



Biden action on guns draws praise, skepticism

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President Biden on Thursday rolled out a series of executive actions aimed at addressing gun violence that earned plaudits from advocacy groups and Democrats, but skepticism remains about whether they will lead to meaningful change.

Anti-gun-violence groups, lawmakers and people who have lost loved ones in mass shootings were overwhelmingly supportive of Biden's six-pronged approach to curbing gun violence, saying it was long overdue for a president to take matters into their own hands.

"President Biden's actions and the agenda that he outlined will tangibly affect gun violence in all of its forms. From updating regulation to stop the proliferation of ghost guns in our communities to directing funds for community violence prevention programs, each of these actions will stop emerging threats to public safety while taking a public health approach to ending this epidemic," said Kris Brown, president of the gun control advocacy group Brady.

But there is uncertainty about how effective the rules Biden is calling for will be in curbing gun violence and how quickly the Department of Justice will be able to enact them.

In a speech Thursday, Biden repeatedly nodded toward the sheer size of the problem his administration is facing. He called the epidemic of gun violence in America an "international embarrassment" and pointed to statistics that showed hundreds of people in the U.S. are shot every week.

He and his team have called the measures outlined Thursday initial steps, leaving the door open to further action while calling on Congress to play a larger role in passing reforms, though the path forward is murky in a closely divided Senate.

Biden on Thursday focused in on so-called ghost guns, red flag laws and other measures he hopes can rein in forms of gun violence that include mass shootings, domestic violence and suicide.

Biden said he wants ghost guns to be treated as firearms and have serial numbers on their key components. Ghost guns are made from kits at home, meaning they don't require a background check to purchase and are untraceable when they turn up at crime scenes because they don't have serial numbers.

Ghost guns have become an increasingly popular target for law enforcement officials in recent years as they have become more accessible. Everytown, a gun control advocacy group, filed a

petition in 2019 urging the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF) to take action against ghost guns. A group of Democratic senators urged Biden earlier this year to target ghost guns via executive action, and Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro spoke directly with the president about the issue when Biden was in Philadelphia last month to promote the American Rescue Plan.

Shapiro, in an interview with The Hill, said Biden's announcement would be especially meaningful in places like Philadelphia. The attorney general's office said roughly 430 ghost guns have been recovered in the city since 2019.

Skeptics questioned how much this action would accomplish and noted that ghost guns were not used in the recent Atlanta and Boulder, Colo., mass shootings.

"Most gun policies in this country are performative and don't do much to mitigate gun deaths. This is essentially hollow. America is saturated with guns so the idea that the home manufacturer of guns is something that criminals are doing to get guns and that this is a significant source of guns is ridiculous," said Trevor Burrus, a research fellow at Cato Institute specializing in gun policy.

Other experts pointed to the lack of concrete data on how widespread ghost guns are at this point.

"So-called 'trace' data about the sources of weapons recovered by police are typically very difficult for researchers to access, making it hard to predict the impacts that policies like this may have," said Max Kapustin, an assistant professor at Cornell University who studies the effects of gun violence.

Biden will also direct five federal agencies to support evidence-based community violence and intervention programs with grant money, which anti-gun violence groups applauded.

"In cities and states that have funded these types of programs, we've seen significant decreases in homicides and firearm injuries," said Adzi Vokhiwa, federal affairs director for the anti-gun-violence group Giffords. "We know when these programs are implemented effectively and when they're properly funded, they absolutely save lives."

Luis Hernandez, the founder and executive director of Youth Over Guns who was present for Biden's announcement in the Rose Garden on Thursday, singled out the funding for community violence intervention programs as a particularly impactful step to reduce gun violence.

"These are funding streams that create clear pathways for these organizations to thrive and really expand their work," Hernandez said.

In addition, Biden's Justice Department will publish model red flag legislation for states. Red flag laws would allow police or family members to petition courts to temporarily remove firearms from people in crisis.

The president noted on Thursday that red flag laws have been effective in states like Delaware, his home state, and can help combat domestic violence. Experts say they are also effective at curbing gun suicides.

While red flag laws have gained some bipartisan momentum nationally and at the state level, experts have argued they may be ineffective without additional reforms to keep guns out of the

hands of dangerous individuals in the first place and could have unintended consequences in dissuading gun owners from seeking help.

Ben Newman, associate professor in the school of public policy at University of California Riverside, said red flag laws are a step in the right direction but could go further.

“I think that it would have so much more teeth if it came in conjunction with background check laws. It seems easier to not give someone who is mentally unstable a gun, then to bring in the courts to remove it. Because there’s a whole process there where you have to get courts involved,” he said.

The Justice Department will also issue a proposed rule to make clear that when a stabilizing device effectively turns a pistol into a short-barreled rifle, that firearm is subject to the requirements of the National Firearms Act. The suspect in the Boulder shooting used a pistol with an arm brace.

Biden was joined in the Rose Garden by former Rep. Gabby Giffords (D-Ariz.), Brandon Wolf, who survived the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, and the parents of children killed in shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School.

Fred Guttenberg, whose daughter was killed in the 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas, tweeted that Biden’s actions were historic.

But even those groups that cheered Biden’s unilateral actions on guns acknowledged the president can only go so far on the issue. They said it will ultimately fall to Congress to take the lead on enacting stronger gun laws, even though lawmakers have failed to pass major reforms after repeated mass shootings.

Biden on Thursday called on Congress to do just that and pass two bills approved in the House last month. One would strengthen background checks and the other would close the so-called Charleston loophole by extending the time federal investigators have to conduct background checks.

The president also called for legislation to close the so-called boyfriend loophole and for Congress to pass bans on assault weapons and high-capacity magazines.

“I think he certainly sees it as an issue we won’t solve overnight,” White House press secretary Jen Psaki said.

A bill proposed by Sens. Joe Manchin (D-W.Va.) and Pat Toomey (R-Pa.) after the Sandy Hook shooting, in which 20 children and six adults died, only garnered 54 votes.

With the current makeup of the Senate, Democrats would need all 50 members in the chamber to vote for gun legislation and be joined by at least 10 Republican senators to overcome the legislative filibuster.