



# Guns and Violence Against Women

## Key Challenges and Solutions

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# Introduction and summary

Gun violence in the United States is a public health crisis. Every day, more than 100 people are killed with a firearm, more than 200 are nonfatally injured, and more than 1,000 are threatened with a gun.<sup>1</sup> There are many forms of gun violence, each affecting communities differently, and women in particular are uniquely affected.

More than 11,000 women in the United States were killed with a gun between 2015 and 2019, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.<sup>2</sup> While men suffer even higher rates of gun violence, women are often targeted for violence because of their sex and are frequently victims of people they know well. Every month, an average of 57 women are killed with a firearm by an intimate partner.<sup>3</sup>

The impact of gun violence against women goes beyond fatal encounters. A 2016 study found that nearly 1 million women alive at that time had been shot by an intimate partner, and 4.5 million women had been threatened with a firearm.<sup>4</sup> Firearms have long been used as a tool of power and control to instill fear and inflict abuse on women—with women of color, people in the LGBTQ community, and women with disabilities being disproportionately affected.<sup>5</sup>

In 2019, the Center for American Progress released “Transforming the Culture of Power: An Examination of Gender-Based Violence in the United States,”<sup>6</sup> a report that focuses on the different forms gender-based violence can take across various settings and experiences as well as the policy and legislative reforms needed to address it. In this report, the author expands on one aspect discussed in that analysis: gender-based gun violence. This report highlights five key challenges around firearms and gender-based violence in the United States:

- **Guns used in an intimate partner context.** A significant portion of firearm violence against women occurs in an intimate partner context, with a disproportionate impact on women of color.
- **Gender-based violence perpetrated by strangers and acquaintances.** Gender-based violence by nonintimate partners, particularly targeting women of color, reveals the harmful consequences of easy access to firearms by misogynistic and racist individuals.

- **Transgender women targeted by gun-related hate crimes.** Transgender women, particularly trans women of color, experience disproportionate effects from gun-related hate crimes.
- **The harmful effects of COVID-19 on gun violence against women.** Intersecting crises, including the economic recession resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, have led to spikes in gun violence against women.
- **Political actors block gun reform and promote dangerous narratives.** Gun lobbyists and manufactures promote gender-stereotyped narratives to promote widespread gun ownership despite empirical evidence that demonstrates how dangerous the weapons really are.

The report’s final section presents comprehensive recommendations on how policymakers and private institutions can holistically address these challenges. These include:

- **Disarm domestic abusers.** Close loopholes in legislation that allow dangerous people to access firearms.
- **Close the gender wage gap.** Fair and equitable pay allows survivors to leave abusive relationships and provide for their families.
- **Address online hate speech.** Misogynist and racist individuals commune in online forums that result in dangerous situations in real life.
- **Reauthorize the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) with key improvements.** Each reauthorization creates an opportunity to enhance protections for survivors of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual violence, and stalking.

## Forms of violence against women defined

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Gender-based violence is an inclusive and internationally recognized term that the United Nations defines as “harmful acts directed at an individual based on their gender. It is rooted in gender inequality, the abuse of power, and harmful norms.”<sup>7</sup> Domestic violence is a narrower term, defined by the National Domestic Violence Hotline as “a pattern of behaviors used by one partner to maintain power and control over another partner in an intimate relationship.”<sup>8</sup> Domestic violence can also include people in a family unit who are not intimate partners, such as children or other dependents.<sup>9</sup> Intimate partner violence is a specific term that refers to “physical violence, sexual violence, stalking or psychological harm committed by a current or former partner or spouse.”<sup>10</sup> This report focuses on these three forms of violence in the United States. However, this report is not exhaustive. Gender-based violence is a broad topic that affects men and individuals across gender identities. This report focuses specifically on women because extensive research documents that gender-based violence has a disproportionate impact on women from a variety of backgrounds.

# 5 key challenges around firearms and gender-based violence

Firearm violence against women is a dangerous and pervasive issue. This section examines the far-reaching impact of such deadly weapons through the following five key challenges.

