

RESPONSES TO THE PLAGUE OF GUN VIOLENCE

Remarks of Bishop Frank J. Dewane of Venice, FL, Chairman of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, Delivered to the General Assembly of Bishops in Baltimore, MD, November 11, 2019.

Thank you for the opportunity to address this assembly on a crucial issue of national importance: the topic of ceaseless gun violence that burdens our society. Certainly, Cardinal DiNardo is to be commended for placing this problem foremost among the issues that he has asked our Conference to address, and I am deeply grateful for the valuable contributions and insights that so many of our Committees and Departments have shared with me on these matters. Today I want to describe how these materials fit together within the historic approaches taken by our Conference in the past, and how they cast a light on the path forward that we can pursue together.

Let us begin with context: there are approximately 40,000 gun related deaths each year in the United States, about the same number as persons who die in car accidents.¹ About two-thirds of gun deaths are suicides, and about one-third are homicides.

As you can see from the list of policy initiatives described in this slide, the bishops of our Conference have historically supported common sense measures of gun policy to address the violence, including:

- A ban on assault weapons;
- Universal background checks;
- A federal gun trafficking bill;
- Regulations on sales of handguns;
- Improved mental health interventions;
- Safety measures; and
- An honest assessment of violent images and experiences in our society.²

In addition to what we have supported recently, two policy responses with strong evidence behind them are extreme risk protection orders (“ERPOs” or “red flag laws”) and licensing handguns. It would make sense to support these, as there is

¹ See, e.g., John Gramlich, “What the data says about gun deaths in the U.S.,” *Pew Research Center* (Aug. 16, 2019); National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, U.S. Department of Transportation, “2018 Fatal Motor Vehicle Crashes: Overview,” (Oct. 2019).

² See, USCCB, “Backgrounder on a Mercy and Peacebuilding Approach to Gun Violence,” (March 2018).
<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/criminal-justice-restorative-justice/backgrounder-on-gun-violence.cfm>

strong evidence that ERPOs will significantly impact the gun suicide rate, and that licensing handguns would have a very large impact on both gun homicides and suicides. There appears to be bipartisan support for a potential federal ERPO bill, and we encourage lawmakers to work through any differences on this issue. Research suggests that for every 10-20 ERPOs issued, one life is saved.³ Another study found ERPO laws contribute to a 7.5% reduction in gun suicide.⁴

Regarding handguns, beginning with the statement “Handgun Violence: A Threat to Life” in 1975, and on several occasions after that, including in the conference-wide pastoral letter “Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice,” the bishops of our Conference have argued that handguns may be accessible to law enforcement and military, and that civilians should have significantly restricted access.⁵ The bishops have even suggested that society would be better off if civilians had virtually zero access to handguns.

Licensing handguns—or any guns—is a political impossibility at the federal level at present, but is being adopted more in the states and may be worth taking a position to encourage consideration by state Catholic conferences. The 1975 statement on handgun violence actually did support handgun licensing, but we have not discussed it as much in recent years. This has the strongest research, of any gun policy, suggesting it would have a large impact on gun homicides and suicides. For example, after Connecticut adopted a handgun licensing law in the mid-90s, they saw a 40% decrease in gun homicides over ten years (while non-gun homicides stayed at the same levels),⁶ and a 15.4% decrease in gun suicides.⁷ By contrast, Missouri repealed a handgun licensing law in 2007 that dated back to the 1920s, and

³ See, e.g. Jeffrey W. Swanson, et al., “Criminal Justice and Suicide Outcomes with Indiana’s Risk-Based Gun Seizure Law,” *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and Law*, (April 15, 2019); Jeffrey W. Swanson, et al., “Implementation and Effectiveness of Connecticut’s Risk-Based Gun Removal Law: Does it Prevent Suicides?” *80 Law and Contemporary Problems* 179-208 (2017).

⁴ Aaron J. Kivisto, et al., “Effects of Risk-Based Firearm Seizure Laws in Connecticut and Indiana on Suicide Rates, 1981-2015,” *Psychiatric Services* (Aug. 1, 2018).

