

## Taking Action to Build a Safer North Carolina

*Roy Cooper*

Children in North Carolina deserve happy, healthy childhoods, and we focus on working to make sure they have good food, see doctors regularly, and even brush their teeth to give them the right start. But a growing threat to their safety has created a public health crisis for children and adults: firearm deaths.

Five North Carolinians die every day from a firearm and more than 1700 people in North Carolina died by firearm in 2020 [1]. Shockingly, gunfire has surpassed car accidents as the number one cause of injury deaths for children. A recent report found that in 2021, children in North Carolina were 51% more likely to die from gun violence than children in the United States as a whole [2].

Violence is a significant public safety and public health threat, not only because of injury and death but also because of the fear and trauma it inflicts on families and communities. Gun violence, whether intentional (murder or suicide) or unintentional (a child discharging an unsecured firearm) leaves families, communities, and law enforcement begging for answers.

There are solutions that work. There are effective strategies to combat violence that can be coordinated across state and local government, law enforcement, public health, health care, and community organizations.

Many people across the state are already taking action.

North Carolina communities have been leading the way using innovative thinking like safe gun storage initiatives, law enforcement and community partnerships, and community violence programs that intervene with individuals most likely to commit violence. State agencies like the Governor's Crime Commission, the Department of Justice, the Department of Public Safety, and the Department of Health and Human Services have launched efforts to prevent violence and firearm misuse.

As Governor, I am committed to building a safer North Carolina and stopping violent crime. By applying proven, evidence-based solutions, we can reduce it. I'm going to continue to push for better laws to make life safer for brave law enforcement officers and everyday people by keeping guns away from children, criminals, and those who are a danger to themselves or others. In meetings across the state with sheriffs, police chiefs, mayors, doctors, emergency responders, and public health leaders, I've heard time and again how important it is to promote smart, safe gun ownership. It's sobering to hear their stories. One emergency physician told me, "It changes your life when you're putting pressure on a bullet wound in a four-year-old." It's clear this violence is unacceptable. I have directed the Crime Commission and Task Force for Racial Equity to focus on violence-prevention efforts and we are seeking

funding from the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act [3] to expand these initiatives.

Even with a legislature unwilling to enact needed reform, we're using effective tools at our disposal to ensure a whole-of-government approach to reducing violence. We have launched a firearm safe-storage campaign to help gun owners keep their guns out of the wrong hands. We created the Office of Violence Prevention, a first in the South [4]. This office will help address violence in a comprehensive way grounded in public health and in partnership with law enforcement. It will serve as our coordinated group of leaders who wake up every day and think about how we can meet the challenge of violence in our communities. The goal of this office is to promote local success in violence prevention by improving data collection and sharing, offering technical assistance to local officials, promoting collaboration and sharing of best practices, and managing grant programs to direct available federal funding to law enforcement and community-based organizations focused on reducing gun violence.

One real-life example of how medical professionals can help: Just as pediatricians ask parents about children's seatbelt wearing and vaccinations, they should educate gun owners about storing their weapons safely out of reach.

But more must be done, and it is past time to come together for real action. We can, and must, find common ground and reduce violence in our communities. All of us want safe, healthy communities, and stopping violence will require collaboration between medical professionals,

law enforcement, community leaders, our faith-based and nonprofit organizations, our research institutions, our government leaders, and a lot more. NCMJ

Roy Cooper NC Governor, Raleigh, North Carolina.

#### Acknowledgments

Disclosure of interests. The author serves as the Governor of North Carolina. No further interests were disclosed.

#### References

1. *Keeping Families and Communities Safe: Public Health Approaches to Reduce Violence and Firearm Misuse Leading to Injury and Death*. North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services. Published November 2022. Accessed May 10, 2023. <https://www.ncdhhs.gov/public-health-approaches-reduce-violence-and-firearm-misuse-leading-injury-and-death/open>
2. *Annual Report to the Governor and General Assembly*. North Carolina Child Fatality Task Force. Published February 2023. Accessed May 10, 2023. [https://webservices.ncleg.gov/ViewDocSiteFile/75628?mc\\_cid=674a134d43&mc\\_eid=9238f9498c](https://webservices.ncleg.gov/ViewDocSiteFile/75628?mc_cid=674a134d43&mc_eid=9238f9498c)
3. Bipartisan Safer Communities Act. Office of Elementary & Secondary Education, United States Department of Education. Updated April 12, 2023. Accessed May 10, 2023. <https://oese.ed.gov/bipartisan-safer-communities-act/>
4. Governor Cooper Signs Executive Order Establishing State Office of Violence Prevention. News release. North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper. Published March 14, 2023. Accessed May 10, 2023. <https://governor.nc.gov/news/press-releases/2023/03/14/governor-cooper-signs-executive-order-establishing-state-office-violence-prevention>

---

Electronically published July 5, 2023.

Address correspondence to 20301 Mail Service Center, Raleigh, NC 27699-0301 (govpress@nc.gov).

N C Med J. 2023;84(4):212-213. ©2023 by the North Carolina Institute of Medicine and The Duke Endowment. All rights reserved. 0029-2559/2023/84406