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## Firearms in an intimate partner context

Firearms are used in intimate partner violence more than any other weapon.<sup>11</sup> According to data from the FBI's supplemental homicide reports, from 2010 to 2019, more than 50 percent of homicides of women perpetrated by an intimate partner involved the use of a gun.<sup>12</sup> In 2015, 92 percent of all firearm deaths among women in high-income countries occurred in the United States.<sup>13</sup>

Domestic and intimate partner violence can happen to anyone regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation. However, intimate partner violence affects communities differently. Women experience it at far greater rates than men—and men are far more likely than women to perpetrate intimate partner violence.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, women with disabilities experience intimate partner violence at greater rates than their nondisabled counterparts.<sup>15</sup> The stigma that surrounds disability starts at birth and is reenforced across the lifespan, causing discrimination and abuse toward women with disabilities.<sup>16</sup>

Black and American Indian/Alaska Native women experience intimate partner violence at disproportionate rates.<sup>17</sup> In fact, Black women are more likely to be killed by firearms than any other group of women in the United States.<sup>18</sup>

To make things worse, women of color, people in the LGBTQ community, and women with disabilities often face additional barriers when accessing services for victims of gender-based violence or domestic violence. For example, one study found that nearly half of Latina women did not report their abuse to authorities because of fear, shame, or lack of confidence in the police.<sup>19</sup> Identifying the unique needs of all survivors and creating services that meet these needs is essential for survivor safety.

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Even when firearms are not used to kill, they are used as tools to uphold the power, control, and abuse that perpetrators wield over survivors.

Even when firearms are not used to kill, they are used as tools to uphold the power, control, and abuse that perpetrators wield over survivors. Firearms are used to threaten and shoot women at alarming rates. This is particularly noteworthy because even when individuals survive gun injuries or a gun is never fired, women still pay the price emotionally, physically, and economically. For example, when compared with crimes perpetrated by strangers, survivors were significantly more likely to report emotional and physical symptoms if the perpetrator was an intimate partner.<sup>20</sup> This demonstrates the complexity of abusive intimate partner relationships. For instance, the period immediately following a woman leaving her abuser is the most dangerous.<sup>21</sup> Abusers are likely to escalate their abuse once they find out they are losing control.

In addition to the emotional toll, the ability to leave an abusive situation is also a financial hurdle. While women at all income levels experience domestic violence and gun violence, women experiencing financial hardship can be at greater risk, making the decision and ability to leave that much more difficult.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, medical expenses for an individual's gun injuries are estimated to cost \$1.7 billion annually for survivors, their families, and their employers.<sup>23</sup>

Intimate partner gun violence, both fatal and nonfatal, has lasting and damaging effects on survivors, their families, and communities.

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## **Gender-based violence perpetrated by strangers and acquaintances**

While intimate partner violence represents a significant share of the gun violence perpetrated against women, anyone can commit gender-based violence—including friends, coworkers, and strangers. Several recent incidents have highlighted how racist, homophobic, and transphobic ideologies, policies, and practices create a dangerous environment for people in certain communities—especially when firearms are present.

In March 2021, a gunman entered three spas in Atlanta and the surrounding area and fatally shot eight people, bringing the rise in violence and discrimination that has targeted the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community to the fore.<sup>24</sup> Seven of the victims were women, and six were Asian women.<sup>25</sup> The gunman told police that the rampage was motivated by his need to “eliminate” his temptations and desires for Asian women, clearly identifying the attacks as both racially and gender motivated.<sup>26</sup> This attack was, unfortunately, not an isolated incident. In the past year, the group Stop AAPI Hate has compiled 6,600 reported incidents of discrimination or violence against the AAPI community.<sup>27</sup> AAPI women were 2.2 times more likely than men to report these incidents.<sup>28</sup>

In 2020, Grammy Award-winning popstar Megan Pete, known professionally as Megan thee Stallion, was shot by a former friend in the music industry.<sup>29</sup> Her story was plastered on the news, and while many came to her defense, others denied that the act of violence happened. This ultimately led to her op-ed in *The New York Times* addressing the admonishment of Black women who speak about their trauma.<sup>30</sup> This is often the reality for women—especially women of color—who come forward after their attack: They are often blamed for the abuse, not believed, or fear the threat of more violence by their abuser.

