

“Universal Background Checks for Gun Purchases”

Bishops United Against Gun Violence Briefing Paper

Introduction

Bishops United Against Gun Violence (BUAGV) is a voluntary network of over fifty active and retired bishops of The Episcopal Church. Initially formed in the wake of the August 2012 shootings at the Sikh Temple in Oak Creek Wisconsin and the December 2012 school shootings in Newtown, Connecticut, Bishops United explores means of reducing the appalling levels of gun violence in our society and advocates policies and legislation that save lives.

This “Briefing Paper” is the first in a series of occasional papers intended to assist bishops and other Christian leaders in their vocations of teaching, preaching, pastoral care, and advocacy. This paper, in particular, seeks to shed light on new findings indicating that the vast majority of Americans today, including gun owners, support universal background checks prior to all gun sales. This new information provides an urgent call for action that can save thousands of American lives each year.

92% of Americans Support Universal Background Checks

A July 3, 2014 national poll by the leading research institution, Quinnipiac University, has found that 92 percent of voters, including 92 percent of gun owners support requiring background checks for all gun buyers.¹

There is broad consensus on the call for universal background checks. When asked “Do you support or oppose requiring background checks for all gun buyers?” 86 % of Republicans and 92% of Democrats answered affirmatively. Perhaps most surprising of all, 92% of gun owners also responded in the affirmative.

When further asked: “Do you support or oppose laws to prevent people with mental illness from purchasing guns?” 89% of voters said yes, with 90% of Republicans and 91% of Democrats choosing the affirmative respectively. Democrats and gun owners were equally in support of such legislation with 91% of both groups voicing the affirmative.

When asked the more wide-ranging question: “Do you support or oppose stricter gun control laws in the United States?” significant differences emerged with only 50% of all voters in support. Republicans and Democrats were substantially divided on this question with 71% of Republicans opposing stricter gun control laws

generally and 80% of Democrats in favor of more gun control legislation. Of gun owners, 65% are against more gun control laws, with 32 percent in favor and 3% undecided.

The implications of the Quinnipiac poll are profoundly important. While American voters remain divided on the question of “stricter gun control laws,” the same voters are incredibly united on the question of universal background checks prior to all gun sales as well as the need for laws to prevent people with mental illness from purchasing guns.

In this new consensus on the call for universal background checks and additional laws to keep guns out of the hands of mentally ill people, is the possibility for action to save thousands of American lives each year. Christian leaders, and especially bishops in The Episcopal Church, have a profound pastoral and theological responsibility to act in light of this new information.

Pastoral and Theological Implications

As Christians, and as Bishops of The Episcopal Church, how do we approach questions of “Guns and God?” In a nation in which there are passionate differences and feelings about this highly polarized issue, how do we, as Christian leaders who manifest among ourselves a wide range of differing opinions about guns, speak a pastorally and theologically informed word in the hope of fostering helpful conversation among the people committed to our care and beyond? How do we draw on our sources of scripture, reason, and tradition in order to offer something that goes beyond the merely ideological?

To be sure, the Bible does not address guns and the gun issue *per se*. There are weapons in the Bible, but there are no guns. Nonetheless, scripture and our theological tradition evidence deep concern for community and the human condition, and call us to live lives of peace, justice and love. As the gun debate rages on in this nation, questions about community, the human condition, peace, justice and love are of central importance to God and humankind. This being so, people of faith are obliged to venture beyond the political/ideological aspects of the debate and are called to consider prayerfully the pastoral and theological implications of the prevalence of guns in American society.

There are many difficult and challenging facets in the gun debate as it is being argued in the public square, in the halls of government, and behind closed doors. For bishops and other clergy, enormous pastoral concerns flow from the issue. Clergy often deal with the aftermath of gun violence episodes. This is not merely true when mass shootings occur on the national stage with episodes such as Columbine, Virginia Tech and Newtown; it is true with the much more frequent local occurrences that clergy deal with on a day-to-day basis – accidental shootings, homicides and suicides. Individuals who are caught in a fit of rage, or who are

distraught, or who are depressed too often use guns impulsively. Sadly, guns are highly efficient weapons, and momentary distress can have permanent consequences. It is often the clergy who are called to minister to the survivors in their pain and grief.

While clergy are called to minister to the survivors of gun violence, we are likewise called to speak out against growing gun violence and work for change. Women who are victims of domestic violence are at very high risk when a gun is in the home.² Middle-aged White and adult Native American males are at higher risk of committing suicide successfully when a gun is in the home.³ Guns are a scourge on the streets of our nation's cities resulting in an extraordinary number of deaths, maiming and imprisonment among young people, particularly males of color.⁴ That guns flow to our cities' streets from states and regions where laws are lax, especially background check laws, makes the issue of universal background checks, and closing gun sale loop holes and so-called "straw man purchases" a nationwide concern.⁵

Pursuit of the common good is an expressed theological and moral concern. In both Testaments of The Bible, great emphasis is placed on the formation of community and its welfare. Concern for the common good draws all beyond selfishness and a solipsistic worldview. Writing about the complexities of "Guns, God and Rights," Catholic Moral Theologian Thomas Bushlack rightly observes:

"Rights must consistently be contextualized within the complex social structures and systems that we all live in the late modern world. Therefore, when the claims of my individual rights, or the corporate rights of an organization to which I belong, begin to infringe upon the rights of others or of the common good as a whole, we have reached the limits of rights language and must begin to speak of my responsibilities toward the greater good. The challenge is to identify and name that point where even legitimate rights go too far and they begin to impinge upon the well being of the entire community as a whole. Very few people (though there are some) are challenging our second amendment constitutional rights to bear arms, any more than I think we should outlaw cigarettes or alcohol. But it is time to recognize that our gun laws are shaped by one of the most powerful lobbying institutions in our nation; that is, the gun lobby, and that their rights-based claims to provide our society with a steady stream of weapons and munitions designed, created, and intended to kill human beings is destructive of the common good, and of the rights of every other American to live in safety⁶

