

**Testimony of Adam Skaggs
Chief Counsel & Policy Director
Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence**

Before the Joint Economic Committee hearing on

**Gun Violence in America:
Understanding and Reducing the Costs of Firearm Injuries and Deaths**

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Thank you Chairman Lee, Vice Chair Maloney, and members of the Committee for the opportunity to testify here today, and for your attention to this critically important topic.

My name is Adam Skaggs, and I am Chief Counsel and Policy Director at Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, the legal arm of the gun safety organization led by former Congresswoman Gabby Giffords.

Gun violence has an enormous human cost: approximately 36,000¹ people in this country are shot and killed each year, while an additional 100,000² are shot and wounded. In 2017, gun deaths reached their highest level in at least 40 years. Some of these shootings make national headlines and shock the nation, like the recent mass shootings in El Paso, Dayton, Odessa, and Midland. But the daily drumbeat of American gun violence receives far less media interest, despite the fact that gunfire claims nearly 100 lives,³ and injures almost 300 more, every single day.⁴ This is a uniquely American problem: our gun homicide rate is 25 times that of other high-income countries.⁵

¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS), “Fatal Injury Reports,” last accessed Feb. 20, 2019, <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars>. Figures represent an average of the five years of most recently available data: 2013 to 2017.

² Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS), “Nonfatal Injury Reports,” last accessed Feb. 20, 2019, <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars>. The CDC warns that its estimates of nonfatal firearm injuries may be “unstable and potentially unreliable.” To increase reliability of the data, a five-year average of the most recently available data (2013 to 2017) was used.

³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS), “Fatal Injury Reports,” last accessed Feb. 20, 2019, <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars>. Figures represent an average of the five years of most recently available data: 2013 to 2017.

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS), “Nonfatal Injury Reports,” last accessed Feb. 20, 2019, <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars>. The CDC warns that its estimates of nonfatal firearm injuries may be “unstable and potentially unreliable.” To increase reliability of the data, a five-year average of the most recently available data (2013 to 2017) was used.

⁵ Erin Grinshteyn and David Hemenway, “Violent Death Rates in the US Compared to Those of the Other High-Income Countries, 2015,” *Preventive Medicine* 123, (2019): 20–26.

Beyond the devastating toll it imposes on American families and communities, gun violence imposes extraordinary costs on the American economy. Because of restrictions on meaningful data collection, the level of these costs is difficult to measure with precision. But according to research conducted by the non-partisan Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation in 2012, gun violence cost the American economy at least \$229 billion annually.⁶ Given increased gun violence in the intervening years, the current totals are surely even higher.

This totals includes direct costs like emergency transport, medical and mental health treatment, as well as law enforcement, court and prison expenses. They also entail indirect costs like lost wages, and the reduced quality of life for those who live with permanent injuries and pain.

Notably, the \$229 billion estimate does *not* take into consideration a range of other significant indirect costs -- like lost business opportunities, lowered property values, neighborhood flight, reductions in the tax base of communities across the nation, and the trauma experienced by communities that fear mass shootings and live with chronic gun violence. Even if difficult to measure, the total costs of gun violence in America plain total hundreds of billions of dollars every year.

These costs fall on every one of us: 87% of the direct costs of gun violence are borne by taxpayers, to the tune of roughly \$700 per person per year.⁷ Law enforcement, incarceration, and many court costs are publicly funded, as is a substantial portion of the medical expenses associated with treating victims. A 2017 study on the financial burden of *initial* hospitalizations for firearm injuries, published in the American Journal of Public Health, found that 40% of the costs are covered by Medicaid and Medicare,⁸ and the average cost per gun-injury hospital admissions for patients on Medicaid is more than \$30,000.⁹ And that is just the initial hospital admission; obviously, if ongoing long-term care is considered, the costs are much higher.

These numbers are staggering, but they fail to encompass the total costs of gun violence. A 20-year absence of federal investment in gun violence research has prevented scholars from answering more complex questions about the toll this violence extracts from our economy. What are the lifetime healthcare costs for gunshot wounds? What are the effects of trauma associated with gun violence on individuals and on the economy? How does gun violence stifle economic development and growth? Our nation's gun violence crisis has reached epidemic proportions,

⁶ Mark Follman, Julia Lurie, Jaeah Lee & James West, "The True Cost of Gun Violence in America," *Mother Jones*, April 15, 2015, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/04/true-cost-of-gun-violence-in-america/>.

⁷ Mark Follman, Julia Lurie, Jaeah Lee & James West, "The True Cost of Gun Violence in America," *Mother Jones*, April 15, 2015, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/04/true-cost-of-gun-violence-in-america/>.

⁸ Sarabeth A. Spitzer, Kristan L. Staudenmayer, Lakshika Tennakoon, David A. Spain & Thomas G. Weiser, "Costs and Financial Burden of Initial Hospitalizations for Firearm Injuries in the United States, 2006–2014", *American Journal of Public Health* 107, no. 5 (2017): 770-774.

⁹ *Id.*

and policymakers would be better equipped to address this dire threat to public health and safety if we had clearer answers to these questions.

What we do know is that gun violence is not inevitable, and policy solutions exist that can save both dollars and lives. Community violence intervention (CVI) initiatives have proven effective in reducing gun homicides and nonfatal shootings that are disproportionately concentrated in urban areas, particularly in underserved communities of color. In recent years, effective violence reduction strategies have been implemented in a number of cities, including Oakland, California, which has seen a [50% reduction in shootings](#) since 2012. In Connecticut, a state-funded violence intervention program has helped combined gun violence rates drop more than 50% in three major cities since 2011 -- at a cost of less than \$1 million per year. Research has shown that this modest investment generates an annual savings of \$7 million from averted shootings.

Simply put, the potential return on a nationwide investment in stopping gun violence would be huge in both lives and taxpayer dollars. One Harvard criminologist [estimates](#) that an eight-year federal grant program to fund community violence intervention programs would save more than 12,000 lives with an associated cost savings of \$120 billion.

Other smart public policy would further reduce costs. Easy access to guns fuels this epidemic, and criminals and dangerous people routinely exploit loopholes in the law to arm themselves. Requiring a background check on every gun sale to prevent criminals, domestic abusers, and other dangerous people from acquiring guns is common sense, and has the backing of 90% of the public. Thankfully, the House passed such a policy earlier this year, and the Senate should follow suit. Just last week, the CEOs of 145 companies, including Uber, Twitter, and Bain Capital, sent a letter to members of the Senate calling for such action.

The House has also allotted \$50 million for research by our premier public health institutes, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and National Institutes for Health (NIH). Again, the Senate must do the same. And in the coming weeks, the House will vote on bills to support extreme risk protection orders, to restrict the large capacity magazines that make mass shootings so deadly, and to prohibit those convicted of hate crimes from getting their hands on guns. These policies have broad public support, and they will save dollars and lives.

Data compiled by Giffords Law Center has made clear for years that states with stronger gun laws have lower rates of gun deaths and spend less on gun violence than states with weaker laws. But our federal laws remain porous and ineffective and gun violence continues to be a tremendous public health and safety crisis that costs hundreds of billions of dollars each year.

This crisis is neither inevitable nor acceptable. Congress should act immediately to stop it.

Mr. Chairman, Madam Vice Chair, members of the Committee, thank you again for the opportunity to testify here today. I look forward to your questions.