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## Transgender women targeted in gun-related hate crimes

Discrimination against transgender people is harmful and deadly when dangerous, transphobic people have access to firearms—particularly for Black trans women and other transgender women of color. In 2021, at least 45 transgender or gender-nonconforming people—most of whom were Black or transgender women of color—were shot or killed by other violent means.<sup>31</sup> Between 2017 and 2019, 74 percent of homicides of transgender people involved a gun.<sup>32</sup> The layered and inextricable identities of trans women of color and gender-nonconforming people of color mean that they are subject to racism, transphobia, misogyny, and xenophobia simultaneously.

In addition to the perils of easy access to firearms by dangerous individuals, the discrimination faced by transgender women and nonbinary people affects their access to safe housing, employment, and health care.<sup>33</sup> Without the security of a home or income, trans and gender-nonbinary people are at greater risk for gun violence. One in 5 trans people have experienced homelessness or unstable housing.<sup>34</sup> Additionally, a 2019 study found that trans and gender-nonconforming people experiencing homelessness were twice as likely to report that they had been attacked with a gun or a knife compared with cisgender people experiencing homelessness.<sup>35</sup>

Nondiscrimination policies in housing, employment, and other life-saving services—such as those in the Equality Act, a bill that would provide federal civil rights protections to the LGBTQ community and strengthen some civil rights protections for communities of color—protect trans survivors who have experienced gun violence.<sup>36</sup>

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## **The harmful effects of COVID-19 on domestic violence**

The height of the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the often too-silent crisis of domestic violence. Those experiencing domestic violence were suddenly trapped between a global health crisis and the risk of abuse at home during lockdown mandates. As the pandemic continues, researchers are still compiling data to grasp the ripple effects the health crisis had on domestic violence. However, early estimates found that there was an 8 percent increase in reports of domestic violence during the months immediately following stay-at-home orders in early 2020.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to isolation, previous research has identified the occurrence of natural disasters such as hurricanes, tornados, and pandemics as risk factors for domestic and intimate partner violence.<sup>38</sup> These disasters often exacerbate underlying crises such as unemployment, economic recession, isolation, and fear. These further contribute to stress as well as violence by abusers.<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic follows that trend at a global scale.

The United States has also seen a dramatic surge in gun sales since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>40</sup> These circumstances created a particularly dangerous situation for survivors of domestic violence.

For example, in April 2020, after suspecting that his girlfriend Cheryl Schriefer had contracted COVID-19, Patrick Jesernik fatally shot Schriefer in their home.<sup>41</sup> Jesernik took his own life shortly after.<sup>42</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic added a layer of fear and tension that created an even more volatile situation for people in domestic violence situations, especially when coupled with higher levels of gun ownership across the country.

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## **Political actors block gun reform and promote dangerous narratives**

The National Rifle Association (NRA) is one of the United States' most identifiable gun advocacy groups. The group, originally founded as a gun safety and training club for hunters, has transformed into a pillar of political discourse. The

NRA’s website boasts images of American flags, hunting, and bald eagles to equate firearm ownership as an extension of patriotism. In 2019, CAP explored in depth the dangerous and pervasive narratives created by the NRA that grip the organization’s audience and position the group as a large political player.<sup>43</sup> The NRA’s home page reads: “Our rights are under attack like never before. Join today.”<sup>44</sup>

The NRA explicitly opposes improving gun safety measures such as the federal background check system.<sup>45</sup> In fact, the organization spends \$10 million each year lobbying against commonsense firearm legislation and millions more to try to elect officials to promote their agenda.<sup>46</sup> Many far-right extremist groups—and NRA-endorsed politicians—have used language from organizations such as the NRA to justify their racist and misogynistic ideologies. Groups such as the Proud Boys describe themselves as a group of “biologically male” members who believe “the West is the best.”<sup>47</sup> These groups commune on online platforms to exchange racist and misogynist rhetoric that leads to planned, armed demonstrations such as the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2020.<sup>48</sup>

In addition to incendiary and misogynistic narratives, the NRA has also sought to arm women to “make them safer.” It is important to combat dangerous and false narratives about gun ownership such as these. In November 2010, International Boxing Hall of Fame athlete Christy Martin was brutally shot in the chest by her former husband after several life-threatening stab wounds.<sup>49</sup> The gun that was used against her belonged to Martin. In too many cases such as this one, the gun used by the abuser belongs to the victim. Christy Martin survived her attack. However, evidence shows that the presence of a gun during a domestic violence situation increases the likelihood that a death will occur by 400 percent, no matter who owns the firearm.<sup>50</sup>

