

State of Play: Gun Violence Prevention

What Happened in the 89th Texas Legislature and What Comes Next

Gun violence is a uniquely American problem. While crime rates fluctuate due to a variety of factors, the United States continues to be an outlier in firearms deaths and gun culture, with the mass shooting epidemic in particular demonstrating the shocking potential for violence in American society. In a time when people feel divided and tensions are rising, faith communities have to continue to take violence prevention measures seriously. More is needed than just thoughts and prayers.

Falling Interpersonal Violence, Rising Deaths of Despair

The United States is one of the most violent high-income countries in the world. In 2025, more than 40,000 people were shot—15,000 of whom were killed—which adds up to more than 110 people shot every day. Firearms remain the leading cause of death among children in the United States, and there is an average of more than one mass shooting each day.

At the same time, 2025 marked a continuing decline in gun violence. All types of violent crime, not just murder, have continued to decrease nationally since 2021 (post COVID). Homicides, shooting injuries, and mass shootings have hit record lows.

“Many cities saw historically low numbers. Among them: Chicago recorded its fewest killings since 1965, and Philadelphia tallied its lowest homicide total since 1966. Homicides in Baltimore were down to a 50-year low. New York saw its fewest shootings in the city’s recorded history. Oklahoma City and Denver both saw some of their lowest homicide rates since 1990.” - The Trace

However, as interpersonal gun violence plummets, suicides soar. 2025 is projected to be the deadliest year in American history for firearm suicide.

The Texas Legislature: Prioritizing Access over Safety

The 89th Texas Legislative Session proved to be a challenging session for gun violence prevention measures. While many pieces of dangerous legislation were stopped, many priorities that would address gun violence were ignored. Here is a breakdown of what happened last year.

Preempting Gun Violence Prevention Initiatives

Gun Buybacks

Gun buyback programs are local initiatives in which municipalities purchase guns from their citizens, typically in the form of grocery store gift cards. While these programs do not show evidence of decreasing violent crime, they do provide an opportunity for communities to discuss firearm safety, provide an accessible and safe space for citizens to get rid of unwanted guns, and raise awareness of violence prevention resources. HB 3053 by Rep. Virdell prohibited municipalities from engaging in gun buyback programs.

Red Flag Laws

Red flag laws are legislative tools that allow mental health professionals and law enforcement to temporarily remove firearms from individuals who have proven to be a credible threat to themselves and/or others. They are active in more than 20 states and show evidence of preventing suicides and mass shootings. SB 1362 by Sen. Hughes made it illegal to enforce red flag laws placed on individuals from other states, allowing those individuals—who were deemed by another state to be too dangerous to possess a firearm—to obtain and carry them in Texas.

Foster Care

As a part of certifying foster homes, the Department of Family Protective Services and third-party providers have to verify the safety of potential foster parents, including whether or not they possess firearms and store them properly. HB 1403 by Rep. Harris prohibited such verification processes from ascertaining the number and type of firearms potential foster parents have, seriously raising questions about the effectiveness of providers' ability to verify that firearms are stored in compliance with regulations.

Deregulating Short-Barreled Rifles

Though definitions are debated, short-barreled rifles generally describe a large category of firearms that tend to have power comparable to rifles, but in smaller, more compact forms. These firearms are regulated more closely due to their concealability. Previously, it was a felony to possess short-barreled rifles unless properly registered with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives. SB 1596 by Sen. Hagenbuch removed short-barreled rifles from the list of prohibited weapons in Texas, ending such a requirement.

What Didn't Pass: Wins and Losses

Dangerous Bills that Failed

There was a major push this session to expand who and where people could carry firearms. Sensitive areas, like schools and hospitals, were targeted, mostly based on the unsubstantiated claim that “good guys with guns” reduce crime.

Expanding Where

- HB 1794 by Rep. Tepper would have allowed individuals to carry concealed handguns at polling locations.
- HB 4201 by Rep. Schatzline would have allowed individuals to carry concealed handguns at schools, courtrooms, and hospitals.
- SB 82 by Sen. Hall would have made private businesses that prohibit firearms liable for damages if there is a criminal act on their premises.
- SB 1065 by Sen. Hall, which was filed in direct response to the lawsuit concerning the State Fair’s ban on guns following a shooting the year prior, would have prohibited private businesses that are using public land from prohibiting firearms on their premises. This would have included locations such as concert venues as well.

Expanding Who

- HB 2470 by Rep. Virdell would have lowered the age to get a license to carry a handgun to 18 years old.
- HB 2066 by Rep. Virdell would have expunged the records of individuals who illegally carried firearms but were placed under community supervision, allowing them to potentially retain the right to carry.
- HB 2771 by Rep. Hayes would have allowed the majority of felons (excluding some violent felonies, but certainly not all) to possess firearms.

