

# Children and Guns: Advocacy Groups Speak Out

James Forman, Jr.

**W**hen gun control and pro-gun advocacy groups talk about children and guns, the images they describe could not be more different. Josh Sugarmann, executive director of the Violence Policy Center, a leading national gun control group, tells the story of two-year-old Kaile Hinke from Fort Myers, Florida, who was shot in the chest by her three-year-old brother Colton. According to Sugarmann, “Colton found the loaded .25-caliber pistol in a drawer in his parents’ bedroom, where he and Kaile were playing while their mother was in another room. Kaile was driven to Lee Memorial Hospital where she was pronounced dead.”<sup>1</sup>

Erich Pratt, communications director for Gun Owners of America, paints a very different picture, describing Jessica Carpenter, a California 14-year-old who was baby-sitting her younger siblings when a pitchfork-wielding assailant invaded their home. “Having been trained by her father, Jessica knew how to use a firearm. There was just one problem: The household gun was locked up in compliance with California state law.”<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, said Pratt, “Jessica had few options. She could not call 911 because the intruder had cut the phone lines to the house.

*James Forman, Jr., J.D., is fellow at the New America Foundation in Washington, D.C., and adjunct professor at the University of Michigan Law School.*

She could not protect herself, for state officials had effectively removed that possibility. Her only option was to flee the house and leave her siblings behind.” Jessica survived, but her two younger siblings did not.

“Advocates are so far apart on this issue that even when they imagine the same kid, their gut reactions are totally different,” said David Kopel, research director at the Denver-based pro-gun Independence Institute. Kopel gave an example: “a 13-year-old kid who says he wants to go out to the nearby field and shoot some cans. The pro-gun folks think that’s great; let’s make this happen. It’s an idyllic picture. The anti-gun people are horrified: a kid with a gun—and unsupervised, too. That’s even worse.”

This article addresses the issue of child and youth access to guns from the perspective of advocates on both sides of the gun debate. It is based on telephone interviews with 29 pro-gun and gun control advocates, conducted between September and December 2001. Two questions frame the inquiry. First, to what extent do advocates believe that young people’s access to guns is problematic? Second, if gun access is a problem, what solutions do advocates on each side of the debate endorse? As this article makes clear, although gun control groups unanimously believe that easy access to firearms by children and youth is a problem, the responses they propose vary depending on regional and philosophical differences.

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Pro-gun groups, for their part, generally do not believe that youth access to guns is problematic. To the extent that they see it as a concern, they define the problem much more narrowly than do gun control groups.

### Advocates for Stronger Controls

Gun control advocacy groups are unanimous in their belief that access to guns is a major cause of youth violence. They differ, however, in the approaches they take toward limiting youth access to guns, with political and geographic considerations playing key roles in their strategies.

#### The Extent of the Problem

Bryan Miller, executive director of Ceasefire New Jersey, reflected the views of gun control advocates interviewed for this article when he said, “Every category of gun deaths for kids is a problem, whether you’re talking about accidents, suicides, or homicides. And every category of kid is a problem, too, whether you’re talking about toddlers or teenagers.”

Jill Ward, director of Violence Prevention and Youth Development at the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF), agreed. “Access is a huge problem. We understand that if a child is killed and a firearm is involved, there are a host of causes that contributed to that death—it could be a troubled family, troubled child, etcetera. But we also know that no matter what else has happened, the presence of a gun makes any situation more lethal. So in that sense, access to guns is critical.”

#### Strategies for Reducing Youth Gun Violence

Gun control advocacy groups differ regarding how best to curb youth access to guns. In part, their approaches reflect varied assessments of what is politically possible. According to Ward, “We support a whole range of legislative initiatives, but we are trying to maximize those issues that are most viable right now. Our priorities are governed by politics.” Regional differences also help to determine both what is appropriate and what is politically feasible. “Gun reform law is a regional issue, and what you push for is going to depend on where you live,” said Gerry Anderson, executive director of Ari-

zona’s Halt Gun Violence. “We’re a rural state with a lot of gun owners, and what we need may be different from what makes sense in New Jersey.” Several strategies for reducing youth gun use are popular across groups, however, including public awareness and education, legislative advocacy, and investment in youth at risk for gun violence.

