

Thank you to Chairman Dolan and this Committee for the opportunity to testify today.

Hello, my name is Whitney Austin and on September 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018 by the grace of God, I survived a mass shooting at my place of employment in Cincinnati, Ohio. In that same year 1,764 other Ohioans died in an incident of violence completed by a firearm. I am so very blessed to not be one of the 1,764.

On that beautiful, sunny Thursday morning after Labor Day, I found myself juggling a conference call and walking into our corporate headquarters. While I noticed shattered glass in the revolving door, it never struck me as something to fear. As I pushed on the door I was met with a barrage of bullets, rendering me nearly helpless, crumbled in a heap at the bottom of the revolving door.

I spent exactly one minute in the quadrant of the door, taking gunfire, exploring all my options for survival (to which playing dead was the only viable one), and praying to God that he would help me transition painlessly and hold my children tight as they would be forced to live life at 5 and 7 without their mother.

But that would not be my fate. On a dime the heroic and well-trained Cincinnati police officers arrived and went to work doing what they knew to do faced with such a violent and dangerous person. The threat was quickly eliminated, and I was rescued from the revolving door.

What happened next is a whirlwind and much of it is foggy within my brain. What is crystal clear, however, is the memory of when my life changed forever. As I awoke in the ICU, I was surrounded by the most angelic faces. The faces of the doctors and nurses who had saved me, saying, "Whitney, we have concluded you were shot twelve times, and that none of the bullets hit any major organs or arteries. You are stable enough to wait until tomorrow for surgery."

This story still takes my breath away. It was the most obvious sign from God that I was to take this gratitude for surviving something so unsurvivable and pay it forward by working to stop this violence from happening again.

Within three weeks of the shooting, thanks to many generous friends, Whitney/Strong was established. I could barely use the restroom without assistance, but nothing was going to stop me from this new purpose. By mid-2019, I made the decision to leave my position as Vice President, Digital Lending Manager at Fifth Third Bank to devote myself professionally to Whitney/Strong. From the very beginning we set out to establish ourselves as a new kind of prevention organization – one focused on finding common ground to end gun violence in its many forms.

At Whitney/Strong we believe in a multi-faceted approach to reducing gun violence. Our solutions are data-driven and focused on responsible gun ownership. Since inception we have distributed over 13,000 gun locks thanks to the American Academy of Pediatrics and the National Shooting Sports Foundation. We've trained over 900 people in communities of high impact in Save A Life, a program that offers evidence-based trainings for reducing gun violence. We've funded research to better understand the solutions for gun violence, including interventions with the parents of suicidal children. And lastly, we've advocated for legislative solutions that have garnered support from the majority of Americans from both political parties.

I know my story is not easily matched but I promise, you do not need to face death to join me in this effort. We all share a desire to increase safety within our communities. Now is the time do it by prioritizing common ground solutions.

Violence is pervasive, and in Ohio, there is one preferred weapon for it: firearms. With 82% of homicides and 55% of suicides completed with firearms in 2020, it is clear gun violence is pervasive.

Gun violence is the number one cause of death for American children, killing 4,357 in 2020 (<https://www.npr.org/2022/04/22/1094364930/firearms-leading-cause-of-death-in-children>).

Suicide by firearm rates have steadily increased for nearly two decades, with the fastest-growing rate tied to our youth (<http://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202206/03/WS62996f83a310fd2b29e609df.html>).

Homicide rates have risen sharply since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, marking 2020 as the highest firearm death toll in over 20 years (<https://time.com/5922082/2020-gun-violence-homicides-record-year/>).

And per the FBI, active shooter incidents have increased from three in 2000 to 40 in 2020 (<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/02/03/what-the-data-says-about-gun-deaths-in-the-u-s/>).

No matter how you slice the data, gun violence is on the rise, and it should be worrisome to all Americans. No community is immune, and as I realized in September of 2018, no person is immune.

And if the data isn't enough to stir you into action, the personal stories of gun violence will. Remember these headlines?

**[21 Killed at Ulvade Elementary in Texas' Deadliest School Shooting Ever](#)**

**[Bodies Drop as Walmart Manager Kills 6 in Virginia Attack](#)**

**[Father Arrested After 3-Year-Old Son Killed by 6-Year-Old Brother in Cincinnati Accidental Shooting](#)**

**[17-Year-Old Girl Shot in Short North is Fourth Teen Slain in Columbus in Less than a Week](#)**

**[Family of 4 found dead in Elyria after Man told 911 he Killed Family, Was Going to Kill Himself](#)**

As a gun owner who has never lived in a home without a gun, I value the Second Amendment. My efforts to prevent injury and death are not incongruent with it. In fact, it is the opposite. The best route to strengthening and preserving the Second Amendment is to put controls in place, that are not in conflict with our Constitution, to ensure the targeted few at risk of harm to self or others do not have access.

Gun owners, we are only as safe as our weakest link, and right now, we are very, very unsafe.

I am here today to lend my support of Senate Bill 357, sponsored by Senator Matt Dolan. I believe that this bill includes the provisions necessary to increase our safety as Ohioians. Through the included measures, we will burden only those at risk of harm to self or others.

Increased penalties for individuals who knowingly purchase guns for prohibited people.

Holding a seller liable for selling a gun to a prohibited person.

A new prohibition for anyone required to complete a behavioral risk assessment, i.e. anyone at imminent risk of harm to self or others.

And these are just a few of my favorite provisions. I am also very supportive of any increase into mental health support, especially knowing that 51% of the gun deaths in 2020 were attributed to firearm suicide, a disease we know often stems from mental health struggles and disproportionately impacts white men and rural populations.

In closing, I ask you to engage with me and with Senator Dolan. In the short four years of this work, the problem has only grown. There are many legislative solutions supported by Americans identifying with both political parties and I've witnessed progress with my own eyes through bipartisan work happening in D.C. and Frankfort, Kentucky. Gun violence is not relegated to any one kind of person or any one geographical area. Please don't wait for it to hit you or those you love. Begin to solve the problem today.