

UNLOAD, LOCK, AND SEPARATE: SECURE STORAGE PRACTICES TO REDUCE GUN VIOLENCE

Three-year-old Brayden Heath found his mother's handgun in the living room of their home in Anchorage, Alaska. Brayden was playing with the gun when it discharged, shooting him in the head. He was taken to a local hospital and pronounced dead later that day.¹

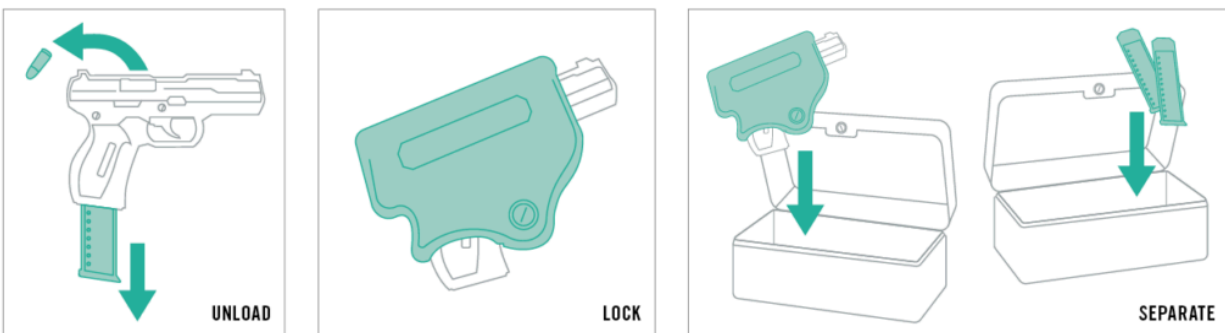
Introduction

There are an estimated 393 million civilian-owned firearms in the United States,² and more than one-third of homes contain at least one gun.³ Responsible gun owners can make our homes and communities safer by storing their firearms unloaded and locked, with ammunition kept in a separate place, to prevent access by children and other people who are at risk of harming themselves or others. Research shows that these storage practices can play a vital role in reducing the risk of gun violence, particularly among children, due to unintentional shootings and gun suicides.⁴

The bottom line is this: Storing firearms unloaded, locked, and separate from ammunition prevents access and saves lives.

What is secure firearm storage?

Experts agree: In order to prevent access, secure gun storage practices should include three methods employed in combination—unloading the ammunition, locking the firearm, and storing the firearm and ammunition in separate locations.⁵



UNLOAD

Gun owners should remove all ammunition from the firearm, including removing any chambered rounds

LOCK

Unloaded firearms should be secured with a firearm locking device, such as a cable lock, or in a locked location, like a safe or lock box. Locking devices, safes, and lock boxes are equipped with keys, combinations, or biometric technology that limit access. *Remember: Firearm locks do not prevent gun theft.*

SEPARATE

Ammunition should be stored separately from the firearm in a secure location.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) concludes that the absence of guns from homes is the most reliable and effective measure to prevent suicide, homicide, and unintentional firearm-related injuries to children and adolescents. But if there are guns in the home, AAP notes that storing guns unloaded and locked, with ammunition kept in a separate place, can mitigate the risk of child firearm injury.⁶

Key Findings

Access to unsecured firearms contributes to gun violence among children and teens. Brayden's tragic story is all too common.⁷ Every year, nearly 360 children under the age of 18 unintentionally shoot themselves or someone else. That's roughly one unintentional shooting per day, and more than 70 percent of these incidents take place in or around a home.⁸ More than 700 children die by gun suicide each year,⁹ most often using guns belonging to a family member.¹⁰ Unsecured firearms also fuel gun violence outside the home. In incidents of school violence, the US Secret Service found that three-quarters of school shooters acquired their firearm from the home of a parent or close relative.¹¹

We are all safer when guns are stored unloaded, locked, and separate from ammunition. One study found that households that locked both firearms and ammunition were associated with a 78 percent lower risk of self-inflicted firearm injuries and an 85 percent lower risk of unintentional firearm injuries among children, compared to those that locked neither.¹² Another study estimated that if half of households with children that contain at least one unlocked gun switched to locking all their guns, one-third of youth gun suicides and unintentional deaths could be prevented, saving an estimated 251 lives in a single year.¹³

1/3

OF YOUTH SUICIDES
AND UNINTENTIONAL
DEATHS COULD BE PREVENTED
BY SECURING GUNS.

Despite the risks to safety, the majority of gun owners do not practice secure gun storage.

While millions of responsible gun owners follow recommended storage practices, an estimated 54 percent do not lock all of their guns, let alone store them unloaded, locked, and separate from ammunition.¹⁴ Gun owners with children in the home are slightly more likely to lock all of their guns,¹⁵ but an estimated 4.6 million American children live in households with at least one loaded and unlocked firearm.¹⁶

Contrary to popular belief, gun storage devices do not prevent owners from readily accessing their guns.