#### Public Awareness and Education

Most gun control advocacy groups view public awareness about the risks guns pose to children as central to their advocacy. For the CDF’s Ward, “Public awareness is critical. People need to know how many kids are killed and injured by guns.” In particular, CDF focuses on raising public awareness about gun suicides among youth, “because they have not declined nearly as rapidly as accidental shootings,” said Ward. “And we know that if kids cannot get guns, they will be less successful if they attempt to kill themselves. Without a gun, that troubled kid might have a second chance.”

Public awareness also plays an important role in state-level organizations, especially those in areas where gun ownership is high. Bruce Gryniewski, executive director of Washington Ceasefire, echoed the views of many state-level advocates when he said, “We do have legislative priorities, but it is so hard to make any headway legislatively that we tend to focus on awareness.” State groups that focus on public awareness use traditional organizing methods, said Jonathan Wilson, outreach coordinator for North Carolinians Against Gun Violence. According to Wilson, “We hand out literature, balloons, brochures, you name it, all spreading the message that we should ‘protect children, not guns’ and that the safest homes are gun-free homes.”

Closely related to the public awareness campaigns of gun control advocates are their educational programs, most of which currently focus on promoting “safe storage” of guns—the message that parents who own guns should store them locked, unloaded, and out of children’s reach. “Once you have convinced people that guns can be dangerous to kids, the next step is talking to them about whether they should have a gun and, if they do, how they can store it safely,” said Diana

Madarieta, executive director of Ceasefire Oregon. Madarieta pointed out that 51% of homes in Oregon contain a gun, and she does not think that number is likely to decline. Therefore, she said, “safe storage is the key issue when talking about kids. We own guns in my house, but the guns and ammunition are locked. We try and educate people by talking to them about whether they are really safer having a gun and then teaching them about safe storage of that gun if they choose to have one.”

### **Legislative Advocacy**

Most gun control advocacy groups complement their public awareness and education efforts with a legislative agenda targeted at reducing youth access to guns, with specific legislative initiatives varying significantly from state to state. Some of these legislative efforts—such as proposals to mandate background checks for all gun purchases or gun owner licensing and gun registration—aim to reduce youth gun violence by making it more difficult

for young people and criminals to obtain guns illegally. (See the article by Wintemute in this journal issue.) Many advocacy groups also push for enacting or strengthening Child Access Prevention (CAP) laws, which impose criminal penalties on adults who store firearms negligently if children later access and use them. Despite mixed data on the effectiveness of CAP laws in preventing gun deaths among children and youth (see the article by Hardy in this journal issue), many gun control advocates view CAP laws as important additions to safe-storage education. They argue that when the government mandates behavior change, people tend to listen. Said the CDF’s Ward, “Many people wear seatbelts now because the government has said you need to do this to be safe, and if you don’t, you can be penalized. Laws requiring safe storage of guns around kids are the same.”

Some gun control advocates also have seized on technological innovations to push for legislation that would require the sale of “childproof guns.” (See the article by

Teret and Culross in this journal issue.) On a state level, one of the most vocal advocates for childproof guns is New Jersey's Miller. According to Miller, "Technology is the answer. The gun industry has the ability to make guns that will not operate in the hands of children or other nonauthorized users." Perhaps reflecting regional differences, however, other gun control advocates are less sure about the future of childproof guns. "I think we need more research before we jump on the smart technology bandwagon," argued Oregon's Madarieta. Said Arizona's Anderson, "We're not pushing for a law requiring childproof-only guns here, and I'm not sure the market or the technology is there yet."

### Investment in Youth at Risk of Gun Violence

Another segment of the gun control movement works directly with at-risk youth and communities to reduce gun violence. "Our approach to juvenile violence is radically different from others in the gun control movement," said Edyie Andrews, education director at The Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence (EFSGV). "We aim our education efforts at kids, not adults, but we don't try to scare kids." Instead, Andrews believes the key is "talking to kids and focusing on the positive things they are doing. Show them that most young people aren't carrying [guns]." The EFSGV visits housing projects, community centers, and schools to recruit students who are interested in addressing gun violence in their neighborhoods. According to Andrews, "We support students in organizing themselves. Some students want to do poster contests, some a book of poetry, some a press conference."