⁵ “However, we believe that in the long run and with few exceptions (i.e. police officers, military use), handguns should be eliminated from our society. ‘Furthermore, the widespread use of handguns and automatic weapons in connection with drug commerce reinforces our repeated “call for effective and courageous action to control handguns, leading to their eventual elimination from our society.”’” *Responsibility, Rehabilitation, and Restoration: A Catholic Perspective on Crime and Criminal Justice*, FN 36 (2000) (Quoting *New Slavery, New Freedom: A Pastoral Message on Substance Abuse* (1990), quoting in turn *Handgun Violence: A Threat to Life* (1975)). <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/criminal-justice-restorative-justice/crime-and-criminal-justice.cfm>

⁶ Kara E. Rudolph, et al., “Association Between Connecticut’s Permit to Purchase Handgun Law and Homicides,” *American Journal of Public Health* (Aug. 1, 2015).

⁷ Cassandra K. Crifasi, et al., “Effects of changes in permit-to-purchase handgun laws in Connecticut and Missouri on suicide rates,” *Preventive Medicine* (Oct. 2015).

they experienced a 25% increase in gun homicides⁸ and a 16.1% increase in gun suicides.⁹

There is also a possibility of bipartisan agreement on background checks at the federal level, and we continue to encourage closing the loopholes on this policy. However, the research indicates that it is less likely to have a large impact on gun homicide or suicide rates.

As regards Assault Weapons and Large Capacity Magazines, although receiving a great deal of publicity, these are used in a minority of criminal assaults, but they are used frequently in the deadliest mass shootings. Our Conference actively supported the federal assault weapon ban that was in place from 1994 to 2004, which banned certain types of rifles as well as several forms of large capacity magazines. However, that law contained several weaknesses that allowed manufacturers to change features of certain firearms to avoid the ban.

A recent study¹⁰ from researchers at Columbia and Harvard University found that, between 1990 and 2017, the incidence of high-fatality mass shootings in states without a large capacity magazine ban was more than double that in states with such a ban; the annual number of deaths from mass shootings was also more than three times higher. Shootings that involved a large capacity magazine resulted in a 62% higher mean average death toll. Again, although there is not much political possibility of a large capacity magazine ban at the federal level, there is potential to work in the states.

There is also good evidence that safe storage makes a big difference,¹¹ though safe storage laws are very difficult to enforce because usually a violation is discovered only after a tragedy has already occurred. An education campaign on safe storage could be very helpful and save lives, particularly in the context of suicide and school shootings.

It should also be noted that other interventions may be worth considering, such as using Catholic institutional resources for place-based interventions and amending the ethical investment guidelines to include divestment from gun manufacturers,

⁸ Daniel Webster, et al., “Effects of the repeal of Missouri’s handgun purchaser licensing law on homicides,” *Journal of Urban Health* (June 2014).

⁹ See Crifasi, footnote 7, *supra*.

¹⁰ Louis Klarevas et al., “The Effect of Large-Capacity Magazine Bans on High-Fatality Mass Shootings,” *American Journal of Public Health* (Dec. 1, 2019).

¹¹ Cassandra Crifasi, et al., “Storage Practices of US Gun Owners in 2016,” *American Journal of Public Health* (April 1, 2018).

especially those that make handguns, assault-weapons or semi-automatic rifles, and large capacity magazines.

As a Conference and as a Church, we should also concentrate on specifically Catholic approaches to address this problem, in ways that reflect our Spirituality and Social Teaching. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church notes, human life is sacred,¹² and we need to address the threat to life posed by gun violence with the full strength of our tradition.

After the mass shooting in Midland, Texas, Bishop Michael Sis of the Diocese of San Angelo stated simply and clearly: “There are no easy answers as to how to end this epidemic of gun violence in our state and our country.” We of course need common sense restrictions on guns – not in a way that takes rifles away from hunters or other law-abiding citizens – just common-sense regulations like those we place on prescription drugs and cars: when the preservation of life is at issue, we must respond.

Such regulations will help, but they will not end gun violence completely. For that to happen, we need new ways of thinking.

At the heart of this epidemic, there is a shooter. This shooter somehow, in some way, turned inwards on pain, or isolation, or illusions, that it became possible to become desensitized to others, losing all empathy.

