



## Guns & Domestic Violence: A Lethal Combination

In recent years, the Virginia General Assembly has recognized the risk that firearms pose to victims of sexual and domestic violence by enacting laws that prohibit the purchase, transport, or possession of firearms when a person is subject to a final 2-year protective order. As Virginia's leading voice on sexual and domestic violence, the Action Alliance supports policies that enact measures to remove firearms from these dangerous and potentially lethal situations and give law enforcement officers, prosecutors, and courts additional tools to enforce these measures to protect victims, their families, and the broader community.

### What are the connections between guns and domestic violence?

**Most intimate partner homicides in Virginia are committed with the use of a firearm.** In 2014, the Virginia Office of the Chief Medical Examiner reports that 64% of all intimate partner violence homicide victims were killed with a firearm. This is consistent with data from the Virginia Medical Examiner's 2010 report of a ten-year review of family and intimate partner homicide that revealed that 60.5% of all IPV homicide victims in Virginia were killed with a firearm.

**Most intimate partner homicides occur in the home.** In 2014, the Virginia Office of the Chief Medical Examiner reported that 83% of intimate partner homicides occurred in the home. The average for 2009-2014 shows that 78% of intimate partner homicides occurred in the home.

**Guns are frequently used in non-fatal domestic violence.** A study by Harvard School of Public Health concluded that "hostile gun displays against family members are more common than gun use in self-defense, and that these are acts of domestic violence directed against victims." According to a 2018 medical study, "about 4.5 million women have had an intimate partner threaten them with a gun and nearly 1 million have been shot or shot at by an intimate partner."<sup>ii</sup>

### Is it evidence-based for victims to carry or obtain firearms for self-defense?

**No. Evidence does not support the theory that introducing a firearm into volatile situations--where a history of domestic violence exists--makes victims and their families safer.** On the contrary, the presence of a gun, regardless of who owns the gun, makes it five times more likely that a woman will be killed—in fact, *gun access is the strongest risk factor for victims of domestic violence to be killed by an intimate partner*<sup>iii</sup>.

**Handguns have not been correlated with increased victim safety.** A 2003 study found that women who were murdered were more likely, not less likely, to have purchased a handgun in the three years prior to their deaths, in direct contradiction to the idea that a handgun has a protective effect against homicide<sup>iv</sup>.

**Expecting potential victims to arm themselves puts the onus of prevention in the wrong place.** The focus on arming victims is a dated and illegitimate self-defense strategy that focuses on changing the behavior

of potential victims to reduce the risk of violence, rather than focusing on preventing perpetration and holding offenders accountable. It is also rooted in the myth that the greatest risk comes from strangers rather than intimate partners, family members, and other people known to the victim.

## What happens when domestic violence victims use firearms to defend themselves?

**Victims of domestic violence are routinely sentenced for long prison terms when they are forced to defend their lives and the lives of their children with the use of a firearm.** A study by the New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services found that 93% of the women convicted of killing an intimate partner had been abused by that partner<sup>v</sup>. **Women of color often face harsher penalties for defending themselves against abusive partners and protecting their children.** Case in point: Marissa Alexander was sentenced to 20 years in prison for firing a single shot near her abusive husband. She testified he had physically abused her and that on that day threatened to kill her. No one was injured, but a jury convicted her in 12 minutes.

**People react to crisis differently.** Victims of sexual and domestic violence, like all people, may experience a variety of reactions to life-threatening situations, ranging from mobilizing to immobilizing reactions. The implicit directive to “fight back” by using a firearm to defend oneself may not be an option available to all trauma survivors in a physiological sense. The complexity of the situation is compounded in cases where the threatening person is a friend and/or intimate partner, where children may be present, or where fear of the abuser immobilizes a victim.

## Are there connections between mass shootings and domestic and sexual violence?

Yes. According to a recent analysis of F.B.I. data on mass shootings in the U.S. that occurred between 2009 and 2017, **offenders of domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking accounted for 54% of all mass shooters<sup>vi</sup>.**

Recognizing the connections between offenders of sexual and domestic violence and mass shootings has prompted many states to require judges and magistrates issuing permanent protective orders to communicate affirmatively to the subject of an order that if they possess any firearms, they are in illegal possession of those firearms and in violation of federal law for the term of the order.

**The assumption and message that guns save lives not only contradicts what we know about the dynamics of sexual and domestic violence, but it also contradicts best available research evidence and public health strategies to prevent violence.**

(i) Violence Policy Center (VPC) study *When Men Murder Women: An Analysis of 2014 Homicide Data* (September 2016);

(ii) Sorensen S, Schut R. Nonfatal gun use in intimate partner violence: A systematic review of the literature. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*. 2018 Oct;19(4):431-442.;

(iii) Testimony before US Senate July 30, 2014 Jacquelyn Campbell, PhD, RN, FAAN, Anna D. Wolf Chair and Professor Johns Hopkins University School of Nursing;

(iv) Violence Policy Center (VPC) study *When Men Murder Women: An Analysis of 2014 Homicide Data* (September 2016);

(v) New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services, *Homicide by Women*, June 1996;

(vi) Everytown Research study *Mass Shootings in the U.S.: 2009-2017* (December 2018)