Another gun violence prevention group that works directly with youth is Youth ALIVE! in Oakland, California. According to Program Director Nic Bekaert, Youth ALIVE!'s Caught in the Crossfire program takes its message directly to youth hospitalized with gun injuries. "When kids have just been shot and are in the hospital, they are wide open to suggestions for how to deal with their lives," said Bekaert. Youth ALIVE!'s staff members, many of whom were themselves formerly involved in gun violence and the drug trade, develop one-on-one mentoring relationships with young victims of violence to help prevent future violence. Comprehensive support services follow, including efforts to get youth back in school and employed. Although it focuses on victims of gun violence, Youth ALIVE! knows

that it is dealing with perpetrators at the same time. As Bekaert said, "There is so much overlap between these different groups. Any place you choose to enter the cycle of violence you will find the same kids."

Approaches like those of EFSGV and Youth ALIVE! are endorsed by gun control supporter Mike Males, who has criticized some traditional gun control groups for buying into "a climate of demonizing kids by portraying them as violent threats in our midst." Males argued that negative images of youth lead to punitive criminal justice policies, including laws that allow juveniles to be tried as adults if a weapon is involved. "As long as adults have access to guns, kids will have access, too, and gun control groups are fooling themselves if they think otherwise," said Males.

The real issue, said Males, is "that if you drive from Santa Barbara to Bakersfield [California], it's a 1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>-hour drive, but the black kids in Bakersfield have a death rate that is 40 times higher than the white kids in Santa Barbara." Males' solution to juvenile violence "involves comprehensive efforts to reduce youth poverty and unemployment" and "increasing access to quality education and jobs."

### Advocates for Gun Rights

Pro-gun groups generally disagree with the gun control groups who view youth access to guns as a key factor in youth violence. However, some pro-gun advocates do endorse strategies for reducing children's unsupervised access to guns.

#### The Extent of the Problem

Many pro-gun advocates agree with Joe Waldron, executive director of the Bellevue, Washington-based Citizens Committee for the Right to Keep and Bear Arms (Citizens Committee), who said, "Access to guns has nothing to do with juvenile violence." Pro-gun advocates point to the fact that homicides make up the majority of child gun deaths. Homicide rates are "lower in rural areas, where gun ownership and training are highest, than in the inner city, where ownership rates are lower," said Waldron.

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guns. According to Larry Pratt, executive director of Gun Owners of America, “Juvenile violence is not a result of kids’ access to guns, but stems from the failure of our culture to give kids a sense of individual responsibility and respect for human life.”

Pro-gun advocates tend to define youth gun violence primarily in terms of youth gun homicide. In response to specific questions about suicide, pro-gun advocates argued that attentive parenting, not restricted access to guns, is the appropriate response. Accidental shootings, which constitute the third category of youth gun deaths, are the one type of child gun violence that pro-gun advocates uniformly say relates to access. Although these advocates generally believe that the number of accidental deaths is too small to warrant substantial attention, they do support targeted educational programs aimed at reducing this category of deaths.

### Strategies for Reducing Youth Gun Violence

Although they do not view guns as a significant underlying cause of youth violence, pro-gun groups do promote some measures aimed at reducing unsupervised access to guns by children and youth, especially educational programs for young children, adolescents, and adults. Some pro-gun advocates also endorse safe-storage programs and increased investments in youth at risk for gun violence, although these positions have generated controversy within the gun rights community.

### Education and Training Efforts

To address the problem of accidental death and injury when young children access guns, pro-gun advocates uniformly endorse the National Rifle Association’s (NRA’s) Eddie Eagle Gun Safety Program. Aimed at children from prekindergarten through sixth grade, Eddie Eagle has one simple message, said NRA spokesperson Nance Pretto-Simmons: “If you see a gun, stop, don’t touch, leave the area, and tell an adult.” Eddie Eagle was developed under Marion Hammer’s leadership at the NRA, and Hammer credits it for the nationwide reduction in gun accidents. So too does the Citizens Committee’s Waldron, who said

gun education programs must work “to demystify guns by dispelling the mysterious and rebellious characteristics attached to guns by contemporary culture.” (For a discussion of Eddie Eagle and other gun avoidance programs, see the article by Hardy.)