While it may be argued that guns are not exclusively designed, created and intended to kill human beings, the fact of the matter is that, in the United States, they kill more than 30,000 people per year. This number is, by far, the highest rate of gun deaths in the industrialized world.⁷ It is clear, where there are more guns, there are not

only more gun deaths, there are more deaths overall.⁸ This is a literal assault on human “being.” If we believe that all human beings have been and are created in the image and likeness of God, then these gun deaths are also an assault on our creator God. That the high number of gun deaths, and deaths overall, could be reduced with the implementation of universal background checks and new laws to prevent people with mental illness from purchasing guns makes it imperative that Christian leaders advocate for these laws without hesitance or equivocation.

If a vast majority of Americans support universal background checks, but the political leadership in our democracy fails to act on the wishes of this vast majority, we must ask why. Our political leaders too often seem to be paralyzed in the face of the money and activism of gun manufacturer and gun-owner lobbyists. The expressed desire of most Americans for action on a matter that concerns the common good – universal background checks – is being held hostage by those with financial power and a clear interest in the unfettered sale of guns. In political terms, this borders on corruption. In theological terms, it is sinful. Deuteronomy 27:25 says: “Cursed be anyone who takes bribe to shed innocent blood.” Might this verse from Holy Scripture be a word to those politicians who have succumbed to the pressure and money of the gun lobbyists and gun manufacturers and turned their backs on the clear and overwhelming will of the people for universal background checks. The voices of the innocent across our nation cry out for action and justice.

Call to Action:

As Christian leaders and bishops we cannot sit idly by while the wishes of American voters go unheeded. The time is right, and the time is now for action. Below are a few simple yet profound steps we might take, individually and corporately to work for universal background checks for all gun purchases. Let us not miss this opportunity to help the voices of the people be heard and new laws enacted that will reduce gun violence in our nation.

In our roles as bishops we can:

- Preach on the scourge of gun violence; how it affects vulnerable people in your communities and some of [the steps](#) we are advocating to help save lives.
- Convene clergy gathering that focus on the particular ways gun violence manifests itself in your diocese and how the church can respond to those who support those who are grieving and protect those who are at risk.
- Write opinion articles for church and secular publications explaining why gun violence is an issue on which the church cannot be silent and why passing legislation that includes universal background checks is a modest and sensible step toward reducing the violence.

- Plan and participate in liturgies and prayer services for peace, safety and reconciliation in our communities.

In our roles as citizens, we can also act, and urge the people of our dioceses and our fellow citizens to do the same. We suggest:

Calling and writing your Senators and Member of Congress and asking them to:

- support bills that require background checks such as the Manchin-Toomey Amendment to Senate bill 649 and House bill 1565, also known as the King-Thompson bill
- support Senate bill 1290, also known as the Klobuchar bill, closing the loophole in federal law that permits domestic abusers and stalkers to obtain firearms.

If your representatives already support these bills, thank them for their support. (Click [here](#) to see Senate votes on Manchin-Toomey background checks amendment. Click [here](#) to see House cosponsors for King-Thompson background checks bill. Click [here](#) to see Senate cosponsors for Klobuchar's domestic violence bill.)

Set up meetings with congressional district staff to encourage them to support these bills, or to thank them for their existing support.

Call and write your state representatives and governor, encouraging them to support universal background checks at the state level.

Talk to friends and families and encourage them to support universal background checks.

October 2014

¹ See Quinnipiac University Release Detail July 3, 2014 found at <http://www.quinnipiac.edu/news-and-events/quinnipiac-university-poll/national/release-detail?ReleaseID=2057> .

² See Hemenway, M.D., David "Risks and Benefits of a Gun in the Home" *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine* - 2011;5(6):502-511 found at: <http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/753058>

³ See "Suicide Statistics" on the website of Suicide.Org found at <http://www.suicide.org/suicide-statistics.html> and "Suicide among Adults Aged 34

– 65 years – United States 1999 – 2010” - Center for Disease Control and Prevention / 62(17);321-325 found at:

<http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/mm6217a1.htm>.

⁴ See “Youth Violence” – Facts at a Glance – 2012 published by the Center for Disease Control found at <http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/pdf/yv-datasheet-a.pdf>.

⁵ See, for example, El- Ghobashy, Tamer “Crime Guns” from the South on the Rise in New York City – *The Wall Street Journal*, July 21, 2013 found at:

<http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424127887324136204578640330948823990>

⁶ Bushlack, Thomas “Guns, God and Rights” posted 12/20/12 on the Catholic Moral Theology website found at: <http://catholicmoraltheology.com/guns-god-and-rights>.

⁷ See Lupkin, Sidney “U.S. Has More Guns – and Gun Deaths Than Any Other Country Study Finds” – *ABC News* – September 19, 2013 as well as World Health Organizations studies which support the report, at:

<http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/health/2013/09/19/u-s-has-more-guns-and-gun-deaths-than-any-other-country-study-finds/>

⁸ See New Research in AJM: ‘Guns Do Not Make a Nation Safer’ – The American Journal of Medicine Blog – September 18, 2013 found at <http://amjmed.org/new-research-in-ajm-guns-do-not-make-a-nation-safer/>