

# THE OKLAHOMAN

## Oklahoma children die more often from gunshot wounds than in other states. Why?



**Kayden Anderson**

The Oklahoman

Sept. 10, 2025, 5:30 a.m. CT

### Key Points AI-assisted summary ⓘ

11-year-old Waylen Wealot died from a gunshot wound in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in June.

Oklahoma's rate of child deaths from firearms is higher than the national average.

While some Oklahoma lawmakers are working on gun safety measures, the state's relaxed gun laws and strong Second Amendment support create challenges.

Waylen Wealot was full of energy and enjoyed playing video games. He had a pet chicken and helped his mom around their house. He was supposed to start sixth grade in the fall.

The 11-year-old was visiting his father in Tulsa when he died from a [gunshot](#) wound on June 25.

His mother, Isabelle Medlock, said she was told he was playing with a gun when he shot himself while he was alone. Oklahoma's Office of the Chief Medical Examiner ruled in August that he died by suicide. Osage County sheriff's deputies are investigating exactly what happened.

Medlock said Waylen never expressed suicidal thoughts. She said she had talked to him on the phone the morning of his death and told him she would talk to him later.

She believes her son would still be alive if he didn't have access to a firearm.

"I just want my baby. He shouldn't be gone," Medlock said. "This was preventable, and he's not going to grow up now."

## More Oklahoma children die from gunshot wounds compared to other states

Children in Oklahoma are more likely to die from gunshot wounds than is the norm across the U.S. An average of 75 children and teens die from gunshot wounds every year in Oklahoma, according to an analysis by Everytown, a gun violence prevention group.

Experts say decreasing those deaths requires taking steps to keep guns out of the hands of kids. Failing to do so can have tragic consequences.

In July alone, police said two Oklahoma toddlers were shot and killed by guns left in the reach of children. A 3-year-old boy died from a gunshot wound in northwest Oklahoma City after a firearm was left out in a bedroom. A 1-year-old girl died in Norman after police said her young sibling grabbed a gun and shot her. Both of their deaths have led to second-degree murder charges against the adults who owned the guns.

**More:** [Guns remain leading cause of death for children and teens in the US, report says](#)

Waylen's mother, who lives in Nebraska, said she isn't sure how he got ahold of the gun. She said police told her there is no law in Oklahoma that requires guns to be secured.

That's what she would like to see changed.

But in a state like Oklahoma — which has more relaxed gun laws than many of its peers — firearm safety advocates face a political tightrope: How do you create enough buy-in from gun rights supporters?

“In order to get that coalition, in order to get that bipartisan consensus, it always has to be in a way that that is respectful of Second Amendment rights,” said Sen. Joanna Dossett, a Tulsa Democrat who has focused on gun safety.

“There won't be any firearm safety measures that go into law in Oklahoma that do not fully acknowledge and maintain and respect Second Amendment rights in Oklahoma.”

Yet some of the state's most vocal gun rights supporters see little need for change. Republican Rep. Jay Steagall, of Yukon, defended the current state of Oklahoma's gun laws. He said further restrictions, such as mandating safe storage or training, were not necessary.

He insisted those changes would not eliminate issues such as accidental discharges, because those do not happen when a firearm is in a safe but when people are negligently handling them.

"As an NRA instructor, the first lesson that we harp on is firearm safety," said Steagall, who is also a retired military member.

## **Oklahoma ranks 37th for child mortality. Guns are a major factor**

In Oklahoma, one of the leading causes of injury-related deaths for children is firearm injuries.

For every 100,000 children In Oklahoma, 7.4 will die from firearm injuries, while the U.S. rate is 5.9, according to public health data site America's Health Rankings. The site ranks Oklahoma 37th for child mortality.

"Deaths are the tip of the iceberg; significantly larger numbers of injuries are treated in the hospital, emergency department, urgent care or doctor's office every year," Erica Rankin-Riley, a spokesperson for the Oklahoma State Department of Health, said about injuries in general.

It's not just children who are disproportionately wounded by firearms. The Oklahoman found in June 2022 that more than 8,600 Oklahomans had died because of gun violence since 2010.

