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Firearms a leading cause of death of TN children. Here's what we should do

David Weatherspoon Guest Columnist

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Key Points

Firearms are the leading cause of death for children in Tennessee, surpassing motor vehicle accidents.

A nonpartisan group advocates for temporary transfer laws, comprehensive background checks, and secure storage policies.

Tennessee ranks first in the nation for stolen firearms, many of which are taken from unoccupied vehicles.

Polls indicate that a majority of Tennesseans across party lines support common-sense gun legislation.

The families I serve as a pediatric hospital chaplain arrive in my care because one day their child is diagnosed with a potentially fatal disease. The disease threatening their children is unforeseeable, and no amount of sheltering and protection could have prevented the battle with which they are now faced.

As a former emergency room chaplain in a children's hospital, I saw too many children brought into the ER with debilitating injuries caused by gunshot wounds and witnessed the heartbreak when a child died from a lethal gunshot.

The tragedy and heartache of the affected families in each instance are devastating, but there is a critical difference. Most of the gunshot cases involving children are preventable.

Firearms leading cause of death of TN children

Unlike the years of intricate research and clinical trials required to develop treatments or cure a disease, many of the answers to addressing firearm injuries and fatalities are straightforward. [Voices for a Safer Tennessee](#), a nonpartisan organization formed in the wake of the Covenant School mass shooting, advocates for just three common-sense policies: temporary transfer laws, comprehensive background checks, and secure storage.

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Temporary transfer laws allow law enforcement to petition a judge for the right to temporarily transfer firearms from a person who presents an imminent risk to themselves or another person. For a judge to agree, law enforcement must meet the high standard of presenting “clear and convincing evidence.” At a hearing before the judge, the owner of the firearms has a right to retain and be represented by counsel. If the judge orders the temporary transfer, depending on the specifics of the law, the firearms can be held in a law enforcement evidence locker, by a trusted family member or friend, or by a licensed firearms dealer. When the crisis has passed, those firearms are returned to the owner.

In Tennessee, private firearms sales in person, online, or at a gun show are not required to undergo a background check. Without a background check, felons, those with mental illness, and domestic abusers can subvert the federally required background check performed by licensed firearms dealers.

Safely storing firearms

Ten years after the legislature passed a law allowing firearms to be stored in an unoccupied vehicle, Tennessee ranks first in stolen firearms. Memphis ranks first among major cities with approximately 546 stolen firearms per 100,000 residents. A safe storage law would require actually locking the firearm in a separate container and establish incentives for complying with the law. According to the Memphis

Police Department, as many as 40% of the guns seized during arrests are stolen, and those guns are being used to perpetrate crimes in our community.

Consistently, Tennesseans support sensible gun legislation. The semi-annual Vanderbilt University poll found that 78% support temporary transfer and 69% back safe storage. Majority support cuts across partisan lines.

But what about the Second Amendment?

I grew up on a farm in Hickman County, and my father and brother were law enforcement officers. Guns have always been a part of my life. Owning a gun is a right we enjoy as Americans, but with rights come responsibilities. Ownership of a firearm should include safeguards for fellow citizens, especially for the most vulnerable.

Not everyone sees it that way, and, unfortunately, society cannot count on some of its fellow citizens to take the necessary steps to protect children from being wounded or worse. However, the state legislature can, if they have the courage to stand up to the gun lobby.

Laws like temporary transfer, comprehensive background checks, and safe storage are not precursors to government confiscation of firearms or Orwellian-type despotism. They are reasonable, evidence-based solutions to the number one killer of children in our state, and the will of the overwhelming majority of citizens. These measured policy approaches are common ground for Republicans, Democrats, and Independents; urban, rural, and suburban residents; and East, Middle, and West Tennesseans. Most importantly, they are in the best interest of those who rely on us the most -- our children.

*David Weatherspoon has served as a chaplain in pediatric hospitals and in higher education for 20 years. He is a co-author of the book *The Peace Class* and taught nonviolence as a form of conflict resolution for seven years. He is running for the *TN state Senate in District 31*.*