Arming women will not make them safer. The idea that women should carry guns to stop an attack creates the harmful narrative that women are responsible for preventing them instead of abusers being held accountable. This is a notorious, misogynist tactic—a form of victim blaming that creates the illusion that violence is inevitable, rather than something that can be mitigated. Lawmakers can stop gun violence against women by preventing their abusers from accessing firearms. Although the narratives of strangers lurking in the shadows and firearms offering women protection often prevail, the data reveal who are often killing women: men they know well. In fact, 92 percent of women who are killed by men are killed by a familiar person.<sup>51</sup>

# Effective policy solutions

Gun violence is not inevitable. Effectively addressing gun violence against women begins with practical solutions such as disarming domestic abusers and ensuring that survivors have access to resources when they need them. More solutions to addressing gun violence against women should be led by survivors in affected communities and invest in long-term solutions that address root causes. Taking measures that protect women and girls holistically will greatly reduce acts of senseless gun violence.

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## Disarm domestic abusers

A critical step to end violence against women is to disarm all domestic abusers. This can be accomplished in three crucial ways:

- **Dating partner loophole.** While federal law prohibits some abusers from purchasing firearms, a significant portion of abusers are left out, creating a dangerous loophole. Under current federal law, people in dating partner relationships who do not share a child or live together do not have the same protections as those who do.<sup>52</sup> And with half of all domestic violence incidents occurring among dating partners rather than spouses,<sup>53</sup> this prevents a large number of survivors of domestic violence from accessing justice against their abusers. Meanwhile, 20 states and the District of Columbia have recognized this dangerous oversight and passed legislation to close this gap in policy. The remaining states and Congress must follow suit.
- **Misdemeanor stalking.** The U.S. Department of Justice defines stalking as “a course of conduct directed at a person that would cause a reasonable person to fear for his or her safety or the safety of others.”<sup>54</sup> As was evident during the Annapolis Capital Gazette shooting, stalking is a dangerous precursor for future firearm violence.<sup>55</sup> In fact, 85 percent of women who survived an attempted murder were stalked prior to their attack.<sup>56</sup> However, under current

federal law, abusers convicted of misdemeanor stalking crimes are not barred from obtaining a firearm. Those convicted of misdemeanor stalking must not be permitted to access such dangerous weapons.

- **Temporary restraining orders.** Temporary restraining orders are short-term, immediate court orders that a judge can grant a survivor of domestic violence against their abuser. These court orders are a crucial first step in a survivor's journey to protection. The time immediately following a survivor leaving their abuser is particularly dangerous.<sup>57</sup> Abusers often escalate their abuse when they feel they can no longer control the other person. Despite the heightened risks to survivors during this period, current law does not prohibit individuals who are subject to a temporary restraining order from purchasing firearms. This must change.

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## Close the gender wage gap and raise the federal minimum wage

A disproportionate number of women are low-wage workers;<sup>58</sup> meanwhile, financial security is crucial to a survivor's ability to leave an abusive situation. Housing and transportation mean safety for survivors, and increasing wages is an important step to ensuring that survivors have the resources they need to take care of themselves and their families when in crisis.

In 2020, women in the United States earned 84 percent of what men made in the same year.<sup>59</sup> This gap was even larger for women of color. Black women earned 63 cents for every dollar a white man made; Native American women earned 60 cents, and Hispanic and Latina women earned just 55 cents.<sup>60</sup> Women with intersecting identities, such as women with disabilities and people in the LGBTQ community, encounter additional biases that negatively affect their wages.

The Raise the Wage Act of 2021, which has been introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives, would raise the federal minimum wage gradually to \$15 per hour, effectively increasing the wages of 32 million people in the United States.<sup>61</sup> The majority of these workers—59 percent—are women.<sup>62</sup> Twenty-two million people across the United States work in the 40 lowest-paying jobs, and 68 percent of these workers are women.<sup>63</sup> It is essential that Congress raise the federal minimum wage adequately to align with the cost of living.