**More:** [From Colorado to Oklahoma, one student's experiences with gun violence and gun law advocacy](#)

Dr. Liz Koldoff, director of injury prevention for Safe Kids Oklahoma, said Oklahoma recorded 17 child deaths from unintentional firearm injuries between 2019 and 2023. Safe Kids Oklahoma offers safety tips and support programs to help parents and prevent children's injuries.

State officials and medical experts also use information from death certificates and medical examiner reports to track trends in child deaths and look for ways to prevent future fatalities.

## Oklahoma's gun laws are among in the worst in the nation, advocacy group says

Laws play a critical role in determining the health and safety of Oklahomans, Rankin-Riley said.

Everytown, the gun violence prevention group, ranks Oklahoma gun laws as among the worst in the country in terms of prevention, saying it lacks "all of the foundational gun violence prevention laws."

Oklahoma law does require background checks to purchase a firearm from a licensed dealer, and felons are not allowed to own or buy a firearm.

Since November 2019, state law does not require a permit to carry openly or concealed firearms, otherwise known as "permitless carry." Twenty-eight other states allow permitless carry, which is sometimes also called constitutional carry, though each state may have differing provisions.

Some states consider open carry illegal, including New York and California.

Gun rights supporters say responsible gun owners develop proper firearm storage habits and make them a routine.

Bill Brassard, the senior director of communications for the National Shooting Sports Foundation, said firearm safety is important everywhere, whether or not states allow open carry. He said his organization partners with law enforcement agencies to provide free cable gun locks.

"No one wants their gun in the hands of an unsupervised child or a person who is at risk of suicide or a thief," Brassard said.

Efforts to expand the rights of gun owners have been more popular than efforts to restrict them.

Steagall has been one of the movement's most ardent supporters at the Capitol. He authored House Bill 2818, which was approved by Gov. Kevin Stitt in May and passed the House and Senate mostly on partisan lines. The new law allows people to point a firearm at someone if they are acting in self-defense or defending their property.

He insisted safe handling is the key to preventing tragedies.

"With firearms ownership, comes safe firearms responsibility, so our responsibility, as firearms owners, is to understand that these tools can cause harm to others and because of that, we need to be responsible enough to learn how to safely handle these tools and use them appropriately," Steagall said.

Dossett has been able to create some buy-in among Republican lawmakers. She co-authored Senate Bill 50, which provides a sales tax exemption when a gun owner purchases gun safes and firearm safety devices. It passed earlier this year with widespread support in the House and Senate, aside from a handful of no votes from mostly far-right senators.

Dossett said she is proud of the bipartisan effort that got the bill across the line. She said she did a lot of outreach with her Republican colleagues, and she found more who were willing to hear her out than not.

Dossett said she will lead an interim study this fall on a voluntary safe gun storage program. This concept would allow any Oklahoman in a self-identified crisis to have their firearm stored safely until the crisis is over, when they can retrieve it.

### **'My baby deserved better'**

Medlock would like to see a law requiring safe gun storage.

Medlock said she had primary custody of their son, but his father had visitation. She was excited for Waylen to spend the Fourth of July with his father in Oklahoma, where they celebrate the holiday with fireworks.

Waylen's father called her at 6:25 p.m. on June 25, and she could tell immediately that something was wrong. She demanded to know how Waylen got access to a gun — why it wasn't locked "away from little hands."

Osage County Sheriff Bart Perrier said in late August that deputies were investigating physical evidence, including a device found at the scene.

Medlock said that she has not communicated much with investigators, but said she had been told they had Waylen's cell phone. She said she has hired an attorney to help her with review her son's case.

She said she was told her son's death will likely not result in criminal charges, because Oklahoma law does not require guns to be stored securely.

"i am just feeling so defeated," she wrote to The Oklahoman on Sept. 2. "My baby deserved better."

Mark Barden's son 7-year-old son, Daniel, was one of the 26 people killed by a gunman at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut in 2012. Barden is now the co-founder and co-CEO of the Sandy Hook Promise, which advocates for gun law reforms.

Oklahoma can improve safety by advancing safe firearm access laws that are designed to keep guns out of the hands of children and other unauthorized users, Barden said in a statement.

He also said education and advocacy also play important roles, he said.

"We all must work together — gun-owners and non-gun owners alike — to prevent the misuse of firearms," Barden said.