Although it has long been the most prominent educational program sponsored by the pro-gun lobby, Eddie Eagle is not alone. The National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF) has developed a video series for teenagers who are too old for Eddie Eagle. The videos feature various scenarios in which teens are forced to make decisions when confronted with unsafe gun practices. In one, a student who learns that a classmate has brought a gun to school is encouraged to tell a teacher. In another, one teen starts playing with his father’s gun in front of his friends, and the message is that kids should leave the house immediately and tell an adult. Gary Mehalik of the NSSF said that the video series “help[s] kids learn how to get out of dangerous situations.” This message is more important today than ever before, he noted, because so many kids now learn about guns from unreliable sources. “It is one thing for [kids] to form their opinions about guns from a father, uncle, or scoutmaster. If they come from a community that uses and respects guns, they will understand how to act with a gun. But if they are learning about guns from action movies and [video games like] *Doom*, they are learning to do things that are unsafe.”

Pro-gun advocates also point to the importance of educating parents, especially when it comes to combating firearm suicides by teens. Although pro-gun advocates disagree about the extent to which kids’ access to guns is related to the incidence of teen suicide, none deny the relationship entirely. “The suicide issue is the one place where the gun control people are at least plausible on a common-sense level,” said the Independence Institute’s Kopel. But while pro-gun advocates concede that access to guns may be a factor in youth suicide, they do not believe that the restrictions suggested by gun control advocates will deter a suicidal teen. According to most pro-gun advocates, suicidal teens who encounter a locked gun will either disable

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the lock, find another gun, or kill themselves another way. “If somebody is bound and determined to do something harmful,” said the NSSF’s Mehalik, “they will do it no matter how many roadblocks we put in the way.”

The real solution, say pro-gun advocates, is not to limit access to firearms, but to help parents, teachers, and other adults understand the warning signs for adolescent suicide. “The only way to reduce teen suicide is to educate parents on spotting depression,” said the Citizens Committee’s Waldron. If parents are properly educated, they will react appropriately, he argued. Paul Blackman, the NRA’s research coordinator, concurred. “I know a real gunner; this guy walked me through his house and showed me a loaded gun in every room,” he said. “But you can be sure that the day his kid showed suicidal tendencies, he took each and every one of those guns and locked them up.”

Pro-gun advocacy groups complement their education efforts for younger children with training for teenagers. The NRA’s Blackman believes that education and supervised access to guns lead to responsible gun use among adolescents, whereas unsupervised access often leads to accidents and violence. Who is competent to provide the training and at what age a child is ready to be unsupervised with a gun are issues that “vary from circumstance to circumstance,” said Blackman. The NSSF’s Mehalik agreed that it is impossible to have ironclad rules about the appropriate age of the trainer or trainee: “In general, I would say that if a child is involved, the supervisor should be an adult, but an older teen would be a fine trainer if well-initiated. Look, there are 15-year-old Olympic shooters that would be great supervisors. The point is that the mentor should be mature and knowledgeable about guns.”

The NSSF believes that training is critical for any uninitiated gun user, regardless of age. According to the NSSF, a proper training course includes a comprehensive introduction to firearms safety and basic use, including the ethics of firearms use. (For a discussion

of research surrounding gun safety training programs, see the article by Hardy.)

### **Safe Storage and Trigger Locks**

There is less unanimity in the pro-gun movement concerning the issue of safe gun storage. In 1999, the NSSF joined President Bill Clinton’s Justice Department in launching Project HomeSafe, which distributed gun locks and promotional literature to encourage safe storage. According to the NSSF’s Mehalik, “The gun industry has long believed that guns should be kept safely in the home. To us, this means that whenever the gun is not under your control, it should be made safe. There are many ways to do that, but by distributing gun locks, we are offering one low-cost alternative to gun owners.”

According to the Independence Institute’s Kopel, the pro-gun community is divided on trigger lock initiatives such as Project HomeSafe. “Some support them, some believe they won’t do much but are harmless, and others believe that they are a pernicious effort to promote unsafe storage practices,” he said. The “unsafe practices” cited by some pro-gun advocates include improper installation of trigger locks, which could lead to accidental shootings, and reduced self-defense efficacy of a locked gun. John Velleco, spokesperson for the Gun Owners of America, argued that “trigger locks will lead to more deaths than they would prevent.” They “strike at the very heart” of one’s right to self-defense, said Velleco, because they cut down on the gun user’s response time in an emergency.<sup>3</sup>

Others questioned the motives of those who support Project HomeSafe, suggesting that the industry is acting voluntarily to reduce the threat that trigger locks will be made mandatory. “Let’s face it, this is a gimmick,” said the NRA’s Blackman. “Trigger locks work in the sense of public relations, in that they might prevent more serious legislative activity. But they won’t really stop somebody who is serious about getting to the gun.”