Once again, the Catechism identifies a spiritual crisis we face,¹³ that causes us to do violence to peace. Anger and hatred are often at the root of violence. What we need to be looking for are the early signs of self-inwardness and loss of empathy. As a society, we have become less and less empathetic ourselves – a clear sign that, somehow, we all are becoming dangerous. The loss of empathy is a sign that the Lord himself saw in each of us, and one of the reasons He died for us on the cross – to show us what genuine empathy, genuine love for others, truly looks like. Genuine empathy is the entryway into the commandment to love thy neighbor and to abide in peace.

This peace is one that the world alone cannot bring. To end the violence, we, as individuals and as a people, need to practice empathy. In the words of Saint Paul, we need to “*have among [ourselves] the same attitude that is also [ours] in Christ*

¹² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2258.

¹³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2305.

Jesus” (Phil 2:5). The same Christ who, “*because of the great love he had for us*” (Eph 2:4) did die for us all, “*so that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised*” (2 Cor 5:15).

That is the kind of empathy our country needs to restore in all her people. And it starts with us. It starts with each of us looking out for those who are *on the peripheries* of our society, those who seem to be isolated and angry, and welcoming them back into the fold so they can be healed by the love of others.

One area that is often raised is mental health. About 10 million Americans struggle with serious mental illness, and about 3 million of those are untreated.¹⁴ It would be good for the health of our society to have greater access to mental health treatment. But the research does not support the notion that persons with mental illness are necessarily more prone to violence than the general population.¹⁵ Where there is a strong link with mental illness and gun violence is suicide. Whereas only about 4% of homicides involve a known mental illness, about 50% of suicides do each year.¹⁶ The research shows that if persons in a suicidal crisis can be denied access to guns, the odds of saving their lives dramatically increase, even if they attempt suicide by other means.¹⁷

Similarly, there is strong evidence that safe gun storage (either in a safe or with a gun lock) significantly decreases the risk of gun violence, especially suicide.¹⁸ In addition, the large majority of school shootings occur when the student gains access to his parents’ guns.¹⁹ Studies indicate, however, that only about half of gun owners

¹⁴ NIMH Statistics (2016). The statistics have been updated to 2017 with 11.2 million adults with serious mental illness, 3.7 million of whom lack treatment. <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/mental-illness.shtml>

¹⁵ See, e.g., Jeffrey W. Swanson, et al., “Mental illness and reduction of gun violence and suicide: bringing epidemiologic research to policy,” *Annals of Epidemiology* (May 2015).

¹⁶ Shane P.D. Jack, et al., “Surveillance for Violent Deaths—National Violent Death Reporting System, 27 States 2015,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Sept. 28, 2018).

¹⁷ See, e.g., Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Means Matter, “Lethality of Suicide Methods,” <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/means-matter/case-fatality/>; Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, Means Matter, “Attempters’ Longterm Survival,” <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/means-matter/survival>.

¹⁸ See, e.g., David C. Grossman, et al., “Gun Storage Practices and Risk of Youth Suicide and Unintentional Firearm Injuries,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* (Feb. 2005); Edmond D Shenassa, et al., “Safer Storage of firearms at home and risk of suicide: a study of protective factors in a nationally representative sample,” *Journal of Epidemiol Community Health* (Oct. 2004).

¹⁹ See, e.g., John Woodrow Cox, et al., “The gun’s not in the closet,” *The Washington Post* (Aug. 1, 2018) (in 105 school shootings since 1999 where the source of the gun was identified, 80% were taken from the child’s home, or those of relatives or friends); Tawnell D. Hobbs, “Most Guns Used in School Shootings Come from Home,” *The Wall Street Journal* (April 5, 2018) (in the 20 school shootings since 1990 where shooters were 17 or younger and there were at least three victims, 17 shooters got gun from their home or home of relatives).

store their guns safely in the home.²⁰ Education campaigns can be effective here. With the Church's community convening capacity in parishes, schools, hospitals, and charities, it may be helpful to provide education on the safe storage of guns, particularly in light of the safety of children in the home and on the avoidance of suicide.

As a complement to this approach, the USCCB Socially Responsible Investment Guidelines are followed by financial advisors in the investment and management of billions of dollars in Church assets. The Guidelines cover military weapons and antipersonnel landmines, but do not expressly cover assault weapons (automatics and semi-automatics), large capacity magazines, or handguns.²¹ It would send a strong signal to encourage divestment from manufacturers that create these items. Since the guidelines already support divestment from military weaponry, it would be only a modest expansion of the present restrictions to bring them in line with positions the bishops have taken consistently over several years.