Several of these bills made it much farther in the legislative process than Texas Impact and our allies were comfortable with, especially SB 1065, which nearly passed both chambers. Other bills were part of a large package of gun bills that originated from the House and were met by significant opposition from Texas Impact’s faith communities and coalition partners. Though this package of bills ultimately failed last session, they show a concerning willingness to continue to deregulate firearms in any and all spaces.

Ignored Priorities

Many pieces of legislation addressing gun violence were filed, but most did not make it far.

- HB 36 by Rep. Bowers would have addressed major gaps in protections for domestic violence by creating a robust tracking system for repeat or high-risk offenders.

- Failed in the Senate after passing the House.
- HB 865 by Rep. Moody would have created legal protections for firearm hold agreements, creating a safe storage option for gun owners experiencing a mental health crisis. Failed in the Senate after passing the House.
- SB 872 by Sen. Birdwell would have increased the penalty for firearm theft from a vehicle, which has become a major problem in Texas as part of larger gun trafficking. Failed in the House after passing the Senate.
- HB 230 by Rep. Rosenthal would have created the Texas Office of Violence Prevention, explicitly focusing on reducing violence in our communities. Failed to get a hearing.

HB 1556 by Rep. Moody was one of many bills that would have raised the age to buy semi-automatic rifles to 21 years old. HB 1556 was a refile from the prior legislative session, and it continued to be the main priority of the families from Uvalde who lost their children in the Rob Elementary school shooting. Failed to get a hearing.

Despite the failure of HB 1556, the many in the Texas Legislature will still claim that the Robb Elementary School shooting was addressed by HB 33, otherwise known as the Uvalde Strong Act, by Rep. McLaughlin, the newest representative from Uvalde.

HB 33 focuses on increasing communication between school districts and local law enforcement, heightened school security planning, and a variety of other things that, for the most part, were already addressed in HB 3 from the session prior. These measures, while not explicitly harmful, fall short of addressing the concerns voiced by the families from Uvalde.

Federal Effects on Violence Prevention

Despite the demonstrated success of public health approaches to gun violence, the Trump administration has largely placed public health at the end of the list of its priorities, focusing more on immigration enforcement. Contrary to claims made by the administration, the militarization of cities using both ICE and the National Guard in areas like Washington D.C. shows little to no evidence of decreasing crime. In fact, the diversion of federal resources and manpower to mass deportation efforts is actively undermining other violence prevention measures.

As the Department of Homeland Security pursues deportations, drug arrests have decreased by 11%, and gun seizures have plummeted by 73%. Additionally, ICE's partnership with local police, supported by state-mandated 287(g) agreements, has shifted police resources and manpower from combating violent crime to deporting immigrants with no criminal record.

This is a far cry from the previous administration's approach to gun violence, as demonstrated by the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act of 2022. The bill, as well as other initiatives by the Biden administration, tackled key policy priorities, such as cracking down on gun trafficking, investing in mental health in schools, and funding red flag laws. Gun trafficking in particular has been most often combated by illegalizing straw

purchases and cracking down on gun stores that are not proactive in abiding by the law.

Though the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act has made significant strides to improve public health, it is struggling to counteract current federal and state measures. Texas' "Anti-Red Flag Law", paired with its defunding of public schools, goes beyond counteracting aspects of the federal legislation and actively worsens Texas' public safety apparatus. Other aspects—such as punishment for straw purchasing—being just in federal statute and only enforceable by the federal government, require a state bill in order to be more widely and effectively enforced.

While expanding firearm access does not seem to be high on the list of the Trump administration's priorities as compared to state legislatures, the administration has consistently gutted public health funding. A total of 373 grants (affecting 221 organizations and totaling \$819.7 million in award value) were cut from the Department of Justice's programs, while the Department of Education has been entirely eliminated through executive order.

Political Violence

The effects of attacks on public health and regulatory measures are especially concerning as the United States is undergoing a particularly violent moment in its political history. Not only is political violence growing in popularity among Americans, but it continues to be readily accessible. Sporadic attempts at assassinations and spreading terror have created no victories for either side. Much in the same way that CVI seeks to end the cycle of reciprocal violence, so too should Americans seek to keep violence out of politics. Unfortunately, violent rhetoric mixed with accessibility to firearms makes for a political environment propense to violence.

Christian Nationalist political rhetoric, specifically rhetoric that romanticizes the armed individual, has also contributed to attacks against its greatest proponents. This political minefield has proven deadly for many, including Charlie Kirk and President Donald Trump, who served as clear examples of the indiscriminate dangers of both violent political rhetoric and easy access to firearms.

The Imbalance between Liberty and Public Safety

While many faith communities support gun ownership, it is also understood that firearms are dangerous tools that, without certain guardrails and training, can lead to deadly consequences. Firearms provide access to an immediate source of power over one's neighbors, one that must be balanced with responsibility and diligence.

