

**Pennsylvania Council of Churches**  
**Resolution on Legislation in Pennsylvania to Prevent Gun Violence**

WHEREAS: A rising tide of handgun violence affects all corners of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania: to wit, in the year 2006 Philadelphia endured more than 400 homicides, the vast majority committed with handguns, the highest total since 1997; Harrisburg's per capita rate of gun death exceeded Philadelphia, neighborhoods in Pittsburgh exploded in gun violence and several other cities in the state experienced record levels of gun death and injury. While the perception is that gun violence is an urban problem, mention of the name Nickel Mines reminds us that this violence is not limited by the size of any municipality in the Commonwealth.

WHEREAS: According to the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF), 76% of the guns used in the commission of a crime in Philadelphia that were recovered and successfully traced, and 81% of those used in the commission of a crime in Pittsburgh were originally legally purchased within the Commonwealth; yet nearly 87% of those traced guns in Philadelphia and over 91% of those traced in Pittsburgh were not in the possession of their original, legal purchaser when used in crime; and

WHEREAS: Pennsylvania has become a major net exporter of handguns to neighboring states, especially New Jersey and New York, where strong gun laws inhibit the creation and maintenance of in-state handgun trafficking networks. The Commonwealth's relatively weak gun laws, therefore, unfairly blunt the efforts of our neighbors to diminish gun violence in their jurisdictions.

WHEREAS: The Commonwealth's existing gun laws make multiple handgun purchases easy and cheap; and encourage the illegal trade in handguns and the cruel and vicious violence that results. One of the linchpins of the illegal handgun distribution system in our Commonwealth is "straw purchasing" of handguns in bulk by technically eligible individuals who actually are stand-ins for prohibited felons—gun traffickers, who then resell them across kitchen tables to drug dealers, on street corners to violent teens, and out of the trunks of cars to gang members; and

WHEREAS: By requiring handgun owners to report to law enforcement when their handguns have been lost or stolen and providing liability for those who fail to do so, straw purchasers will be discouraged from buying handguns in volume for traffickers, which would increase the cost of trafficking and make illegal handguns more expensive and less available, thereby reducing their use in crime and violence; and

WHEREAS: A recent survey demonstrated that nearly all Pennsylvanians (over 90%) favor enactment of a Lost or Stolen Reporting Requirement for handguns; and

WHEREAS: By limiting individuals to the purchase of no more than a single handgun in any 30-day period, a One Handgun A Month law would seriously disrupt straw purchasing in bulk and drive down the availability of handguns on the street, which would make handguns far less prevalent and thereby reduce handgun injury and death in our region. There is substantial evidence that laws limiting handgun purchases by individuals to one a month have effectively reduced illegal handgun trafficking, without negative impact on lawful gun ownership, in Virginia, Maryland, and California; and

WHEREAS: A recent survey demonstrated that most Pennsylvanians (78%) and even most Pennsylvania gun owners (61%) support enactment of a One Handgun A Month law; and

WHEREAS: Support for advocacy promoting legislation intended to prevent gun violence stems not only from a concern for peace and justice, but also from Biblical imperatives; to wit,  
~The sixth commandment, "Thou Shall not kill," which not only forbids killing, but also implies that we are obligated to prevent harm and to preserve life and the well-being of human life;  
~Both Isaiah and Micah call us to beat our swords into plowshares and our spears into pruning hooks; and

~Jesus calls us to be peacemakers by saying “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called Children of God”;

WHEREAS: The Commonwealth is losing too many of its young people, both as victims and perpetrators. Too many families of both victims and perpetrators are thrown into grief by handgun violence. Too many congregations—urban, suburban, and rural—have buried children and sought to bring the comfort of God’s peace to families wracked by this epidemic of violence and death.

WHEREAS: The Pennsylvania Council of Churches recognizes the problem as one of handgun distribution, abuse, and violence, not gun ownership, acknowledges that legal gun ownership for the purpose of self-defense is a right for most citizens (with exceptions such as for convicted felons), and asserts the need for responsible gun ownership, noting that the vast majority of gun owners take responsibility seriously. The Council also notes that, per the June 2008 ruling of the US Supreme Court, authorities, including state legislatures such as Pennsylvania’s, have the power to enact “laws imposing conditions and qualifications on the commercial sale of arms.”

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED: That the Board of Directors of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches (“Council”) calls upon the House, the Senate, and the Governor of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to enact and sign legislation that (1) requires gun owners to report lost or stolen handguns, colloquially known as the Lost or Stolen Reporting Requirement Act, and (2) provides for a moderate limit on the purchase of handguns by individuals, colloquially known as the One Handgun A Month Act. The purpose of this legislation is to disrupt the illegal distribution system that makes handguns available to felons, drug dealers, and other violent individuals in the Commonwealth and other states and encourages gun violence.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED: That the Council instruct the Director of Public Advocacy to communicate this resolution to the Governor of Pennsylvania, the Speaker of the House, the President of the Senate, the chairs of the House and Senate Committees on the Judiciary, and to all Senators and House Representatives.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED: That the Council recognizes that taking an active stand against gun violence is a profound way for urban, suburban, and rural congregations to stand in solidarity on an issue that affects them all, and therefore urges its member bodies, advocacy staff and appropriate committees to work vigorously and continually towards enactment of the aforesaid Lost or Stolen Reporting Requirement and One Handgun A Month legislation, until such time as each is signed into law.

AND FINALLY BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED: That the Council encourages its member bodies to seek adherence to denominational resolutions on gun violence similar to this Resolution, and to provide educational materials and resources to their congregations to make them aware of, and to educate them about, the epidemic of handgun violence besetting the Commonwealth, its causes and effects, and how enactment of Lost or Stolen Reporting Requirement and One Handgun a Month legislation will reduce the illegal trade in handguns and resulting handgun violence, and to encourage congregations and individuals to seek enactment of said legislation.

Approved by the Board of Directors of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches on this 14<sup>th</sup> day of April, 2009.



The Rev. Dr. Marja Coons-Torn, President  
Board of Directors  
Pennsylvania Council of Churches

**REFERENCES:**

Most recent comprehensive trace info (2000) for guns recovered from crime in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh:

<http://www.atf.gov/firearms/ycgii/2000/cityreports/philadelphia.pdf>

<http://www.atf.gov/firearms/ycgii/2000/cityreports/pittsburgh.pdf>

Most recent statewide trace info (2007) for guns recovered from crime in Pennsylvania:

[http://www.atf.gov/firearms/trace\\_data/2007/pennsylvania07.pdf](http://www.atf.gov/firearms/trace_data/2007/pennsylvania07.pdf)

Most recent statewide trace info (2007) for guns recovered from crime in New Jersey and New York – for purposes of comparison:

[http://www.atf.gov/firearms/trace\\_data/2007/newjersey07.pdf](http://www.atf.gov/firearms/trace_data/2007/newjersey07.pdf)

[http://www.atf.gov/firearms/trace\\_data/2007/newyork07.pdf](http://www.atf.gov/firearms/trace_data/2007/newyork07.pdf)