



Patrick pushes gun-control bill in Lowell visit

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Gov. Deval Patrick talks with UTEC staff member Anthony Febo, 21, during a workshop on gun violence at the United Teen Equality Center in Lowell yesterday. Febo recited a rap poem he wrote to the group at the social-service agency. SUN / DAVID H. BROW

LOWELL -- In the first three months of this year, Lowell police recovered 22 illegally possessed firearms and saw an alarming 20 percent increase in gun incidents over the same time period last year.

In the last 2 1/2 weeks, five people have been shot in the city. One died.

"This is not a police problem," said Lowell Deputy Police Superintendent Arthur Ryan. "It is a community problem."

Since 2002, there have been 40 homicides, 70 percent of which involved guns, "and it's not getting any better," Ryan added.

Gov. Deval Patrick, speaking about gun violence to

a crowd of 150 teens and officials at the Traffick Jam Community Workshop at the United Teen Equality Center yesterday, said society's complacency is unacceptable. He used the platform to boost the "Act to Reduce Firearm Violence," a bill proposed by his administration to strengthen the state's already tough gun laws.

"We accept more of this as OK than we should," Patrick said of shootings reported nearly daily on the news. "We see it as poor people, people of color, people whose lives are already a mess who are taking it out on each other. We act like it is OK. It is not OK. It is never OK."

Patrick's bill, which was not acted on by the Legislature in its last session, would:

- * Limit gun purchases to one per month.
- * Make it a felony, punishable by 10 years in prison, for possessing a gun while committing a misdemeanor that involves use of force.
- * Require private gun sales to be conducted at a licensed dealer so the transaction can be entered into the electronic firearms database.
- * Prohibit anyone without a machine-gun license, aside from police officers in training, from handling a machine gun.

Secretary of Public Safety Kevin Burke pointed out that individuals on the national terrorist watch list are stopped from boarding an airplane, but not prohibited from purchasing firearms.

"That is how silly the current national gun policy, or lack of it, is," he said.

The Citizens for Safety's Citizens Action Group, led by Executive Director Nancy Robinson, has

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launched a postcard campaign to support Patrick's push to improve the state firearms database, by requiring private gun sales to be recorded by licensed dealers.

"We are losing a whole generation through this problem," Robinson said. "Our young people are either going to prison or to their graves. It is still too easy for young people and the wrong people, criminals, to get their hands on guns."

Eddie Mercado, 19, shared his life story with the group. At 7 years old, he was an enthusiastic honor-roll student, who was subsequently abused and molested. He bounced from home to home.

Five years ago, he moved to Lowell and spent a lot of time with his cousins, Moises Cotto and John Tejada, who he said "were like brothers to me."

Four years ago, Moises, 19, and John, 13, were killed in a drive-by shooting at their Lincoln Street home.

"I felt empty," Mercado said, adding he joined a gang, dropped out of high school and was stabbed three times.

With the help of UTEC, he has since earned his GED, joined the Governor's Statewide Youth Advisory Council and is now attending Middlesex Community College.

"Thank you for the example your whole life has offered," Patrick said to Mercado.

Robinson said the time has come for someone to start asking the tough questions, to connect the dots between the shootings and where the guns are coming from.

Many illegal gun sales are completed through

"straw purchases," where people buy large amounts of guns for people, such as felons, who otherwise would not qualify to purchase them.

"You must make your voices heard, you must tell your stories," Patrick told the teens, urging them to call or write their state representatives. "The status quo is not acceptable."

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