

Lethal loophole

Addressing a link between guns and domestic violence, Oregon lawmakers will consider tightening a law that now gives some abusers access to firearms

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Carsen thought she was going to visit an old friend she hadn't seen in 25 years, then leave for home in a couple of weeks. She arrived in the small town where he lived in April, but it wasn't until August that she finally managed to escape.

The first show of violence was a slap in the middle of an argument. Carsen said she planned to leave after that.

Only he wouldn't let her leave. He wouldn't allow her to go to the bathroom alone, much less leave the house without him. He starved her, beat her at the slightest provocation.

He isolated her completely. He wouldn't allow her to call her mother or her four adult children, who were looking for her. He made her hide when police officers came to the door, and she was too scared to make a sound.

"I never expected it to happen to me," she said. "It's something you would see on TV. I never expected to take the beatings. And even himself, my abuser, he told me one night, 'I don't see how you're still standing.'"

He used many different tools to inflict abuse on her. One of them was a gun. He shot at her multiple times and threatened her by saying he would find her children and use the gun against them.

Unknown to Carsen, her abuser had been convicted of domestic violence before and had served time for it. Yet he still had a gun that made it even easier for him to threaten her life and the lives of those she loved.

This legislative session, Gov. Kate Brown has introduced the "Oregonians United to End Gun Violence" bill, which, if passed, would make it more difficult for abusers to access firearms.

This bill would close the "Boyfriend Loophole." Currently, domestic abusers are prohibited from purchasing or owning a firearm only if they have a legal relationship with the person whom they are abusing — that is, if they are married, have a child together, or have cohabited. Closing this loophole would expand the law to protect victims of domestic violence whose relationship does not fit those criteria.

The bill would direct the Oregon Health Authority to issue annual gun death reports and make policy recommendations, as well as create a work group to report to the governor on counties' existing gun relinquishment protocols in order to make recommendations on statewide policy to further protect domestic violence survivors. Both of these pieces are efforts to identify and fill gaps in the state's protection of survivors.

Guns and domestic violence

Many women who have experienced domestic abuse, like Carsen, have lived in fear because of the presence of a gun in their home.

Statistically, Carsen's risk of death while with her abuser was five times higher simply because he possessed a firearm, according to Everytown for Gun Safety, a pro-gun-control nonprofit. This is something Sgt. Ronald Mason of the Portland Police Bureau's Domestic Violence Reduction Unit has seen in Portland cases of domestic violence.

"Anecdotally, just having the access to a firearm when an offender is in an aggressive violent state, it gives them another option of increasing the violence and making bad choices into horrible choices within seconds," Mason said. "Them having access to that firearm when they are a domestic violence offender anyway does make it a lot more dangerous of a situation for the victim."

There could be multiple reasons for this, said Eric Mankowski, a professor of social and community psychology at Portland State University. One could be that those predisposed to be abusive are purchasing guns at higher rates. Research in social psychology suggests another reason could be that the mere presence of the gun escalates conflicts to violence.

"It is thought to be like a cue, we call it, a reminder or an elicitor of violence, that weapons are associated with. I see a gun on a table or a knife on a table — it's a threat, and acts of violence come to mind," Mankowski said. "So guns could be both a cause and a consequence of intimate partner violence at home."

Carsen's abuser always kept his gun tucked into his overalls.

"He always made it known that he had a gun at all times with him," Carsen said.

Whether a woman is experiencing extreme physical abuse like Carsen or the abuse is strictly emotional and verbal, a gun in the home sends a powerful message to an abused partner, whether intentional or not.

"A common reason people own guns is that it makes them feel safe," said Chris Huffine, the executive director of Allies in Change, an organization that counsels abusers and their partners. "So if I'm a gun owner, I may never ever use that gun, except in practice. But just knowing it's in my nightstand helps me feel safer. If you're in an abusive home, knowing there's a gun on the premises, just knowing it's there, can make you feel unsafe. It's the exact opposite."

Mass shootings

Researchers are also beginning to study the link between mass shootings and domestic violence. Mass shootings in public places like schools are prominently featured in the media, which could give people the notion that no one is safe, that a shooter could be lurking in every corner, and that they prey on the most vulnerable places. In reality, according to a 2014 Everytown study on mass shootings, only 4 percent of shootings occurred in schools.

"The other effect of this mass media coverage of shootings is, 'Oh, the world is a dangerous place; I have to stay in my home,'" Mankowski said. "And I think for a long time, we've been understanding that that narrative is incorrect, and you're more likely to be sexually assaulted, physically assaulted, lethally assaulted by an acquaintance and, specifically for women, by a current or former intimate partner."

According to the Everytown study, 70 percent of mass shootings — meaning at least four people were killed with a gun — occurred in wholly private residences, and in more than half, the shooter killed a current or former intimate partner. Fifteen percent of mass shooters had a former domestic violence charge.

Although few domestic violence abusers will commit mass shootings, these statistics show a consistent link that is often overshadowed by more sensational events.

We have also seen example after example of public mass shootings by men with a history of domestic violence allegations, from Omar Mateen at the Pulse nightclub in Florida, to Micah Johnson, who killed five police officers, to Robert Dear, who attacked a Planned Parenthood office in Colorado Springs, Colo.

"We've been thinking about domestic violence and then these mass shootings, and it's looking more and more like there's a bigger intersection there than we had previously understood, and guns may be a linkage there, an important linkage," Mankowski said. "Obviously we're talking about shootings; they're going to be present. But we know that the possession or