

[Certain states](#) experience higher firearm homicide rates, while others have elevated suicide rates. In 2024, the [U.S. Surgeon General](#) formally recognized gun violence as a major public health crisis and called for a national reduction in firearm deaths.

Compared internationally, research from the [Pew Research Center](#) has shown that the United States has a substantially higher firearm death rate than peer nations; across several sources, that rate is consistently shown to be approximately 11x higher.

These patterns make clear that gun violence in the US is widespread, unequal in impact, and shaped by larger structural forces.

¹ In this position statement we use the term gun violence also referred to as firearm violence. We acknowledge that there are multiple forms of violence with deadly weapons that individuals may use to carry out acts of destruction or terror including knives, motor vehicles, and other kinds of weapons. Guns are the most used and most lethal forms of violence.

A Systems Framework for Understanding Gun Violence

Our approach is guided by a public health and ecological systems perspective, drawing from the work of [Bronfenbrenner](#), [Engel](#), and other [systemic thinkers](#). This perspective explains that individuals exist within nested systems that influence behavior and well-being. See [Figure 1](#) below for a visual representation. No person acts in isolation; each life unfolds within relationships, institutions, communities, and culture.

1. Your Everyday World (Individual Level/Microsystem)

Prevention begins with individuals.

Many people who later engage in gun violence show early warning signs beforehand — including trauma history, isolation, hopelessness, suicidal thinking, or escalating anger. Research from [The Violence Project](#) shows that most mass shooters, particularly youth, often communicate their intentions in advance of carrying out acts of violence.

Key prevention priorities at this level include:

- Supporting youth through mentoring relationships with stable adults.
- Enforcing safe firearm storage.
- Limiting access to firearms for individuals at risk.
- Strengthen emotional and stress management skills (e.g., help individuals seek support when overwhelmed).
- Build skills in conflict resolution and nonviolent communication (e.g., individuals learn perspective taking, calm communication, and ways to deescalate tense situations).
- Help individuals seek support for trauma, grief, or chronic stress.
- Strengthen individuals' healthy relationships and social connections (build supportive friendships and mentorship, understand that social isolation is a risk factor for many forms of harm).
- Challenge harmful norms in everyday interactions (speak up against bullying, dehumanization, and promote norms of respect and empathy).
- Practice and model safe media consumption (encourage critical thinking about what is normalized in the media).

Protective relationships matter. One consistent finding in resilience research is that a stable, supportive adult relationship is one of the strongest buffers against trauma.

Gun violence prevention at the individual level means noticing distress early and responding with care.

2. Our Everyday World (Relationships and Immediate Environments/Microsystem)

People are shaped by their relationships — family, peers, teachers, coworkers, faith leaders, and neighbors.

Social isolation is an all-too common theme among perpetrators of violence. When individuals lack meaningful connection, distress can deepen and go unnoticed.

Key prevention strategies at this level include:

- Strengthening family ties, including communication and monitoring of children and adolescents.
- Strengthening intimate relationships.
- Reducing bullying.
- Supporting workplace mental health by, for example:
 - Fostering supportive workplace climates.
 - Promoting healthy workplace relationships.
 - Strengthening workplace connection and support.
- Encouraging mentorship and mentoring relationships.
- Building community belonging.

Connection is protective. Isolation increases risk.

3. How Your Worlds Connect (Connections Between Systems/Mesosystem)

Risk increases when the systems in a person's life do not communicate with one another.

Key prevention strategies at this level include:

- Strengthening communication and coordination between mental health providers and schools, workplaces, and community organizations.
- Establishing multidisciplinary risk assessment and crisis response teams that include schools, mental health professionals, law enforcement, and families.
- Building community partnerships connecting public health, education, faith communities, and local organizations.

The strongest mesosystems are characterized by open communication, shared responsibility, and coordinated support. Collaborative threat assessment teams, coordinated crisis responses, and integrated care models improve early intervention and reduce escalation.

Communities affected by gun violence can also experience collective trauma. Healing requires coordination across sectors — education, health care, law enforcement, faith communities, and local leadership.

4. The Larger World That Affects You (Institutional and Policy Systems/Exosystem)

Individuals are shaped by systems they do not directly control — employment structures, media environments, housing systems, and public policy.

For example, chronic underinvestment in communities contributes to instability, stress, and increased exposure to violence. Limited access to mental health care, housing insecurity, inequitable school discipline policies, and negative policing experiences can erode trust and increase risk over time.

Public health approaches at this level include:

- Expanding equitable access to mental health care.
- Investing in youth programs and community infrastructure.
- Supporting employment stability.
- Improving trauma-informed practices across institutions.
- Coordinating with state and federal agencies to ensure firearm safety policies are evidence-informed.
- Enforce safe firearm storage and implement evidence-based policies that regulate firearm access for individuals who pose a clear identifiable risk.

