



HOW WE CAN PREVENT FUTURE TRAGEDIES

America's college and university campuses today are some of the safest places in the country, with rates of homicide far lower than the U.S. as a whole. Recent mass shootings at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University, however, demonstrate that there are steps we *can* and *must* take to prevent such tragedies from happening in the future.

[Students for Gun Free Schools \(SGFS\)](#) rejects the gun lobby's proposed solution of allowing concealed handguns on America's campuses. Bringing firearms onto university grounds is a *reactive* measure which would only create a higher risk environment for students and faculty. To make our campuses safer, we must focus on *preventing* future shootings. If we are serious about prevention, we should start with the following measures to ensure the safety of students and faculty on our campuses:

- 1) **Recognize the warning signs;**
- 2) **Treat those who need treatment;**
- 3) **Enhance campus security;**
- 4) **Improve screening of gun purchasers;**
- 5) **Limit firepower available to shooters, and;**
- 6) **Protect universities' right to set policies regarding firearms on campus.**



1) RECOGNIZE THE WARNING SIGNS

Colleges and universities should focus efforts on identifying and helping distressed students who would inflict harm on themselves or others. SGFS supports [the findings of the Virginia Tech Review Panel](#), which recommended that colleges and universities: a) Require professors to report aberrant, dangerous or threatening behavior in students, and make all faculty aware of this policy; b) Establish a threat assessment team to identify warning signs in reported behavior; c) Require students who exhibit dangerous behavior to participate in counseling as a condition of continued residence in campus housing and enrollment in classes; d) Maintain a flow of information between the threat assessment team, the university's judicial affairs office, the campus counseling center, local law enforcement officials, and parents, and; e) Allocate adequate resources to ensure the quality of systems of care which reduce mental illness-related risk on campus.

2) TREAT THOSE WHO REQUIRE TREATMENT

The history of Virginia Tech shooter Seung-Hui Cho illustrates why proper treatment for mental illness is so critical in preventing future tragedies. In December 2005, Cho was temporarily detained in a psychiatric hospital where two separate evaluators determined that he suffered from mental illness. Immediately thereafter, a special justice concluded that Cho presented an imminent danger to himself. However, as a result of miscommunication between the hospital, the courts, and the Virginia Tech counseling center, Cho received no treatment for his condition.

SGFS supports [the findings of the Virginia Tech Review Panel](#), which recommended that each state: a) Ensure that information regarding involuntary admission or involuntary outpatient treatment is certified, maintained and shared with the proper authorities; b) Allow magistrates to temporarily detain individuals who may pose a danger to themselves or others due to mental illness; c) Increase the number of beds available for mentally ill individuals who are temporarily detained, and; d) Implement procedures for commitment hearings which promote a more consistent application of the standard needed for involuntary commitment.



3) ENHANCE CAMPUS SECURITY

In the wake of tragedies at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University, colleges and universities across America have examined potential policies and procedures to enhance security on campus, and many good ideas have resulted (e.g., [Virginia Tech Review Panel findings](#), [State of Illinois Campus Security Task Force Report](#), [University of Wisconsin President's Commission on University Security report](#), etc.). SGFS supports initiatives to: a) Implement systems that allow students to receive e-mail and text messages regarding emergencies on campus; b) Increase the availability of campus safety information by including it in student and faculty orientation materials, posting it in highly public places and on school websites, and discussing it in meetings between students and Residential Assistants; c) Train campus police in conjunction with local law enforcement to prepare for emergencies, including "active shooter" situations; d) Increase foot patrols by campus police at colleges and universities, to include patrols inside academic buildings, and; e) Take bomb threats (like the one that preceded the Virginia Tech massacre) seriously and immediately report such threats to campus police and local law enforcement.

4) IMPROVE SCREENING OF GUN PURCHASERS

The screening process for gun purchasers in the U.S. is flawed. The shootings at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University again demonstrated that people who should be barred from buying guns are still able to purchase them, in many cases legally. Both Seung-Hui Cho and Steven Kazmierczak had established histories of mental illness, yet both were able to purchase firearms and accessories from multiple licensed dealers.

