Recent mass shootings create new urgency for gun reform

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Two recent mass shootings—one inside an LGBTQ+ nightclub in Colorado and another inside a Walmart in Virginia—drive home our nation’s urgent need to end the scourge of firearm violence through commonsense, evidence-based legislative solutions.

Gun violence is a true public health crisis in America. And, sadly, much of it is preventable. When will lawmakers in Congress finally decide enough is enough?

The deaths of five people and the wounding of 25 more at Club Q in Colorado Springs on Nov. 19 recall the catastrophic Pulse nightclub shooting of June 2016 when nearly 100 people were shot down, 49 fatally, in what was at that point the worst mass shooting our nation had seen.

The AMA House of Delegates declared firearm violence a public health crisis that same month, building on decades of advocacy and more than 30 policy recommendations aimed at reducing gun deaths.

Sadly, the public health crisis of gun violence has only deepened in the six years since that declaration. The Club Q and Walmart tragedies occurred just days after the AMA House of Delegates agreed to create a task force charged with bolstering our work on firearm violence prevention at the 2022 AMA Interim Meeting. Acting on a proposal from the AMA Medical Student Section and the American Academy of Pediatrics, delegates also voted to work more closely with state and specialty medical societies to advance litigation related to firearm safety at every opportunity.

Action needed now

The time for forceful action and meaningful change is now—today, this exact moment—because we simply cannot continue to live in the shadow of gun violence. By at least one count, more than 600 mass shootings have scarred our nation so far this year, in places stretching from Uvalde, Texas, to
Highland Park, Illinois, and from Buffalo, New York, to Sacramento, California. The peaceful settings ripped apart by bullets in 2022 have included grade-school classrooms and Independence Day parades as well as supermarkets and nightclub districts. Meanwhile, an astonishing two-thirds of firearm-related deaths are suicides.

The nation’s gun death rate in 2021 reached its highest level in almost 30 years, according to an analysis of data compiled by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published in JAMA Network Open. More than 1.1 million people in our nation lost their lives in firearm-related incidents since 1990, and more than 100 firearm deaths are recorded in the U.S. each and every day. Gun violence continues to strike without warning or reason, replacing our sense of security and well-being with fear and uncertainty.

A first step

The gun legislation passed by Congress and signed into law earlier this year, an action which ended decades of deadlock on firearm policy at the federal level, was a much-needed first step. But while those newly enacted measures are helpful—enhancing background checks for purchasers under age 21, boosting school security and funding further development of red-flag laws at the state level, among other steps—they will not fully solve the problems facing us.

We continue to urge Congress to advance policies outlined by the AMA, including banning the sale and possession of assault-style rifles like those used in Colorado Springs and Uvalde and so many other places. We need lawmakers to heed our call for background checks and waiting periods for all firearm purchases, ban the manufacture and sale of 3D-printed guns, and develop enhanced safety education programs to promote greater responsibility in the use and storage of firearms.

Physicians witness the devastating effects of firearm violence every day. We do our best to save the lives of those whose bodies have been torn apart by high-velocity rounds fired from weapons developed for military use, weapons that should never be present on our streets and in our schools. We seek to comfort the families of gunshot victims as they grieve senseless loss.

Just as there are millions of responsible gun owners in America, there are also people for whom firearms are a way to threaten, intimidate or inflict pain on others. Calling for sensible changes to our nation’s gun laws isn’t an attack on the Second Amendment, it’s an attempt to save lives.

As physicians and healers, we are and must always remain committed to ending gun violence. We owe that to our patients, our families and our nation.