Institutional systems and public policies—like housing, healthcare, employment, and gun policies—shape individual well-being, with inequities increasing risk, while targeted public health strategies aim to create safer, more supportive environments.

5. The Bigger World Around You (Culture and Social Norms/Macrosystem)

The broader culture influences how people think about violence, conflict resolution, power, and help-seeking.

Reducing gun violence requires:

- Expanding social and emotional learning in schools.
- Reducing stigma around mental health care.
- Promoting responsible media and social media practices.
- Strengthening family and community support systems.
- Encouraging respectful bipartisan public dialogue.
- Promoting responsible and lawful firearm ownership and safe firearm practices.

Many firearm owners practice responsible and lawful gun ownership. Efforts to reduce violence should support safe firearm practices while also strengthening prevention, accountability, and coordinated community responses. Cultural change takes time, but it shapes and influences all other systems that affect safety and well-being.

6. How the World Around us Changes Over Time (Chronosystem)

Gun violence must also be understood historically.

Rapid technological change, social polarizations, declining trust in institutions, and the rapid rise of social media contribute to a sense of instability and loss of control for many individuals.

Sustainable prevention requires long-term national coordination, evaluation of what works, and leadership that prioritizes safety across political lines.

Implications for Practice and Policy

No single solution will eliminate gun violence. Effective prevention requires coordinated action across all system levels. A systemic approach should focus on three key areas: connection, prevention, and system coordination.

Strengthening Connection

Strong relationships and a sense of belonging are foundational to healthy individuals, families, and communities. Efforts should:

- Prioritize and strengthen healthy relationships within and across families, schools, workplaces, and communities.
- Reduce bullying and loneliness while promoting connection, belonging, and supportive relationships.
- Expand mentoring opportunities for children and adolescents.
- Promote respectful dialogue and reduce polarization across communities and institutions.

Promoting Prevention

Preventing violence requires recognizing risk early and building protective factors that support well-being. Efforts should:

- Identify risk and protective factors, especially for individuals who may be vulnerable.
- Invest in early intervention and prevention efforts.
- Promote healthy and responsible social media use among youth.
- Promote safe firearm storage and responsible access practices and policies.
- Promote responsible firearm ownership while strengthening prevention, accountability, and community coordination.
- Learn from the history of violence in the United States to inform prevention and future action.

Improving System Coordination

Reducing gun violence requires systems to work together in thoughtful, coordinated ways. Efforts should:

- Improve crisis response systems to ensure timely and coordinated support.
- Integrate trauma-informed practices across systems such as schools, mental health services, and law enforcement.
- Strengthen collaboration across systems, including families, social supports, community members, schools, workplaces, community organizations, law enforcement agencies, and mental health service providers.
- Encourage national leadership and accountability in efforts to reduce gun violence.

Gun violence is preventable. Prevention requires sustained effort, shared responsibility, and cooperative commitment across sectors.

Conclusion

Gun violence is not solely an individual problem, nor solely a policy problem. It is a systemic issue emerging from interacting layers of risk and prevention strategies.

When we strengthen relationships, coordinate institutions, invest in communities, and promote responsible policies, we reduce risk.

Public safety improves when we move beyond polarization and work together toward the shared goal of protecting human life.

Figure 1

Gun Violence in Context



Gun violence emerges from the interaction of individuals, relationships, institutions, communities, and culture over time. Prevention must address all levels together.



Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

Gun Violence Prevention: A Systems Perspective from AAMFT

Why is AAMFT issuing this statement now?

Gun violence continues to affect individuals, families, schools, workplaces, and communities across the United States. As the national professional association representing marriage and family therapists, AAMFT believes it is important to contribute a systems and public health perspective focused on prevention, relationships, and coordinated support systems. AAMFT's position reflects the profession's commitment to strengthening individual, family, and community well-being while encouraging thoughtful, collaborative approaches to reducing violence and promoting safety.

Is AAMFT taking a position on gun ownership?

No. AAMFT is not taking a position on whether individuals should or should not own firearms. The focus is on reducing harm and preventing violence through a systems-based, public health approach.

Is AAMFT advocating for specific legislation?

AAMFT's focus is on prevention, public health, and strengthening the systems that support individuals, families, and communities. We support thoughtful, evidence-informed approaches that reduce risk, improve access to care, strengthen community safety, and promote coordinated prevention efforts.

What does a “systems perspective” mean?

A systems perspective recognizes that behavior is shaped by multiple, interconnected influences—individual experiences, relationships, communities, institutions, and broader cultural norms.