Even with the majority of gun owners being responsible citizens, the lack of responsible legislation allows bad actors to continue to exploit firearm laws, much to the deep pain of the rest of society. The imbalance between individual liberty and public safety has dipped into the extreme that disregards common-sense policy supported by

academia, health care professionals, and survivors.

Though Texas claims public safety as a forefront issue, firearms and gun violence don't appear to be a priority. The Texas Legislature continues to double down on policy that, at its best, hinders violence prevention initiatives, and, at its worst, exacerbates the problem.

Policy Opportunities for Violence Reduction in Texas

Public health advocates' policy priorities—such as universal background checks, raising the age, and extreme risk protection orders—have been extremely difficult to pass. Despite overwhelming popularity and evidential support, these policies have not only seen stagnation but regression in the Texas legislature.

As Christian Nationalism continues to grow not only in Texas but in the Southern United States, these popular and evidence-based policies continue to be a long-term fight rather than a passable agenda. What were previously far-right fringe positions have entered the mainstream. Bills mandating the display of the Ten Commandments in classrooms, financially pressuring cash-strapped public schools to adopt a Christian curriculum, and statements by the Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton to place prayers back in school are a few examples of the extreme lengths Christian Nationalism has pushed the Texas Legislature.

Religious fundamentalism has also coincided with the rise of a pseudo-warrior culture, which has romanticized ideas of self-defense that actively harm evidence-based public safety measures. The idea that a society full of armed and atomized individuals ready to defend themselves is preferable to one that focuses on fostering community has been strongly pushed by conservative activists like the NRA.

More guns do not make us safer. The presence of guns in the home actually increases the inhabitant(s) likelihood of dying in the home, especially due to suicide and domestic violence risks. In the same vein, the high presence of guns in our society has not correlated with a decrease in violence and death. It is in this same society that gun rights activists die by guns and NRA-backed politicians suffer its effects as well. Gun violence hurts us all.

Despite the uphill battle at the Texas Legislature, there are still immediate policy opportunities to address crimes of despair.

Though it is motivated by mental illness, suicide is facilitated by firearm access. Suicides can be combatted by increasing funds for both state and school mental health resources. However, even in environments lacking a robust mental health infrastructure, effective, safe storage and gun safety education can be the determining factor in preventing suicides and accidental shootings.

These policies have the potential to affect mass shootings. While mass shootings grab the attention of both politicians and advocates, suicides remain the majority of gun deaths both nationally and statewide. In fact, mass shootings themselves are typically suicidal events. In most instances, the shooter either plans to commit suicide or be killed in the process of committing a mass shooting. Tools that address suicide, like stronger mental health and crisis intervention resources, can be effective in reducing mass shootings as well.

Amid increasing suicides and Christian Nationalist tendencies, strengthening safe storage and improving gun safety education is a key policy focus. Safe storage is a nonpartisan policy that decreases gun violence without restricting gun ownership and protects those who are at higher risk of suicide, like veterans. Police departments often collaborate on safe storage initiatives by handing out gun locks and gun safes, as well as hosting events on gun safety.

While these policies alone will not solve America's gun violence problem, they do provide an immediate direction for potential policy goals in Texas.

Community Violence Intervention: The Importance of Prevention, not Reaction

Community Violence Intervention (CVI) is one of the most effective nonpartisan approaches to combating violence. CVI staff work directly in communities and areas that are at the highest risk of violence by educating, mentoring, and intervening before violence occurs. CVI workers come from within the community themselves, often having experienced violence or incarceration firsthand.

The effectiveness of CVI goes beyond simply preventing violence. The communities that CVI organizations focus on are often neglected both socially and financially. CVI provides not only immediate, reactive intervention during potentially violent events (although this is a part of their work) but also a long-lasting presence in the community through education and mentorship of youth at higher risk of violence.

CVI, despite receiving state funding, is currently in a financially precarious position. Last session, the Texas Legislature set aside \$1 million per year in both 2026 and 2027 in the state budget for CVI programs. Although the Texas Legislature may recognize CVI as a component of a robust public health infrastructure, the funding is wildly insufficient. This is especially true as CVI programs nationally are experiencing significant financial strain due to the federal government's cut of grant programs for public health and violence prevention initiatives.

CVI remains one of the most promising investments in public health and requires greater funding in the years to come. In 2025, interpersonal violence continued to decrease significantly. Although there are a plethora of factors that influence violent crimes, many experts agree that CVI programs have played a significant part in that decline.

Summary

Despite national historic decreases in interpersonal violence, violence prevention continues to be in a precarious position in Texas. Necessary public health infrastructure is underfunded at both the state and federal levels. Ideology, particularly Christian Nationalism, has made passing common-sense violence prevention legislation more difficult. However, by focusing on CVI funding and awareness, as well as gun safety and safe storage, we can make significant strides in reducing death and promoting public health.