Federally licensed firearms dealers are required to run background checks on purchasers. To date, the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) has prevented more than 1.6 million criminals and other prohibited purchasers from buying guns. Despite this success, the states have yet to submit millions of records to NICS which would prohibit disqualified individuals from buying guns. One fourth of felony conviction records and more than 9 out of 10 disqualifying mental health records are not available to NICS. To prevent criminals and other prohibited purchasers from acquiring firearms, their records must be available during background checks on gun purchases. SGFS encourages the states to submit all necessary records to NICS in order to ensure public safety.

Unfortunately, prohibited purchasers can also obtain guns through the Private Sales Loophole. This loophole allows unlicensed individuals to sell firearms without conducting background checks on purchasers at gun shows, through classified ads, over the Internet, across a kitchen table, etc. Such private sales allow prohibited buyers to avoid paperwork and accountability for their gun purchases. A good first step toward addressing this problem would be to require background checks on all such sales at gun shows. Approximately [5,000 gun shows are held in the U.S. each year](#) and they account for a significant volume of firearm sales. An April 2008 national poll indicated that [87% of Americans support closing the Gun Show Loophole](#).

The [Virginia Tech Review Panel recommended requiring background checks for all private sales](#), noting, "In an age of widespread information technology, it should not be too difficult for anyone, including private sellers, to [conduct] a background check that usually only takes minutes before transferring a firearm."

Finally, states should consider implementing permitting procedures for handgun purchasers to make sure that individuals who might pose a danger to public safety are properly screened. Certain states, such as New York and New Jersey, use permitting procedures which require character references, fingerprinting and an extensive background check. Both Seung-Hui Cho and Steven Kazmierczak were able to pass computerized instant background checks and legally buy firearms. Implementing more thorough licensing procedures would prevent such individuals, who are clearly a danger to themselves and others, from purchasing handguns.

5) LIMIT FIREPOWER AVAILABLE TO SHOOTERS

The exceptional lethality of assault weapons poses a unique threat both to public safety and to law enforcement. These semiautomatic military-style firearms accept high-capacity magazines and have specific manufacturing features (i.e., barrel shrouds, pistol grips, etc.) that allow shooters to fire many rounds in rapid succession without reloading. Assault weapons are now so readily available that [police departments across America are finding themselves increasingly outgunned by criminals](#). The [ATF has described these guns as follows](#): "Assault weapons were designed for rapid fire, close quarter shooting at human beings. That is why they were put together the way they were. You will not find these guns in a duck blind or at the Olympics. They are mass produced mayhem."

In many instances, the availability of assault weapons and high-capacity magazines has increased the lethality of campus shootings. In December 1992, a student at Simon's Rock College named



Wayne Lo purchased an SKS carbine assault rifle and used it to kill two people and wound four more. In April 2007, high-capacity magazines that held fifteen bullets facilitated Seung-Hui Cho's shooting spree at Virginia Tech.

Regrettably, in September 2004, the federal ban on assault weapons (and high-capacity magazines that hold more than 10 rounds) expired. A [national poll](#) conducted that month showed that 71% of Americans supported renewing the ban. It is clear the American public believes assault weapons have no place in civilian hands and the U.S. Congress should take action to renew the federal ban immediately.

6) PROTECT UNIVERSITIES' RIGHT TO SET POLICIES REGARDING FIREARMS ON CAMPUS

Despite our fears about campus safety following recent shooting tragedies, our colleges and universities remain some of the safest places in America. In 2003, there were [11,920 total gun homicides in the United States](#), but only [10 total murders on the nation's college campuses](#). This is partially due to strict policies that have prohibited students and faculty from carrying firearms on the overwhelming majority of campuses.

SGFS believes that decisions about firearm policies should be made by university officials alone. The [Virginia Tech Review Panel made their position on this issue clear](#), stating that state legislatures should adopt legislation "clearly establishing the right of every institution of higher education...to regulate the possession of firearms on campus ... The panel recommends that guns be banned on campus grounds and in buildings unless mandated by law."

Universities should understand their rights regarding setting policies on firearms, and should make such policies clear to all students and faculty.

If implemented, SGFS believes these common sense measures will help to prevent future violence on our nation's campuses.