While Americans await efforts to pass the Raise the Wage Act, businesses should not wait on the federal government to pay their employees a living wage.

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## Address online hate speech

Tolerance of online hate speech contributes to an environment that normalizes and enables continued hate and violence. Failures to prevent and remove online hate and harassment construct barriers to full participation in public life for affected groups, who are disproportionately women, people of color, people of faith, and the LGBTQ community.

There are several examples of online hate manifesting violence. For instance, in January 2021, Twitter permanently suspended President Donald Trump for his role in inciting the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6.<sup>64</sup> Facebook would later do the same.<sup>65</sup> This was a landmark step that private companies took to hold a public figure—whose speech has heightened reach and influence—accountable for inciting violence.

President Trump’s large platform and influence made his comments particularly harmful. However, private citizens use online platforms as a means of inciting violence every day. In July 2021, Tres Genco was charged by a federal court for attempting to commit a mass shooting of women and illegally possessing a machine gun.<sup>66</sup> Genco was a self-identified “incel,” a shorthand for “involuntary celibacy.” Incels are a group consisting almost entirely of men who commune in online forums to discuss their hatred of women. Inside Genco’s car, police found firearms with bump stocks attached, loaded magazines, and boxes of ammunition.<sup>67</sup> Prior to his arrest, Genco had surveyed the sorority house where he planned to commit the crime.<sup>68</sup>

Internet companies must take steps to curb hate speech and hateful activities online, including ending the use of their platforms to conduct, finance, and plan violence. CAP is a founding member and co-chair of Change the Terms (CTT), a coalition of civil rights, human rights, technology policy, and consumer protection organizations working to reduce hate online. CTT has advocated for defining hateful activities as those “that incite or engage in violence, intimidation, harassment, threats, or defamation targeting an individual or group based on their actual or perceived race, color, religion, national origin, ethnicity, immigration status, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, or disability.”<sup>69</sup>

Internet companies must improve terms of service and enforcement systems across languages to prohibit users, content, or activities that promote hate and facilitate violence—whether it is committed online or offline. Improved transparency, regular audits, and independent civil rights investigations are an essential

part of accountability and improvement around ending hate online. The federal government also has a role to play in ensuring that internet companies' business practices are transparent, respect civil rights, and protect consumers from systematic online hate and violence.

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## **Reauthorize the Violence Against Women Act with key improvements**

VAWA is a key piece of legislation that offers legal and community-based responses for survivors of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking. Originally passed in 1994, VAWA's subsequent reauthorizations in 2000, 2005, and 2013 have included protections for Native American and Indigenous women, LGBTQ people, disabled survivors of violence, and immigrant survivors of violence.<sup>70</sup> VAWA provides funding that trains judges, prosecutors, and law enforcement on how to effectively support survivors of domestic violence, sexual violence, and stalking.

In March 2021, the House of Representatives passed H.R. 1620, which includes several key enhancements that address the variety of needs of survivors. Provisions in the recently passed House bill that should be a part of the final bill include:

- Funding for the Culturally Specific Services Program
- Investments in choices beyond the criminal justice system for survivors, such as restorative justice initiatives
- Implementing policies and procedures for the recovery and storage of dangerous weapons from adjudicated perpetrators of misdemeanor and felony crimes of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, or stalking—as well as individuals for which the courts have issued protective or other restraining orders
- Tribal jurisdiction over crimes of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking that returns authority to tribes to hold nonnative perpetrators accountable for crimes committed on tribal lands
- Nondiscrimination requirements for VAWA grants that ensure all survivors have equal access to services regardless of gender identity<sup>71</sup>

Each reauthorization of VAWA provides an opportunity to enhance protections for survivors of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual violence, and stalking. Improvements to VAWA must continue to meet the needs of all survivors.

# Conclusion

Addressing gun violence against women is an individual, community, national, and global effort. The recent events highlighted in this report reflect the history of gun dependence and mistreatment of women that has existed in the United States for centuries. Failures in current law that allow unmitigated access to guns by abusers must be rectified. Women and girls deserve to live a life free from gun violence.

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## About the author

**Marissa Edmund** is a senior policy analyst for Gun Violence Prevention at the Center for American Progress.

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