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Testimony

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**Accidental Shootings:
Data on Children**

Statement of
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before the
Montgomery County Council
Montgomery County, Maryland



Good evening. It's a pleasure to appear before this council. We're here to discuss the issue of accidental shootings, in particular, accidental shootings involving children.

The U.S. General Accounting Office recently published a report on accidental shootings.¹ That report provides information on two important points with regard to accidental shootings involving children. First, the number of children involved in accidental shootings is not trivial, and second, the number of accidents that result in injuries far exceeds the number of fatal accidental shootings.

Over the last decade (1980-1988), some 15,000 people were killed in the United States by accidental discharges of firearms. Among the 1501 victims in 1988, the most recent year for which data were available, 18 percent were children under age 15. Firearms are the fourth leading cause of accidental deaths among children 5 to 14 years old, and the third leading cause of accidental deaths among 15 to 24-year-olds. Across all age groups, accidental shootings are the sixth leading cause of potential years of life lost due to accidents.

GAO examined accidental firearms-related fatalities for calendar years 1988 and 1989, in a statistically valid, nationally projectable sample. Of the 107 cases we analyzed, over half

¹U.S. General Accounting Office, Accidental Shootings: Many Deaths and Injuries Caused by Firearms Could Be Prevented, PEMD-91-9. Washington, D.C.: March 1991.

involved instances where children age 18 or younger accidentally shot and killed themselves or another person, and 1 in 5 cases involved children under the age of 13.

Although it has long been assumed that far more injuries than deaths occur from accidental discharges of firearms, no information has been available on the actual number of injuries. GAO examined data on accidental shootings in ten cities and found that in 1988 and 1989 these areas had a ratio of 105 injuries for each death. Although this estimate, based on a judgmental sample, is not generalizable to the country as a whole, it is nevertheless reasonable to infer from it that the number of accidental injuries due to firearms nationwide is substantial and far exceeds the number of fatalities.

The number of individuals being injured and killed each year in accidental shootings is substantial. The human, economic, and public health costs of these shootings to the victims, their families, and society are considerable. While GAO did not make a determination of which approach to reducing the number of deaths and injuries would be most effective, we did take the position that the magnitude of the problem requires that all possible efforts be made to reduce the number of accidental shootings.