News

A Brown-skinned young woman, boy, and middle-aged woman look emotional. The young wo

Jazel Ramos, niece of victim Eduardo Uvalde, cries while visiting a memorial site July 6, 2022, in Highland Park, Ill., after a mass shooting at a Fourth of July parade. Catholic leaders in Illinois hailed the state's newly enacted ban on assault weapons, high-capacity magazines and switches. J.B. Pritzker signed the measure into law Jan. 10, 2023, and it took effect immediately. (CNS photo/Cheney Orr, Reuters)

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Catholic leaders in Illinois are hailing the state's newly enacted ban on assault weapons, high-capacity magazines and switches.

"The Catholic Conference of Illinois would like to commend the Illinois General Assembly and Governor J.B. Pritzker on banning assault weapons and high-capacity magazines with the passage of House Bill 5471," the state's Catholic bishops said in an undated message posted to the conference's website.

The bishops said that the state had "too many times ... witnessed the horror of mass shootings," adding they hoped the legislation would "help to provide some peace in our communities going forward."

On Jan. 10, Pritzker signed into law the Protect Illinois Communities Act (H.B. 5471), banning the sale and distribution of assault weapons, or semi-automatic rifles, shotguns and pistols designed for military use; high-capacity magazines, ammunition devices capable of feeding 10 or more rounds into a gun chamber; and switches (also known as auto sears), small attachments that enable semi-automatic weapons to function as fully automatic firearms."

Under the new law, which went into immediate effect, existing owners of semi-automatic rifles must register their ownership.

Illinois is now the ninth state to implement such a ban. California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York, along with the District of Columbia, have passed similar laws. Minnesota, Virginia and Washington state now require additional regulation for assault weapons.

During the signing ceremony, Pritzker recalled a July 4, 2022 mass shooting in Highland Park, Illinois, which left seven dead – including the parents of a 2-year-old boy – and 36 injured. Accused shooter Robert Crimo III used an AR-15 style semi-automatic rifle in the attack, a weapon he had managed to purchase despite previous mental health issues. In December 2022, Crimo's father was charged with felony reckless conduct for sponsoring the gun license for his then-underaged son in 2019.

Assault rifles and high-capacity magazines "are weapons of war and … should not be available to any civilian, anywhere," Fr. Michael Pfleger, pastor of St. Sabina Parish in Chicago, told OSV News. "You can't hunt with them; there's nothing left to eat. These are not for home protection. These are for war, not for individuals and communities."

He noted the tragedy of the Highland Park mass shooting had "put new breath" into long-standing community efforts to reduce gun violence, which disproportionately impacts people of color.

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According to the Centers for Disease Control,, the overall rate of firearm-related homicides increased 34.6% from 2019-2020.

Assault weapon sales have surged in recent decades. The National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF), an industry trade organization, estimated some 2.8 million semi-automatic rifles were imported or manufactured by the U.S. in 2020. NSSF data also puts the number of semi-automatic rifles now in circulation in the U.S. at 24.4 million, a 4.5 million increase since its 2020 total.

The Geneva, Switzerland-based Small Arms Survey reported that as of 2017 there were more than 1 billion firearms in global circulation, some 85% of them in civilian hands. In the U.S., there were 393.3 million weapons, some 63.3 million more than the total population of about 330 million – a ratio of 120.5 guns per 100 residents, according to the group's data.

The day after the May 2022 school shooting in Uvalde, Texas -- which claimed the lives of 19 children and two adults -- Pope Francis said in an audience that "it is time to say enough to the indiscriminate trafficking of arms."

The U.S. bishops echoed that plea in a June 2022 letter to Congress, calling for "the passage of reasonable gun measures" as one of "many steps toward addressing this endemic of violence."

The Illinois bishops said they recognized their state's new law "will not solve all the challenges associated with mass shootings," since "we live in a violent culture, mental health needs are many, and too many families are in crisis."

At the same time, the ban is an important step, said Pfleger, who said he had contacted Pritzker's office to express his gratitude.

"I hope this (legislation) will continue to have a ripple effect across the country," said Pfleger.