There is some good evidence that reclaiming vacant lots and rehabilitating abandoned buildings has significant effects on crime, including gun crime.²² Place-based intervention posits that disorder in a neighborhood environment contributes both to attitudes of fear that encourage violence, and creates physical spaces where covert criminal activity can take place. Local community groups can do this work, sometimes with the assistance of a municipal grant, transforming a vacant lot into a community garden, park, sports field, or other green space. Catholic institutions located in cities, such as schools, parishes, or charities, could work with local city government to take on some of these projects. It could be an opportunity for evangelization, for promoting a *Laudato Si'* ecology in an urban setting, and for taking concrete actions as a community to help lower local violence.

Catholic schools may also wish to evaluate the role they can play in anticipating and lowering violence among students. Catholic schools may wish to conduct further research on the threat assessment model²³ and how they can apply it in their school.

²⁰ Cassandra Crifasi, et al., "Storage Practices of U.S. Gun Owners," *American Journal of Public Health* (Feb. 22, 2018).

²¹ USCCB Socially Responsible Investment Guidelines, <http://www.usccb.org/about/financial-reporting/socially-responsible-investment-guidelines.cfm>.

²² See, e.g., Justin E. Heinze, "Busy Streets Theory: The Effects of Community-engaged Greening on Violence," *American Journal of Community Psychology* (Sept. 2018); Michelle C. Kondo, et al., "Neighborhood Interventions to Reduce Violence," *Annual Review of Public Health* (April 2018); Charles C. Branas, et al., "Citywide cluster randomized trial to restore blighted vacant land and its effects on violence, crime, and fear," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (Feb. 2018); Michelle Kondo, et al., "Effects of greening and community reuse of vacant lots on crime," *Urban Studies* (Oct. 2016).

²³ See, e.g., University of Virginia Curry School of Education and Human Development, "The Virginia Student

Catholic parishes can offer training on these and other models of providing for gun safety and mobilizing our communities for action.

Our Conference will continue to support measures that control the sale and use of firearms, that make guns safer, that provide for sensible regulations of handguns, and that limit assault weapons. Public opinion polls show overwhelming support for many of these policies, such as universal background checks²⁴ and extreme risk protection orders.²⁵ Even something somewhat more controversial like licensing handguns has large majority support, and is supported by a clear majority of gun owners.²⁶ These initiatives for future legislative action are summarized in our backgrounder on addressing gun violence, as shown in our next slide. They are consistent with approaches historically taken by our Conference on these matters.

As mentioned in the beginning of this presentation, I am very grateful for the generous and thoughtful contributions that many of the Conference's Committees and Departments have shared in reflecting on the sources and consequences of gun violence. These reflections are recorded in a publication available on the Bishops Only website and in your packets, known as "In Response to Gun Violence."

At this moment, even in the midst of divisions in our politics, we have opportunities to promote thoughtful legislation both at the federal and state levels that will save lives. In addition, our institutions have tremendous presence in local communities, and we have research that can help inform how to build programs to intervene locally and reduce violence.

Please reflect on these concerns and on the issues we have discussed today, and add your voice to the way in which our Conference and our Church may creatively respond to this great challenge. Your thoughts and comments are most welcome at present, as are your questions and concerns. Thank you for your kind attention and interest.

Threat Assessment Guidelines." <https://curry.virginia.edu/faculty-research/centers-labs-projects/research-labs/youth-violence-project/virginia-student-threat>

²⁴ See, e.g., Katherine Schaeffer, "Share of Americans who favor stricter gun laws has increased since 2017," *Pew Research Center* (Oct. 16, 2019).

²⁵ See, e.g., Mike DeBonis, et al., "Americans of both parties overwhelmingly support 'red flag' laws, expanded background checks for gun buyers, Washington Post-ABC News poll finds," *The Washington Post* (Sept. 9, 2019).

²⁶ See, e.g., Colleen L. Barry, et al., "Trends In Public Opinion On US Gun Laws: Majorities Of Gun Owners And Non-Gun Owners Support A Range Of Measures," *Health Affairs* (Oct. 2019).