AAMFT believes people do not exist in isolation, and prevention efforts are most effective when these systems work together in coordinated and supportive ways.

Does AAMFT believe gun violence is caused by one factor?

No. AAMFT believes gun violence develops through the interaction of many factors over time, including individual distress, relationship dynamics, social isolation, community conditions, institutional systems, and broader cultural influences. Effective prevention requires attention across these interconnected systems.

What are the main factors contributing to gun violence?

There is no single cause. Contributing factors include:

- Trauma, isolation, or distress at the individual level.
- Weak or disconnected relationships.

- Lack of coordination between systems (e.g., schools, healthcare, community support).
- Structural inequities (e.g., access to care, economic instability).
- Cultural norms around violence, help-seeking, and conflict.

Does AAMFT believe mental illness causes gun violence?

AAMFT does not equate mental illness with violence. Most individuals living with mental health conditions are not violent.

AAMFT recognizes that unaddressed distress, trauma, hopelessness, or isolation can increase risk when combined with other factors. This distinction is important for reducing stigma and supporting evidence-informed approaches to prevention.

Why does AAMFT emphasize relationships so strongly?

Research consistently shows that strong, supportive relationships are one of the most effective protective factors against violence and trauma.

Connection, whether through family, mentors, or community, helps identify distress early and reduces isolation, which is a common risk factor.

What role do mental health professionals play in prevention?

Marriage and family therapists and other mental health professionals play an important role in prevention by:

- Identifying early warning signs of distress.
- Supporting individuals and families in crisis.
- Strengthening communication and relationships.
- Participating in coordinated response systems, such as schools or community teams.

AAMFT believes prevention efforts should prioritize early intervention, connection, and coordinated support, rather than solely responding after harm occurs.

What makes this approach different from typical public discussions?

Public conversations about gun violence often focus on single causes or polarized solutions. AAMFT approaches gun violence through a systems and public health lens. We believe meaningful prevention requires attention to:

- Shared responsibility.
- Multi-level prevention.
- Long-term system coordination and support.
- Strong relationships and community connection.

No single intervention will eliminate gun violence.

What does AAMFT ultimately want members to take away?

AAMFT believes gun violence prevention requires sustained effort, shared responsibility, and stronger coordination across systems.

We hope members and stakeholders recognize the important role relationships, prevention, early intervention, and coordinated support systems play in reducing violence and strengthening community well-being.

Our overarching goal is to help protect human life while encouraging thoughtful, respectful dialogue across perspectives.

What Can I Do?

Gun violence prevention can feel complex, but there are meaningful actions individuals, families, professionals, and communities can take. AAMFT believes meaningful prevention happens through consistent, everyday actions across systems, not only through large-scale solutions.

As an Individual

- Pay attention to signs of distress in yourself and others, including isolation, hopelessness, or escalating anger.
- Reach out. Connection can make a meaningful difference.
- Seek support when needed, whether through friends, family, or a mental health professional.
- Practice calm communication and conflict resolution in everyday interactions.

As a Parent, Caregiver, or Family Member

- Foster open, ongoing conversations about emotions, stress, and conflict.
- Stay engaged in children's and adolescents' lives; relationships are protective.
- Monitor and support healthy media and social media use.
- If firearms are present in the home, ensure they are stored safely and securely.

As a Mental Health Professional

- Be attentive to early warning signs of distress, trauma, or potential risk.
- Support clients in building strong relationships and coping skills.
- Encourage help-seeking and reduce stigma around mental health care.
- Collaborate, when appropriate, with schools, healthcare providers, and community supports to strengthen coordinated care.

As a Community Member

- Get involved in efforts that build connection and belonging (e.g., mentoring, community programs, faith-based or local initiatives).
- Support environments that reduce isolation and promote inclusion.
- Speak up when you see harmful behaviors such as bullying, dehumanization, or escalating conflict.

As a Leader, Educator, or Employer

- Foster environments where people feel supported, connected, and able to ask for help.
- Promote mental health awareness and access to resources.
- Encourage collaboration across systems—schools, workplaces, healthcare, and community organizations.
- Support training in conflict resolution, emotional regulation, and trauma-informed practices.

As an Advocate

- Stay informed about evidence-based approaches to prevention.

- Engage in respectful, constructive dialogue, even when perspectives differ.
- Support policies and practices that expand access to care, strengthen communities, and promote safety.

A Final Note

There is no single action that will prevent gun violence. But when individuals strengthen relationships, communities build connection, and systems work together, risk can be reduced over time.

Small, consistent actions, especially those that increase connection and coordination, are an important part of broader prevention efforts.