

# 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.<sup>1</sup>

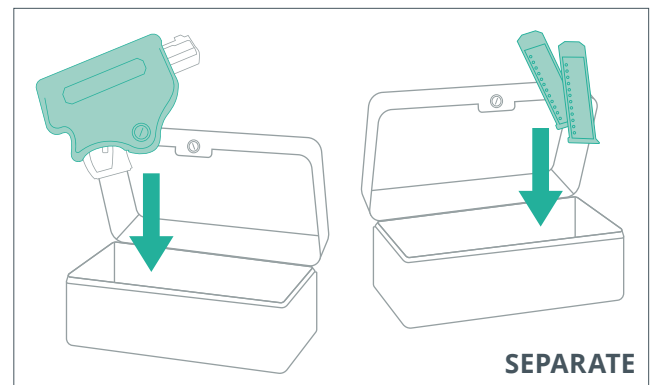
## Introduction

There are an estimated 265 million civilian-owned firearms in the United States,<sup>2</sup> and more than one-third of homes contain at least one gun.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

**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, firearm storage practices should include three methods employed in combination—unloading the ammunition, locking the firearm, and storing the firearm and ammunition in separate locations.<sup>5</sup>



**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 jacket 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.<sup>6</sup>

## Key Findings

**Access to unsecured firearms contributes to gun violence among children and teens.** Brayden's tragic story is all too common. Every year, nearly 350 children under the age of 18 unintentionally shoot themselves or someone else.<sup>7</sup> That's roughly one unintentional shooting per day, and 70 percent of these incidents take place inside a home.<sup>8</sup> Another 700 children die by gun suicide each year,<sup>9</sup> most often using guns belonging to a family member.<sup>10</sup> Unsecured firearms also fuel gun violence outside the home. In incidents of gun violence on school grounds, up to 80 percent of shooters under the age of 18 obtained their guns from their own home, a relative's home, or from friends.<sup>11</sup>

**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.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup>

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OF YOUTH SUICIDES  
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**Despite the risks to safety, the majority of gun owners do not secure their firearms.** 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.<sup>14</sup> Gun owners with children in the home are slightly more likely to lock all of their guns,<sup>15</sup> but an estimated 4.6 million American children live in households with at least one unlocked and loaded firearm.<sup>16</sup>

**Contrary to popular belief, 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.<sup>17</sup> The reality is that there are many affordable options for firearm 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.<sup>18</sup> Further, it is possible that unsecured guns may actually *increase* the likelihood of crime and violence through an increased risk of gun theft.<sup>19</sup> Each year, an estimated 200,000 to 500,000 guns are stolen,<sup>20</sup> and many are funneled into the underground market, where once-legally-owned firearms can be transferred to people with dangerous histories.<sup>21</sup>

## 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.<sup>22</sup>

**Research suggests that clinicians can positively influence secure storage practices, especially when they provide free storage devices.**<sup>23</sup>

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