



# Inside Philanthropy

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## "An Epidemic Within the Pandemic." How Eight Funders Back Gun Violence Prevention

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### Follow the Money!



PHOTO: ROB CRANDALL/SHUTTERSTOCK

Two March mass shootings—the first in Atlanta, the second in Boulder—served as grisly omens for a return to “normal” in which episodes of mass gun violence dominate headlines on a regular basis. The lack of such front-page incidents over the past year is yet another way the pandemic has been a break in the narrative of American life. Yet even as mass shootings appeared to decline during COVID, gun violence itself continued unabated. According to some [data sources](#), deaths from homicide and other forms of non-suicide gun violence were higher in 2020 than in past years, with suicide again accounting for the highest proportion of gun violence deaths.

Yet for all the carnage—over 43,000 gun violence deaths in the supposed lockdown year of 2020—philanthropy’s footprint in the gun violence prevention space is far from deep. The biggest reason for that is the fact that the most obvious corrective, federal and local gun regulation, is a thoroughly politicized issue that most funders choose to avoid. Still, even with lobbying off the table, there are ways 501(c)(3) philanthropies can influence the debate.

The overall number of dedicated gun violence prevention funders is a small one, but many of the grantmakers involved are in it for the long haul. Framing the problem in many cases as a public health issue, they’ve funded research, supported local organizing and policy efforts, and sought to change the narrative and generate consensus on firearms.

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Given the statistics, and what seems to be unwavering opposition from Republicans at the national level, it's debatable whether these funders' efforts have amounted to much, at least in terms of national reform. At the same time, their persistence in building up a research, policy and organizing infrastructure for gun safety could pay dividends if the historical winds change, as they inevitably do with time.

Here are eight philanthropic funders who've been important backers of the push for gun violence prevention in the United States.

### **Joyce Foundation**

The Chicago-based Joyce Foundation has been giving around gun violence prevention for nearly three decades. In many ways it [exemplifies the long-haul approach](#) for funding in this space. Both in the Great Lakes region and nationwide, Joyce gives millions to gun violence prevention grantees on an annual basis. Like many of the funders on this list, Joyce has shown a willingness to tackle the issue from many angles, including research, education and advocacy, and general support for movement organizations like the March for Our Lives Foundation.

Joyce is also a prominent member organization at the Fund for a Safer Future (FSF), a funder collaborative that serves as a hub for philanthropy's efforts to stem gun violence. FSF currently consists of 25 members, including foundations, individual donors and DAFs, some of which [are listed here](#). It also operates as a grantmaker in its own right, with \$10 million in gun violence prevention funding out the door since 2011.

## David Bohnett Foundation

The philanthropy of early internet entrepreneur David Bohnett is perhaps best known in the LGBTQ space, where his foundation has long backed human rights advocacy. But Bohnett has other longstanding interests, including arts and culture in Los Angeles and—for over two decades—gun violence prevention. The foundation has given over \$5 million to the cause over the years, including significant support for top policy groups like the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence and the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence. Bohnett has also been involved with FSF over the years. A full list of Bohnett's gun violence grants can be found [here](#).

## Kendeda Fund

Founded by Diana Blank, whose former husband Arthur Blank co-founded Home Depot, the Kendeda Fund is in the process of spending out by the end of 2023. Like Joyce and Bohnett, Kendeda is involved in FSF and has highlighted the collaborative's value as a coordinating force. Kendeda's own gun violence giving includes media and narrative efforts like Guns & America, a two-year reporting project on roles and perceptions of firearms in the U.S., based at WAMU in Washington, D.C. One goal of that initiative, [which Kendeda supported with \\$5.3 million](#), was to shed light on the problem of gun violence in a way that's distinct from the norm; that is, lurid media coverage of the latest tragedy. Note that interest in gun violence prevention appears to be strong among the Blanks: the Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation is also an FSF member.

## Arnold Ventures

Arnold is one of several funders on this list whose gun violence prevention giving accompanies wider giving to tackle crime, violence and criminal justice reform. True to its preference for evidence-based work, Arnold Ventures' funding in this space revolves around research. In fact, it's one of the main philanthropic proponents of grantmaking to make up for a lack of federal research on gun violence, a problem traceable in part to the so-called "Dickey amendment" of 1996, a congressional decision that all but eliminated public research funding on the topic.

