



**Written Testimony**

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**Before the U.S. House of Representatives Gun Violence Prevention Task Force**

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Chairman Thompson, Vice Chairs, and all members of the Gun Violence Prevention Task Force:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak here today and for the task force's leadership since 2012 to push for legislative action to reduce gun violence in our country.

I am here today on behalf of National PTA, the nation's oldest and largest child advocacy association, with congresses in all 50 states, DC, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico and Department of Defense schools in Europe. Since 1897, National PTA has worked to improve the education, health, safety and well-being of all children. And as part of this, our association has long advocated for common sense and comprehensive gun safety and violence prevention measures that will make our schools and communities safer and save lives. We speak with one voice for every child.

No parent should fear for the safety of their child every time they leave home for school or anywhere else, and no child should live in fear every day wondering if this is the last day they will see their family. According to Everytown for Gun Safety, there have been at least 1,082 incidents of gunfire on school grounds since the Sandy Hook shooting in 2013. Thousands of children across the country have been victims of, or witnesses to gun violence in their homes, schools, or communities. As the president of National PTA, I have seen firsthand the impact these shootings have on our nation's families. Alongside their ABCs, our kindergartners sing songs to remind them to run and hide during active shootings. Our middle and high school students are numb to active

shooter drills. Parents and teachers desperately try to plan for how they would protect children should the worst happen—and are sometimes forced to turn that plan into action.

Less than two weeks ago, May 24, 2023, marked one year since the tragedy at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, that claimed the lives of 19 children and 2 educators. While the enactment of the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act last summer was a significant step forward, it is not enough, and school communities continue to face the daily threat of gun violence, with far too many communities and families nationwide forever altered due to the trauma caused by similar events.

Firearms are now the leading cause of death for children under the age of 19 in our country. According to a recent study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, “the United States is alone among peer nations in the number of child firearm deaths. In no other similarly large or wealthy country are firearm deaths in the top 4 causes of mortality let alone the number 1 cause of death among children.”

Last fall, Terron Yarbrough, a 17-year-old, was shot and killed at a homecoming football game in my home state, only 15 minutes from my daughter’s home. Terron was like other kids his age—he went to school every day, loved sports, attended church. He is survived by 7 siblings, his mother, grandmothers, and many loving relatives and friends. Terron’s mother is still having a hard time understanding why this happened to her family and all parents are. What do we continue to tell our parents when they lose a child? That their life didn’t matter, and we are sorry this happened to your family?

There are no real words that can accurately convey the horror, anger, sadness and disgust I continue to feel as gun violence continues to take innocent lives in our country. At PTA, we have issued so many statements on mass shootings at schools over the years that we now keep a draft on hand at all times. In every statement, we remind the nation that our students deserve a safe environment in which to learn, grow and thrive. Fannie Lou Hammer once said, “We are sick and tired of being sick and tired.” In every statement, we urge Congress to do more. Not doing more is unacceptable.

For far too long, we have been at a crisis point. From the suburbs to cities to rural communities, this affects all of us. And it is urgent that all of us work together to address the social, economic and behavioral causes that lead to the multi-faceted problem and cycle of violence, especially in incidents that involve firearms.

We know that a person's exposure to gun violence and other traumatic events in childhood significantly impacts their mental and physical health through adulthood, including increased likelihood of risky behavior, such as substance use, suffering from depression, anxiety and posttraumatic stress disorder, failing or having difficulties in school, and becoming involved in the justice system. Violence, especially by firearms, not only directly impacts individual children, but whole families and whole school communities.

I come to you today not only as the president of National PTA, but as a mother, grandmother, gun owner, child advocate and proud Oklahoman. I am also one of the 58% of Americans who have said they or someone they care for have experienced gun violence in their lifetime. In 2003, my beloved brother killed himself with a gun. His death took an immense toll on myself, our mother and many of my family members. Gun violence permanently altered my life, and unfortunately, I'm not alone.

In addition to addressing the social, economic and behavioral causes that lead to the problem and cycle of violence, it is also critical that our country address access to guns. In July of last year, our association joined with several other K-12 organizations, including the American School Counselor Association, the American Federation of School Administrators, the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association, and the National Association of School Psychologists, calling for Congress to reinstate a strengthened federal assault weapons ban as quickly as possible.

For too long, we have watched in horror as these weapons have been deployed against educators and children learning at school, against families exercising their right to worship, against seniors shopping, and against communities celebrating.

Many of our nation's school shooting tragedies—from Robb Elementary in Uvalde, Texas, to Marjory Stoneman Douglas in Parkland, Florida, to Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut—may have been prevented by limiting access to military-style weapons. At a minimum, we are urging Congress to pass legislation preventing children and teenagers from accessing dangerous weapons by passing the Age 21 Act and Raise the Age Act, which would increase the minimum age from 18 to 21 for purchasing certain military-style assault weapons and high-capacity magazines.

We also urge Congress to pass the Safe Gun Storage Act, the School Shooting Safety and Preparedness Act, and the Background Check Expansion Act and Bipartisan Background Checks Act, other common sense gun violence prevention measures that will enhance school and community safety.

To be clear, gun ownership is not the issue here. I know because I am also coming to you today as a gun owner. The issue is the ease of access to firearms and assault weapons, especially for those who pose a danger to themselves and others. National PTA is not about taking away an individual's Second Amendment right. What we are about is ensuring there are laws that will keep our children, our families, our schools and our communities safe and prevent future tragedies from occurring.

And this work can, and should be done, in a bipartisan way. The original assault weapons ban that sunset in 2004 was passed by Congress on a bipartisan basis as part of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, with the support of law enforcement and colleagues from across the aisle. Then and today, the majority of Americans—Republicans and Democrats—continue to support common sense gun safety measures such as limiting access to military-style weapons.

School safety is a critical priority for all parents, educators, students and community members, and it remains a top priority of PTA to prevent and eliminate gun violence, promote the safety and well-being of all children, and ensure every child has every opportunity to reach their full potential.

The time is long overdue for Congress to adopt measures that ensure our children are protected from harm and support schools in their efforts to create safe and welcoming spaces for all of our nation's students.

In America, we teach our children that they've inherited life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, but for far too long children have been taken from us because of unexplainable and senseless gun violence. Instead of confidently going to school and learning in a safe and peaceful classroom, these incidents have made us focus on safety measures and drills for active shooter situations. These incidents also have our children living in fear, wondering if a shooting like this could happen at their school. And parents and guardians are afraid to send their children to school, what should be a safe place and the best place for them to learn and thrive.

If we can't protect our children from gun violence and keep them safe at school, how can we help them reach their full potential? And who will carry our nation into a brighter future? At PTA, we will never stop speaking loudly and demanding more for every child and young person across our country.

Thank you for this opportunity, and I look forward to answering any questions members may have.