



DIOCESE OF WHEELING-CHARLESTON

1311 BYRON STREET
POST OFFICE BOX 230
WHEELING, WEST VIRGINIA 26003

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A Letter to West Virginians on Gun Ownership and Use

My fellow believers and citizens,

For some time, I have been reflecting on the tragic phenomenon of deaths by firearms, both murders and suicides, in our state. I previously addressed the need to ban assault-style weapons. It is in the spirit of concern for my fellow West Virginians regarding handgun violence that I write to you.

I will limit myself in this letter to asking this question: does possession of a firearm actually make you safer? Or does the widespread possession of firearms contribute to gun violence?

To put this topic in a wider context, consider that there are actually more guns in civilian hands in the United States than there are people in the country: about 101 per 100 persons. The next highest nations are Serbia with 58.2 and Yemen with 54.8 per 100 inhabitants (*World Atlas*, 2024).

What is the result of widespread gun ownership? In 2019, the United States had 12.1 firearm-related deaths per 100,000 persons, while nearby Canada had 4.1 per 100,000 persons. The US rate for gun homicides was 2.5 times higher than for similar high-income nations (*American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 2023, 48 (1), pp. 21-50). There are few gun deaths from homicides, suicides and accidents in the United Kingdom, Australia, Japan and Norway, where civilian gun ownership is rare. In our country, the states with the highest rates of gun violence, like Mississippi, Alabama, Alaska, Wyoming and Montana, “tend to have high gun ownership rates. In comparison, states with low gun violence per capita, like Massachusetts, Hawaii, New Jersey and New York, have lower rates of gun ownership and stricter gun regulations” (2021 *World Population Review*).

What about West Virginia? According to a CBS news report of April, 2022, 58.5% of West Virginians had guns in their homes, among the highest rates in the nation. There are 17.3 gun deaths in West Virginia per 100,000 persons for an average of 320 deaths per year (*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*, April 17, 2024). The number of homicides from gun use in our state rose 83% between 2013 and 2022 (CDC). Seventy percent of gun fatalities here are suicides. As a West Virginian, active in suicide prevention, whose relative killed himself with a gun, said, “If firearms aren’t accessible, it’s rare that someone searches for another means to end their life.” But guns are easily available in West Virginia.

Why do many West Virginians own guns? Apart from hunting, in which rifles rather than handguns are usually used, gun owners believe they and their families are safer because a gun is available to defend against an intruder in their home or someone assaulting them on the street. Is that true? One study says: “Victims who use guns defensively are less likely to be harmed than those using other forms of self-protection” (*Rand Corporation*, March, 2018). Another says: “There are no statistically significant benefits to a would-be victim during a criminal confrontation” who uses a gun

in self-defense; running away or calling the police would be more effective (*J T Chan School of Public Health*, 2022, Harvard University, David Hemenway). It is simply difficult to know how effective possessing a gun is in deterring crime and protecting intended victims.

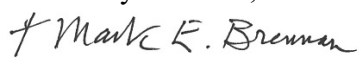
What we do know, as I cited above, is that guns are used with regularity in West Virginia to commit homicides and suicides. If there is no clear evidence that possessing a gun makes us safer and much evidence that it results in the death of a significant number of our neighbors, why do we hold on to this relic of the frontier days? It seems to be another instance of that exaggerated American individualism that shouts “My body, my choice” or “I can change my gender if I feel like it” or “No one can tell me or my children to get vaccinated.”

In Catholic thinking the freedom of the individual person, a great value, must be balanced by respect for the common good, which is also a great value. You have the personal freedom to drive a car, but you must first have the requisite age and pass a driver’s test to obtain a license and then you must obey the traffic laws. The restrictions on your freedom reflect a concern for the common good: the safety of drivers and pedestrians. So, I ask: does not the widespread ownership of handguns tip the balance too far in the direction of personal freedom in disregard of the common good?

What can be done? I ask gun owners to seriously consider whether owning a gun to protect oneself or one’s family actually provides that protection. If there is conflicting evidence about the matter, why keep a gun handy when the widespread possession of firearms puts all West Virginians at risk? I trust that many gun owners store their guns in locked safes or drawers and store ammunition separately. But how safe is this? The key is kept someplace and that can hardly be kept a secret in most homes. The problem is solved if no gun is available.

While the Second Amendment allows us to possess guns, it does not require that we own them or use them. My concern is that the broad possession of handguns in our state poses a clear danger to everyone who lives here. God has commanded us: *You shall not kill*. That applies both to killing others and to killing oneself. Life is a precious gift which we should respect and cultivate in ourselves and others. If the easy availability of firearms puts our people’s lives in danger, which I believe it does, then prudence should lead us to reduce their number and availability and take other measures to ensure public safety. I ask you to pray and think about this matter. May the Holy Spirit guide you as you do.

As we approach our nation’s birthday, may God grant you much peace and joy in your faith and in your love of God and neighbor!

Sincerely in Christ,

+Mark E. Brennan
Bishop of Wheeling-Charleston