

Preventing Firearm Related Deaths and Injuries in the United States of America

Position Statement of the Sacramento Chapter of Physicians for Social Responsibility

Firearm-related deaths and injuries are a serious public health problem in the United States. The rate of gun violence is many times higher in the United States than in other economically advanced democratic nations. While the roots of gun violence are complex, the factors that most clearly distinguish the United States from other countries with much lower rates of firearm related deaths and injuries are the weak gun control laws in the United States and the associated widespread availability of firearms. Handguns account for the majority of all firearm related deaths and injuries in the USA. Although most people who keep handguns in their homes cite personal protection as the reason for having them, there is overwhelming evidence that guns in the home are much more likely to be used to kill, injure, or intimidate a household member than to protect against an intruder. Semiautomatic firearms that are designed to rapidly kill or maim large numbers of enemy combatants have been used in a rash of recent mass shootings, including the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre in December, 2012, the San Bernardino terrorist attack in 2015, and the Pulse nightclub mass shooting in June of 2016. The Sacramento Chapter of Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR/Sacramento) believes that there is no legitimate civilian use for such weapons.

The Second Amendment to the United States Constitution states, “A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.” Prior to 2008, it had been repeatedly established in Supreme Court decisions, in decisions of lower courts, and in reviews by legal scholars that the Second Amendment was intended to protect a collective right of the people to maintain armed state militias, such as the current day National Guard, not a right of individual citizens to own firearms. PSR/Sacramento regrets that a narrow one justice majority of the current Supreme Court reversed decades of legal precedent in ruling in 2008 and again in 2010 that the Second Amendment confers an individual right to keep handguns in the home “for protection.” PSR/Sacramento believes that the self-evident right of the people of the United States to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness includes the right to be free from the threat of wanton gun violence.

It is PSR/Sacramento’s position that the rates of firearm related deaths and injuries in the United States can and should be reduced to levels at or below the rates in other economically advanced democratic countries, and that in order to accomplish this goal, we must adopt comparable gun control laws. Such laws include stringent regulation, if not complete bans, on civilian ownership of handguns and semi-automatic rifles. In order to ban or stringently regulate handgun ownership, the 2008 Heller and 2010 McDonald decisions by the Supreme Court must first be overturned. PSR/Sacramento further believes that stringent regulation of civilian ownership of firearms should be accompanied by stringent regulation of the use of lethal force by law enforcement officers.

At the same time that we work toward definitive gun control legislation, PSR/Sacramento also agrees with taking short-term, incremental steps toward reducing rates of firearm related deaths and injuries that have been proposed by other organizations, including banning assault weapons and high capacity magazines, expanding criteria for persons prohibited from owning firearms, closing loopholes for background checks, restoring federal funding for scientific study of preventing firearm related deaths and injuries, and rescinding special protection from products liability for the firearm industry. PSR/Sacramento also encourages its members and other health care professionals to counsel patients regarding the dangers of guns in their homes and in our communities and to continue to work to address the root causes of violence in our society.