

June 21, 2022

United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Richard Blumenthal
The Honorable Cory Booker
The Honorable Bill Cassidy
The Honorable Chris Coons
The Honorable Lindsey Graham
The Honorable Mark Kelly
The Honorable Joe Manchin
The Honorable Rob Portman
The Honorable Kyrsten Sinema
The Honorable Thom Tillis

The Honorable Roy Blunt
The Honorable Richard Burr
The Honorable Susan Collins
The Honorable John Cornyn
The Honorable Martin Heinrich
The Honorable Angus King
The Honorable Chris Murphy
The Honorable Mitt Romney
The Honorable Debbie Stabenow
The Honorable Pat Toomey

Dear Senators:

We join in your heartbreak as once again our nation faces tragedies of mass gun violence. We commend your determination to ensure that this time is different—this time, long awaited action that addresses the epidemic of gun violence will follow and work to stop another atrocity from occurring.

As one of the country's leading children's groups, First Focus Campaign for Children writes to you today to offer our support in passing meaningful gun safety reform. **Gun violence is now the leading cause of child death in the United States.** We should all be horrified by this fact and join together to protect our children.

As you engage in discussions and writing of this legislation we encourage you to listen to the experts—those in academia and those in directly affected communities—and implement policy recommendations being asked for by advocates, people with lived experiences, and violence prevention researchers.

The following policies are largely accepted and being advocated for across these communities. In a recent letter from leaders of the public health and medicine community, members of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine wrote:

“There is good scientific evidence for policies that would work to reduce deaths from firearms and simultaneously protect the rights of law-abiding gun owners. We believe that the science can guide us to policies to achieve both of these objectives. These include:

- First, we need to keep firearms out of the hands of those most likely to commit violent crimes. Prohibiting all firearm purchases and transfers to individuals who have committed violent crimes or have domestic violence restraining orders has been shown to work. Implementing this and other measures requires universal background checks.
- Second, firearms recently surpassed car crashes to become the leading cause of death among American children. Child access prevention and safe gun storage laws protect our children and families from gun suicides and unintentional gun deaths.

- Third, all states have driver licensing and training requirements for obvious safety reasons. Firearm licensing and training requirements are similarly needed, especially for people obtaining guns for the first time, and have been shown to reduce gun homicide, suicide, and mass shootings.
- Finally, the deadliest mass shootings are fueled by the use of firearms with large-capacity magazines. Evidence supports taking action on large-capacity magazines as a way to significantly lower deaths in mass shootings.”

As child advocates, in addition to uplifting policy, we have a responsibility to encourage the inclusion of children as an impacted community in determining policy, raise awareness of the importance in examining secondary messaging and stigmatization that can occur through legislation, and bring to your attention potential harms that could occur to children if a whole-child perspective is not taken in negotiating the provisions of this legislation.

Listen to children, survivors, and impacted individuals

The kids must be heard. Children and youth are speaking up with incredible strength to ensure that this unnecessary violence comes to a stop. We must honor this courage and determination and lean in to what they are saying. Far too often, adults fail to listen to young people. It is their lives, their experience, their best interests, and their safety that must be heard, addressed, and turned into purposeful policy.

“Because I don’t want it to happen again.” - Miah Cerrillo, Uvalde, Texas

“I am unbelievably angry, but I’m not going to turn my anger into hate. I’m going to channel that anger, and I’m going to create some real change.” - Jazmin Cazares, Uvalde, Texas

“Love is a combination of care, commitment, knowledge, responsibility, respect, and trust. Many of our politicians approach stages with only one of those ingredients. We are demanding that politicians love and that requires all six of those ingredients.” - RuQuan Brown

Avoid stigmatizing youth and mental health

Legislation not only changes policy, but also sends a message about our values as a nation. The question of *who* or *what* we are naming as the threat to children’s safety is extremely important. Children are not the threat. Individuals with mental health diagnoses are not the threat.

It is a culture that provides easy unchecked access to guns, including weapons of war, without regard for the impact on children’s lives that is the leading issue. We must name the true threat and make children’s best interests the strong foundation that guides all policy decisions.

We whole-heartedly support increased resources and focus on youth mental health in federal policy, but we want to be clear that these efforts will not prevent mass shootings. They are necessary for countless other reasons, but mental health investments cannot be used in place of meaningful action on guns.

Take a whole-child approach to stop further harm

We share the urgency to enact change. Gun safety reform is long overdue and we must deliver a policy package that addresses this issue immediately. In doing so, however, we urge you to maintain your commitment to children. The core motivation of this package is to protect our children, and we urge you to carry that focus as provisions of the package are determined and written. Efforts to protect children from gun violence cannot be the reason for increased harm in other aspects of their lives.

“School hardening”, police presence in schools (SROs), and increased surveillance leads to a criminalized environment that has significant consequences for students, particularly Black and brown students and students with disabilities. [Research shows](#) that these practices are ineffective at preventing shootings. Furthermore, [students are more likely to be targeted for punitive discipline](#), and even arrested over minor

disciplinary instances. The number of SROs in schools has seen a consistent upward trend in the last few decades, while so many of these schools lack nurses, counselors, or school psychologists. We must work to create in schools an atmosphere of compassionate support for all students. “School hardening” policies are contradictory to those goals and are ineffective at stemming shootings.

We also wish to express our privacy concerns for children and youth. Our nation’s children are facing an increased mental health crisis. We should be encouraging mental health services and counseling. Any policy that may lead to decreased use of services due to privacy concerns, or how those records may be used in the future, should be reevaluated. This concern for privacy extends to children involved in the youth justice space. Records in the juvenile justice system are often sealed or expunged as our justice system and country hold a belief that children have the right for the mistakes of their youth to not follow them into adulthood. We hope that any gun reform efforts would carry that same value in its implementation.

We thank the working group’s leadership in providing a bipartisan agreement to protect our children. Please consider First Focus Campaign for Children a resource in advancing meaningful and effective gun violence prevention legislation.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bruce Lesley". The signature is fluid and cursive, with "Bruce" on the top line and "Lesley" on the bottom line.

Bruce Lesley
President