

THE TENNESSEAN

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Opinion: Parents, secure firearms to prevent tragedy. Gun violence is No. 1 killer of kids

Tennessee has the tools to turn the tide on the No. 1 killer of our kids. As a Second Amendment supporter, advocate for stringent permitting process, gun owner and parent, citizens meet the challenge.

Mark Proctor Guest columnist

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As a retired captain with the Tennessee Highway Patrol, who for years served on the security detail of Govs. Bill Haslam, Phil Bredesen and Don Sundquist, I understand the importance of evaluating the current environment, assessing the threats and implementing preventive solutions.

In Tennessee, I've seen a shift in the environment when it comes to the safety of our children.

Firearm injury has become the [No. 1 cause of death for Tennessee children](#), and we sadly rank third in the nation for accidental shootings by children, which occurs when a child gets their hands on an unsecured gun and accidentally shoots themselves, a friend or a loved one.

And, as evidenced by worsening youth mental health paired with easy firearm access, we are now in the top 10 states for youth suicide by firearm.

These five facts about firearms injury and deaths are harrowing

As lawmakers have relaxed Tennessee gun laws, allowing firearms in more places with less training and fewer background checks, we have seen firearm injuries and

deaths skyrocket – particularly among our most vulnerable, our children. This is a threat to their health, happiness and future livelihoods.

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Luckily, there are preventive solutions we can implement that have been proven to save lives. It's part of what the THP academy ingrained in us as state troopers. The first thing I did when I walked in my front door after work – even before I hugged my kids and asked them about their day – was to secure my firearm in my gun safe, making sure to store my ammunition separately.

We know these simple secure storage behaviors are effective in reducing firearm injury and death. Here's what the data shows:

Studies have [repeatedly found](#) that the presence of an unlocked firearm in the home is linked to a higher risk of suicide and unintentional firearm injury among children and adolescents.

A [2022 national survey](#) of firearm owners found that 65% reported at least one unlocked firearm.

According to a [2023 Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\) analysis](#), 86% of unintentional firearm deaths among children and adolescents (ages 0-17) happened at a house or apartment, including 56% in their own home. Nearly half (45%) of the firearms used in these incidents belonged to a parent of the shooter, and the vast majority were loaded (74%) and unlocked (76%), and were most commonly accessed in bedroom settings in nightstands, under a mattress or pillow, or on a bed.

Sadly, children ages 0–5 years accounted for [nearly a third](#) (29%) of unintentional firearm injury deaths, followed by those ages 6–10 years (14%). In addition, [unsecured firearms left in vehicles](#) have led to a massive increase in gun thefts from cars. These stolen guns are falling directly into the hands of criminals for use in violent crimes. I strongly recommend removing your firearm from your vehicle at night. When leaving it in an unoccupied vehicle, secure it in a separate locked compartment such as a glove box, center console safe or locked

trunk. These small steps will make a dramatic dent in these thefts and ensuing crimes.

Opinion: [As a retired Tennessee state trooper, I know stricter gun regulations save lives](#)

When protecting the lives of Tennesseans, the life of our governor, and the lives of my family, I have always kept in mind the tremendous responsibility that comes with carrying a firearm.

Here's what parents can do to keep their children safe

Tennessee lawmakers have made it easier for Tennesseans to safely secure their firearms, providing [free gun locks](#) at locations in every county and making gun safes tax free.

The Department of Safety and Homeland Security has also created a [video](#) campaign encouraging secure storage of firearms, funded by the General Assembly during the 2023 special session. Organizations like [Voices for a Safer Tennessee](#), in advocating for secure storage policies, have found the majority of Tennesseans from all walks of life support secure storage and responsible firearm ownership.

More: [8-year-old dead after finding loaded shotgun at grandmother's home, police say](#)

Please take a moment to consider whether all your firearms are securely stored, and if not, take advantage of the state's [free cable locks](#) and tax-free gun safes.

We have the tools to turn the tide on the No. 1 killer of our kids. As a Second Amendment supporter, advocate for stringent permitting process, gun owner and parent, I know we as citizens of the Volunteer State can rise to this challenge.

Mark Proctor is the proud father of two girls, lifelong Tennessean, real estate investor, and retired captain of the Tennessee Department of Safety and Homeland Security, former executive detail for Governors Haslam, Bredesen, and McWherter.