The primary way Arnold's addressing the problem is through a \$20 million commitment [to seed the National Collaborative for Gun Violence Research](#), which also has backing from several other funders. Hosted by the RAND Corporation and set to last for five years, the collaborative has had [no shortage of research proposals](#) to choose from.

## MacArthur Foundation

Like Arnold Ventures, MacArthur's work on gun violence coincides with a broader program of anti-violence and justice reform giving. Though it has funded national policy work, much of MacArthur's gun violence prevention support [centers on its home city of Chicago](#). For instance, the foundation [helped found the Partnership for Safe and Peaceful Communities \(PSPC\)](#), a coalition of funders that has committed \$90 million to Chicago anti-violence efforts since 2016. PSPC's strategies include street-level outreach and engagement, police reform, and efforts to reduce the

flow of illegal guns into the city and pursue state-level gun reform.

## **Robert Wood Johnson Foundation**

In a [statement](#) following the latest mass shooting in Boulder, Everytown for Gun Safety President John Feinblatt characterized gun violence as “an epidemic within the pandemic.” Framing gun deaths as a public health issue has been a favored approach among funders keen to address the problem in less politicized terms. One grantmaker that’s been part of that push is, unsurprisingly, the nation’s best-known public health philanthropy. RWJF’s gun violence prevention grants go back several decades and include support for Cure Violence, a project founded by epidemiologist Gary Slutkin in Chicago to apply public health strategies to violent crime. A number of other philanthropies also support Cure Violence, including MacArthur.

## **Hope and Heal Fund**

The Hope and Heal Fund is a [regional partnership drawing upon support from an array of California grantmakers](#). Like RWJF, it centers a public health approach to the problem of gun violence. The fund got its start in the aftermath of the 2015 mass shooting in San Bernardino, California and has since disbursed about \$1 million for gun violence prevention efforts in the state. Funders involved include the California Wellness Foundation, the Liberty Hill Foundation, the Wintemute Family Foundation, the Blue Shield of California Foundation, the California Endowment, the Heising-Simons Foundation, the Sierra Health Foundation and the Akonadi Foundation.

## Michael Bloomberg

The former New York mayor and veteran philanthropist is the biggest name among individual donors in this space. Most of his gun violence prevention money goes to Everytown for Gun Safety, a 501(c)(4) advocacy organization founded in 2013 that has famously butted heads with the National Rifle Association and pro-gun politicians across the country. But like many advocacy groups on both sides of the political divide, Everytown has a 501(c)(3) affiliate, the Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund. Bloomberg is its main funder, but the C3 arm also draws support from anonymous DAF donors via sponsors like Fidelity and Schwab.

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The presence of DAF donations and other forms of “dark money” in this space is no surprise. Objectively speaking, curtailing gun violence should be an uncontroversial proposition. But the unfortunate reality is that any such giving always has some political resonance, despite many of these funders’ eagerness to sidestep the culture wars. Sure, people don’t always give through DAFs to dodge controversy—they are also popular among upper-middle class donors moved to give in the wake of tragedy, as many have over the past several weeks. Nevertheless, we’ve also gotten wind here and there of larger donors who fund gun violence prevention but cling to anonymity.

That said, the above list is hardly exhaustive. Other philanthropies in or around this space include the Lisa & Douglas Goldman Fund, the Hewlett Foundation, the Langeloth Foundation, the Johnson Family Foundation

and the Lefkofsky Family Foundation. There's also some corporate support for gun violence prevention, including from places like [Google.org](#), [the Motorola Solutions Foundation](#) and Levi Strauss and Company. The local nature of gun violence and violent crime in general has also prompted a range of responses from local funders, including [community foundations scrambling to respond in the wake of mass shootings](#).

Given historical precedent, it's hard to imagine the two recent shootings will lead to anything more substantive policy-wise [than previous tragedies](#). One problem is that even though a majority of Americans still favor stricter gun laws, [recent polling indicates](#) a significant drop-off in support among Republican voters since 2019, prompted no doubt by increased adoption of pro-gun views as a right-wing identity marker in the late Trump presidency.

As long as national legislation remains a doubtful prospect, it's easy to see philanthropic efforts on gun violence prevention as yet another case of locally beneficial work that will continually run into limits on what it can accomplish. Even as the pandemic seems to have temporarily curbed mass shootings, gun sales increased, while more Americans found themselves struggling with mental health issues and in danger of domestic violence. Then again, maybe a post-pandemic policy revolution is on its way, with consequences for gun violence philanthropy. Stay tuned.

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