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Handguns for 18-Year-Olds?

Just in the past year, the National Rifle Association sought to scuttle basic gun controls enacted by the District of Columbia, including a ban on powerful semiautomatic weapons in the nation's capital. The group also blocked common-sense efforts in Congress to bar people on the F.B.I.'s terrorist watch list from buying guns and explosives. It kept open the deadly loophole in federal law that lets gun traffickers and other unqualified buyers to obtain weapons without background checks at gun shows.

Last week, President Obama had barely nominated a new director for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, which is supposed to control firearms — Andrew Traver, a well-qualified career professional — before the gun lobby denounced him as “deeply aligned with gun control advocates.” Mr. Traver's sin? Associating with a police chief's group that wants to reduce the use of handguns on city streets. The nomination was rated dead on arrival in the next Congress, where the N.R.A. will, if anything, be more powerful.

Finally, the gun lobby has filed two lawsuits in federal court in Lubbock, Tex., to compel the State of Texas to allow young people between the ages of 18 and 20 years old to buy handguns and carry them concealed in public places.

The first suit challenges the longstanding federal law prohibiting licensed gun dealers from selling handguns to anyone under 21 years old. The second case contests a Texas law setting 21 as the minimum age for carrying a concealed weapon.

As a legal matter, both lawsuits should fail. In its recent Second Amendment rulings, the Supreme Court struck down complete bans on handgun ownership, but explicitly left room for limits on gun ownership and possession by felons and the mentally ill, and other reasonable restrictions like Texas' age limitations. The Supreme Court has said nothing to suggest that the Second Amendment requires Americans to allow armed teenagers in their communities.

Beyond the dubious legal claims, the idea that young individuals ages 18 to 20 have a constitutional right to buy weapons and carry them loaded and concealed in public is breathtakingly irresponsible.

Young people in that age range commit a disproportionate amount of gun violence. F.B.I. crime data from 2009 shows arrests for murder, nonnegligent homicides and other violent crimes peaking from ages 18 to 20. That age group accounts for about 5 percent of the population but nearly 20 percent of homicide and manslaughter arrests, and nearly twice the number of such arrests for those ages 30 to 34, according to the F.B.I. figures.

What the N.R.A. should be doing is keeping our streets and our teenagers safer by working to extend the prohibition on guns sales to people 18 to 20 years old by licensed dealers to include unlicensed sellers at gun shows and elsewhere.