

Lock Them Up?

In the United States, toddlers accidentally shoot someone about once per week—often seriously injuring, or even killing, themselves or other children.¹ This represents just a small fraction of the cases in which children and teens get their hands on firearms every year. In most such cases, youth access guns in their homes or in places that they visit because these guns are not safely stored. Safety experts urge gun owners to obey certain rules when storing their firearms: when not in use guns should be kept in locked cabinets, safes, or cases; they should be stored unloaded and away from ammunition; and they should be rendered inoperable, through the use of trigger locks or cable locks, or by disassembling them. Despite these warnings, more than half of American gun owners do not follow these guidelines, instead keeping operable firearms (often loaded) in nightstands, desk drawers, closets, under mattresses, in vehicles, or out in plain sight.² Millions of children and teens live in homes with unsecured guns and most children know where guns in their homes are kept.³

In an attempt to promote more responsible gun ownership practices, some people advocate for safe storage laws. Massachusetts, for example, requires that all firearms be safely stored; owners who do not properly secure their firearms can be fined or face jail time. Other cities and states have “child access prevention” laws that, while fall short of demanding all guns be safely secured, require gun owners to make sure that minors cannot access their guns.

Advocates of these laws see this as a safety issue, and an important strategy for reducing gun injuries and deaths. First, they argue, by keeping guns out of reach of children, these laws would help to reduce the number of unintentional shootings. Second, these laws would also help to reduce youth suicide. This is because those who try to kill themselves with guns are far more likely to die than those who attempt suicide through other means, and most youth who attempt suicide by gun obtain that gun in their own homes. The Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence reports that “Guns are used in just 9% of youth suicides in Massachusetts, compared to 39% of suicides nationally, and the overall suicide death rate among youth in Massachusetts is 35% below the national average.”⁴ Third, proponents argue, these laws could reduce the number of school shootings, since the perpetrators of these shootings tend to use guns obtained from their homes or from close relatives. And finally, not only do safe storage provisions prevent young people from accessing guns, many safe storage strategies are also effective precautions against gun theft. Since most guns that enter the black market are stolen from homes and cars, requiring individuals to lock their guns up could be a step in the direction of making illegal guns harder to obtain.

Many gun enthusiasts balk at such legislation. For instance, the NRA sued Seattle after the city enacted a safe storage law.⁵ Many critics argue that these laws violate the rights of gun owners. According to one common argument, when guns are locked away in safes or rendered inoperable by trigger locks, then one cannot easily use them for personal security in emergencies—such as if an intruder breaks into one’s home. In other words, these laws may conflict with gun owners’ right to defend themselves and their families from violent threats. Moreover, according to critics, gun safety is better promoted by teaching children not to play with guns. Ultimately, if unsecured firearms pose a risk to children and others, it is the right of the gun owner, not the government, to determine how to best balance their interest in protecting their family from external threats and the danger that unsecured weapons pose.⁶

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What does it mean to be a responsible gun owner? What makes a gun owner responsible or irresponsible?
2. Do safe storage laws violate gun owners’ right to self-defense? Why or why not?
3. What responsibilities do parents have to make sure that their children are not able to access guns in their homes or in places they visit?

¹ <https://www.denverpost.com/2017/09/30/toddler-shootings-guns/>

² <https://www.jhsph.edu/news/news-releases/2018/survey-more-than-half-of-u-s-gun-owners-do-not-safely-store-their-guns.html>

³ <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/gun-laws/policy-areas/child-consumer-safety/child-access-prevention/>

⁴ <https://lawcenter.giffords.org/gun-laws/policy-areas/child-consumer-safety/safe-storage/>

⁵ <https://thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/398244-nra-sues-seattle-over-safe-storage-gun-legislation>

⁶ <https://www.nra.org/articles/19990729/mandatory-storage-trigger-lock-legislat>

