



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

LET'S TALK, MARATHON COUNTY

How Should We Prevent Gun Deaths in Our Communities?

Preventing Gun Deaths Deliberative Dialogues

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GOALS OF LET’S TALK, MARATHON COUNTY

In the fall of 2023, the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service (WIPPS) launched Let’s Talk, Marathon County.¹ The project uses deliberative dialogues to foster civil and constructive conversations among residents on a variety of public issues. The Let’s Talk team assembled a panel of nearly 100 community members from across Marathon County to meet in groups of approximately 10 people to engage in conversations about youth mental health, homelessness, immigration, voting and elections, child care, and preventing gun deaths. The goal was to select a panel of community members who reflected a range of political affiliations, demographics, and rural and urban areas of the county.

DELILBERATIVE DIALOGUES ON PREVENING GUN DEATHS

This report summarizes the dialogues held on the topic of *How Do We Prevent Gun Deaths in Our Communities?* In July and August 2025, seven deliberative dialogues were conducted on this topic. These dialogues were held in two locations in Wausau, as well as in Mosinee; two dialogues were held virtually. A total of 48 of the 92 Let’s Talk panelists participated, reflecting a distribution of approximately 25% liberal, 50% moderate, and 25% conservative participants. Two additional Spanish language dialogues with 22 participants were conducted in-person in Wausau.

An Issue Guide was provided to the participants and it consisted of background information, including a curated page of background statistics on gun deaths. In addition, the issue guide outlined three potential approaches to the topic of preventing gun deaths, including (1) Limit Access to Firearms; (2) Increase Protection, Deterrence, and Enforcement, and (3) Address Mental Health and Social Problems. Trained moderators guided participants through a discussion of action items within these approaches, including their benefits and drawbacks. The table below summarizes the overall views of action items within and across the dialogues. Caution should be taken to not over-generalize these characterizations to assume that they are a reflection of the views of all participants. Rather, they give a general sense of the groups’ leaning.

Dialogue Participants’ Views about Actions to Address Gun Deaths (Moderator(s) and Observer Characterizations)

| Issue Approach and Action Items | Let’s Talk Deliberative Dialogues* | | | | | | | | All Avg.** | All Overall** |
|--|------------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------|----------|-----|---------------|------------------|
| | 1^ | 2 | 3^^ | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | | |
| | 7/16/2025 | 7/24/2025 | 7/26/2025 | 7/29/2025 | 7/31/2025 | 8/5/2025 | 8/7/2025 | | | |
| APPROACH 1: LIMIT ACCESS TO FIREARMS | | | | | | | | | | |
| Improve gun safety and protections for children | | Mixed* | Support | Support | Support | Support | Support | 2.8 | Support | |
| Implement mandatory waiting periods and background checks | | Mixed | Mixed | Support | Support* | Support | Support | 2.7 | Support | |
| Improve red flag laws that allow temporary removal of firearms | Support | Oppose* | | Mixed | Support | Support | Support | 2.5 | Support | |
| Restrict access to assault weapons and high-capacity magazines | Mixed | Oppose* | Mixed | Mixed | Support | Support | | 2.2 | Mixed | |
| APPROACH 2: INCREASE PROTECTION, DETERRENCE, AND ENFORCEMENT | | | | | | | | | | |
| Empower police and courts; increase patrols, resources, and tougher sentencing | Mixed* | Support | | Mixed | Mixed | Mixed* | Mixed* | 2.2 | Mixed | |
| Enact "Stand Your Ground" laws | Mixed | | Mixed | Support* | Mixed* | Mixed* | Oppose* | 2.0 | Mixed | |
| Expand armed security and citizens' ability to carry firearms at vulnerable locations | Mixed | Mixed | Mixed | Mixed* | Mixed | Oppose | Mixed* | 1.9 | Mixed | |
| Increase law-abiding individuals' ability to carry firearms, including concealed carry | Oppose | Mixed* | Oppose | | Mixed* | Mixed | Oppose* | 1.5 | Oppose | |
| APPROACH 3: ADDRESS MENTAL HEALTH AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS | | | | | | | | | | |
| Make mental health services more accessible, affordable, and available | Support | Support | Support | Support | Support | Support | | 2.7 | Support | |
| Increase social connection through after-school programs, mentorships, and clubs | Support* | Support* | Support | Mixed | | Support* | Support | 2.5 | Support | |
| Enhance domestic violence intervention programs | Support | | | | | Mixed* | Support* | 2.7 | Support | |
| Invest in economies in high-crime areas to address socioeconomic factors | Mixed | | | Oppose* | | Mixed | Mixed* | 1.8 | Mixed | |

If a cell is blank, the notes indicated that the proposal was not discussed by the group or was only raised by one person without affirmation for or against by other participants.