Although pro-gun advocates are divided on the efficacy of trigger locks and other safe-storage mechanisms,

they are unanimous in their condemnation of any legislation mandating such devices. “The pro-gun community uniformly views safe-storage mandate laws as a threat,” said Kopel—compromising what is, in its view, an unrestricted right to keep and bear arms.

#### **Investment in Youth at Risk of Gun Violence**

As noted previously, many pro-gun advocates argue that because most youth gun homicides occur among urban youth, the real problem lies in inner-city communities, not in gun use. Nonetheless, few are working toward solving the problems of the inner city. Typical was the reaction of the Citizens Committee’s Waldron, who stated that inadequate after-school supervision of inner-city children was a principal cause of youth gun violence. When asked if he supported any specific interventions such as increased funding for after-school programs, Waldron said, “I’m not signing up for midnight basketball... because that’s not going to turn a gangbanger into a model citizen.”

One exception was the Independence Institute’s Kopel. According to Kopel, neither side offers appropriate solutions to urban youth violence. “The pro-control camp addresses inner-city gun violence by regulating access,” he said, whereas “the pro-gun camp argues for harsher penalties for illegal gun possession and greater prohibitions on gang membership.” These proposals will not solve the problem, he argued. Instead, society should be debating more comprehensive solutions, including “massive government jobs programs,” “urban enterprise zones,” “charter schools,” or his preferred intervention, “early childhood education programs that are expensive but proven effective.”

Kopel disagreed with those who would suggest that his far-reaching proposals might complement, rather than replace, gun control. “On a theoretical level, it doesn’t have to be one or the other. But the political reality is that no group can push 27 ways at once. You must prioritize, and when you do, you necessarily leave something off the agenda.” Moreover, he argued, “There is

a real problem of advocates letting the politicians off the hook. I mean, we have kids killing kids...so [legislators] enact meaningless access restrictions or increased possession penalties. If advocates allow them to say they've done something, then we've let them off the hook. There is less pressure for them to do something real."

## Conclusion

Perhaps the only thing gun control and pro-gun advocates agree on is the difficulty they have in finding common ground. Although alliances do occasionally occur, both sides agree that most often they are bitter adversaries. "We are diametrically opposed to the gun control advocates on almost all points," said Mehalik, whose NSSF is considered more moderate than some gun rights groups.

In states where gun ownership rates are high, the standoff tends to hurt gun control groups more than it

does pro-gun groups, according to Oregon's Madarieta, because "we won't get anything passed unless the gun owners support it." Despite polls that show public support for many of their positions (see the article by Smith in this journal issue), gun control groups are clearly operating at a disadvantage on a national level as well. *Fortune* magazine rated the NRA as the most powerful Washington lobbying group in 2001, replacing the American Association of Retired Persons.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the watchdog organization Open Secrets reports that since 1990, gun rights groups have outspent gun control groups 13 to 1 in soft money, political action committees, and individual contributions.<sup>5</sup>

Given this political reality, it is not surprising that some gun control advocates, such as Madarieta, suggest that "more and more we're looking for common ground." Nor is it surprising—given the dramatic difference in perceptions of youth gun violence—that they are having trouble finding it.

## ENDNOTES

1. Sugarmann, J. *Every handgun is aimed at you: The case for banning handguns*. New York: The New Press, 2001.
2. Pratt, E. When gun safety locks kill. Available online at <http://www.gunowners.org>.
3. No advocates on either side of the issue were aware of statistical data regarding whether or how often trigger locks or other gun safety devices denied gun owners the opportunity to defend themselves.
4. Birnbaum, J. Fat and happy in D.C. *Fortune*. May 28, 2001. Downloaded from <http://www.fortune.com> on February 28, 2002.
5. Center for Responsive Politics. Gun control vs. gun rights. Washington, DC: CRP, February 6, 2001. Downloaded from <http://www.opensecrets.org/news/guns/index.htm> on February 28, 2002.