There is a common myth that storage devices negate the self-defense purpose of owning a gun by putting time-consuming barriers between the gun owner and their means of defense.¹⁷ The reality is that there are many affordable options for secure gun storage that provide owners with access to guns in a matter of seconds while still preventing access by children and people at increased risk of harming themselves or others.¹⁸ Further, it is possible that unsecured guns may actually *increase* the likelihood of crime and violence through an increased risk of gun theft. Each year, more than 200,000 guns are stolen—the majority from cars—and many are funneled into the underground market, where once-legally-owned firearms can be transferred to people with dangerous histories.¹⁹

Recommendations

Gun owners understand that with rights comes responsibility, and promoting secure firearm storage is integral to public safety. Community members should work together to encourage recommended firearm storage practices.

Community members and local leaders should encourage secure firearm storage through outreach to gun owners and general public awareness campaigns. Researchers, clinicians, and gun owners should work together to develop messaging and recommend storage options that are relevant to local values and context.²⁰

Research suggests that clinicians can positively influence secure storage practices, especially when they provide free storage devices.²¹

1. "Judge Sentences Morin to 18 Months in Jail for Death of Toddler in 2015," *KUUU*, February 2, 2017, <https://bit.ly/2Xqf1lr>.
2. Aaron Karp, "Estimating Global Civilian-Held Firearms Numbers," Small Arms Survey, June 2018, <https://bit.ly/3snZ9fH>.
3. Gun ownership reported in 34 percent of households. General Social Survey, 2018, Data Explorer. <https://bit.ly/2BZhtky>.
4. Michael C. Monuteaux, Deborah Azrael, and Matthew Miller, "Association of Increased Safe Household Firearm Storage with Firearm Suicide and Unintentional Death Among US Youths," *JAMA Pediatrics* 173, no. 7 (2019): 657–62, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2019.1078>.
5. US Government Accountability Office, "Personal Firearms: Programs That Promote Safe Storage and Research on Their Effectiveness," September 2017, <https://bit.ly/394UGFP>.
6. Council on Injury, Violence, and Poison Prevention Executive Committee, "Firearm-Related Injuries Affecting the Pediatric Population," *Pediatrics* 130, no. 5 (November 2012): e1416–23, <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2012-2481>.
7. Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, "#NotAnAccident Index," <https://everytownresearch.org/maps/notanaccident/>.
8. Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, "#NotAnAccident Index," <https://everytownresearch.org/maps/notanaccident/>. Average: 2015–2023; Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, "Preventable Tragedies: Findings from the #NotAnAccident Index," April 2023, <https://everytownresearch.org/report/notanaccident/>.
9. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, WONDER Online Database, Underlying Cause of Death. Average: 2018–2022. Ages 0–17.
10. Renee M. Johnson et al., "Who Are the Owners of Firearms Used in Adolescent Suicides?," *Suicide & Life-Threatening Behavior* 40, no. 6 (2010): 609–11, <https://doi.org/10.1521/suli.2010.40.6.609>. Study defined children as under the age of 18. Over 80 percent of children who died by gun suicide used a gun belonging to a family member.
11. National Threat Assessment Center, "Protecting America's Schools: A US Secret Service Analysis of Targeted School Violence," US Secret Service, Department of Homeland Security, 2019, <https://bit.ly/2U7vnwa>.
12. David C. Grossman et al., "Gun Storage Practices and Risk of Youth Suicide and Unintentional Firearm Injuries," *JAMA* 293, no. 6 (2005): 707–14, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.293.6.707>.
13. Monuteaux, Azrael, and Miller, "Safe Household Firearm Storage."
14. Cassandra K. Crifasi et al., "Storage Practices of US Gun Owners in 2016," *American Journal of Public Health* 108, no. 4 (2018): 532–37, <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2017.304262>.
15. Crifasi et al., "Storage Practices of US Gun Owners."
16. Matthew Miller and Deborah Azrael, "Firearm Storage in US Households with Children: Findings from the 2021 National Firearm Survey," *JAMA Network Open* 5, no. 2 (2022): e2148823, <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.48823>.
17. John R. Lott, Jr. and John E. Whitley, "Safe-Storage Gun Laws: Accidental Deaths, Suicides, and Crime," *Journal of Law and Economics* 44, no. 52 (October 2001), <https://doi.org/10.1086/338346>.
18. Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, "Guide to Secure Storage Devices," <https://besmartforkids.org/secure-gun-storage/resources/#guide-to-secure-gun-storage-devices>.
19. ATF, "National Firearms Commerce and Trafficking Assessment (NFTCA), Volume II: Crime Gun Intelligence and Analysis—Part V: Firearm Thefts," January 2023, <https://www.atf.gov/firearms/docs/report/nfcta-volume-ii-part-v-firearm-thefts/download>; Jay Szkola, Megan J. O'Toole, and Sarah Burd-Sharps, "Gun Thefts from Cars: The Largest Source of Stolen Guns," Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, May 9, 2024, <https://everytownresearch.org/report/gun-thefts-from-cars-the-largest-source-of-stolen-guns-2>.
20. Catherine Barber et al., "Suicide and Firearm Injury in Utah: Linking Data to Save Lives," Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, October 2018, <https://bit.ly/2HP2kG3>.
21. RAND Corporation, "Education Campaigns and Clinical Interventions for Promoting Safe Storage," March 2, 2018, <https://bit.ly/2KPD71h>.