There was overall consistency between the full Let’s Talk panelists’ dialogues and the two Spanish language dialogues in terms of the participants’ views of the action items.²

¹ Let’s Talk, Marathon County is fully funded by New Pluralists: <https://newpluralists.org/>. WIPPS was chosen from a pool of almost 800 applicants and no taxpayer dollars were used for this project. More information can be found at: <https://wipps.org/lets-talk/>.

² See the discussion surrounding Table 13 in the full report for an explanation of the methods used to create the summary table shown above. Table 14 in the full report provides a summary of the Spanish language dialogues.

At the conclusion of each deliberative dialogue, participants were asked to complete a brief, 20-question survey about their experiences engaging in the discussion. The questions were designed to gather information about whether the dialogues expanded participants' views on the issue of preventing gun deaths; helped them consider tradeoffs and solutions; increased appreciation for diverse viewpoints; and increased interest in engaging in community issues. Overall, 100% of dialogue participants completed the survey.³ Participants in the dialogues reported:

- **Greater confidence in their community's ability to have civil discussions about preventing gun deaths.** About 90% reported that the dialogue made them "somewhat more" or "much more" confident that their community can engage in civil conversations about preventing gun deaths.
- **Considerable common ground about preventing gun deaths, despite political differences, and high levels of respect for those with differing views.** Each dialogue included participants with a range of political affiliations. Even with these differences, 85% reported "quite a bit" or "a great deal" of common ground about the topic. A similar percentage (85%) reported that those with differing views acted "very respectfully" toward one another.
- **Increased understanding of gun deaths and the pros and cons of potential solutions.** More than half (53%) reported that participating in a dialogue helped them better understand the issues surrounding preventing gun deaths and helped them evaluate the pros and cons of solutions "quite a bit" or a "great deal."
- **Expanded perspectives and viewpoints.** Many participants (at least half, or 57%) reported that the dialogue helped them "quite a bit" or "a great deal" to consider perspectives or viewpoints they had not considered before.
- **Input was highly-valued.** Nearly 9 out of 10 dialogue participants (94%) responded that they valued "quite a bit" or "a great deal" the input provided by the other participants about the topics they discussed.
- **Increased appreciation for differing viewpoints.** Nearly three-fourths (71%) reported that participating in a dialogue made them value differing viewpoints "somewhat more" or "much more" than before the dialogue. A similar percentage (70%) reported being "somewhat more" or "much more" comfortable interacting with members of their community who hold different viewpoints from theirs.
- **Increased interest in community engagement.** About 61% of dialogue participants reported that participating in the dialogue made them want to be "quite a bit" or "a great deal" more involved with community decision-making about preventing gun deaths and made them want to learn "quite a bit" or "a great deal" more about the topic.

WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT LET'S TALK, MARATHON COUNTY?

Detailed summary reports on all of the Let's Talk, Marathon County topics can be found at <https://wipps.org/lets-talk/>

- How Do We Support Youth Mental Health in Our Communities?
- How Do We Address Homelessness in Our Communities?
- How Do We Manage Immigration in Our Country?
- Voting and the U.S. Presidential Election System
- How Do We Ensure Access to Safe, Quality, and Affordable Child Care?
- How Should We Prevent Gun Deaths in Our Communities?

For more information about conducting a Let's Talk dialogue, please inquire with Luke Rudolph, WIPPS Let's Talk, Marathon County program coordinator at luke.rudolph@wisconsin.edu.

³ Spanish language dialogue participants' survey results are reported separately in Appendix D in the full report. Their general pattern of responses follows those of the Let's Talk panelists whose results are summarized here.