

GUNS IN OUR COMMUNITY: GUN VIOLENCE FACTS AND PUBLIC HEALTH PREVENTION STRATEGIES

**League of Women Voters of North County San Diego
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Gun violence is a major public health problem and a leading cause of premature death, illness, and disability in the U.S. In 2018, the national office of the League of Women Voters stated that “Curbing gun violence is a critical matter of public safety, public health, and public confidence.” Regardless of individual views about gun ownership, there is widespread agreement that reducing firearm deaths and injuries is a goal of the utmost importance. Following are recent statistics about gun violence and examples of public health strategies for reducing gun violence and enhancing public safety. See References (below) for information about published studies underpinning the research findings.

Gun Ownership

- With 4.4% of the world’s population, Americans own 42% of all firearms owned by civilians worldwide.¹
- There are more than 393 million guns circulating in the US., approximately 120 for every 100 people.²
- 31% of all U.S. households have firearms, and 22% of American adults own at least one firearm.³

Firearm Shootings, Injuries and Deaths

- 125,000 Americans are shot each year--- over one million in the past decade.⁴
- The U.S. gun death rate hit a 20-year high in 2017. Nearly 40,000 Americans were killed by guns, an average of 109 per day.⁵
- In 2017, 60% of firearm deaths were suicides, 37% were homicides, and others were unintentional.⁵
- Unintentional firearm injuries resulted in almost 500 deaths and 21,000 nonfatal injuries in 2016.⁶
- 44% of Americans report knowing a person who has been shot and 25% report that they or someone in their family has been threatened or intimidated by someone using a gun.⁷
- The U.S. has a gun homicide rate 25 times higher, a gun suicide rate 8 times higher, and a young American (15-19 years) gun murder rate 82 times higher than its peer high-income countries.⁴

Risks for Firearm Injury and Death

- 3 categories of high risk for firearm injury and death: 1) Individuals with suicidal or homicidal ideation or intent; 2) Individuals with a history of violent behavior, violent victimization, abusive partners, alcohol and drug abuse, serious and poorly controlled mental illness, and/or impaired cognition/judgment; and 3) Individuals in a high-risk demographic group, including: children and adolescents; Black and Hispanics aged 15-34 (homicide); and middle-aged and older White men (suicide).⁸
- Guns in the home are 11 times more likely to be used in a suicide, 7 times more likely to be used in a firearm assault or homicide, and 4 times more likely to be used in accidental shootings than to be used in self-defense against a home intruder.⁹

Homicides and Gun Assaults

- Access to a gun doubles the risk of death by homicide.⁷
- Nationwide, gun homicides are concentrated in cities, and within these cities, gun homicides are most prevalent in racially segregated neighborhoods with high rates of poverty.⁷
- Black Americans are 10 times more likely than White Americans to die by gun homicide.⁷
- Black males are 16 times more likely than White males to be shot and injured in firearm assaults.⁷

Suicides

- Over 50% of all suicides in the U.S. are carried out with a firearm. ⁴
- Access to a gun increases the risk of death by suicide 3 times, regardless of the type of gun, method of storage, or number of guns in the household. ¹⁰
- About 85% of gun suicide attempts end in death. Most attempters (95%) don't die unless they use a firearm. ⁷
- White males (40% of male population) account for nearly 80% of gun suicides. In 2016, from age 45 onward, the suicide rate for White males was at least 3 times that for Black or Hispanic males. ^{4,11}
- Suicide is the leading cause of death among military veterans, and firearms account for 68% of the suicides. ¹²
- Suicide rates are much higher in states with high rates of gun ownership, even after controlling for state differences in poverty, urbanization, unemployment, alcohol/drug abuse, and mental illness. ²

Domestic Violence

- In an average month, 52 U.S. women are shot to death by an intimate partner, and many more are wounded. ⁷
- Nearly 1 million women alive today have been shot or shot at by an intimate partner. ⁷
- Abused women are 5 times more likely to be killed by their abuser if the abuser has access to a gun. ⁴
- U.S. women are 16 times more likely to be killed with a gun than are women in other high-income countries. ⁷

Children and Youth at Risk

- Each year nearly 1,600 children and teens are killed by guns, and 3 million witness gun violence. ^{4,7}
- Firearms are the 2nd leading cause of injury-related death for U.S. children and teens (after motor vehicle deaths) and the first leading cause of death for Black children and teens. ⁷
- Black children and teens are 15 times more likely than White children to die by gun homicide. ⁷
- 1 out of every 3 homes with children have guns, and 1 in every 3 hand guns is kept loaded and unlocked. Most children know where parents store their guns. ²
- Between 2007 and 2016, 915 children under 18 died in unintentional shootings. ⁴ 89% of child shooting deaths occurred at home, mostly when children were playing with a loaded gun in their parent's absence. ²
- Firearms are the most common method of suicide by males and the second most frequently used method by females between the ages of 10 and 24. ¹³
- More than 75% of guns used by children and youth in child and teen suicide attempts were kept in homes of the victim, a relative, or a friend. ⁴

Mass Shootings and School Shootings

- Mass shooting events have been increasing in the U.S., but account for only 1-2% of firearm deaths annually. ³
- Assault weapons have been the weapon of choice for assailants intending fatalities and mass chaos. ²

Mass Shootings and School Shootings (continued)

- 346 mass shootings were reported in the U.S. in 2017, killing 437 people and injuring another 1,802. Tracked by the Gun Violence Archive, mass shootings are defined as a single incident in which “4 or more people, not including the shooter, are shot and/or killed at the same general time and location.”¹⁴
- 2018 broke the record for school shootings, with 94 people shot, 33 killed, and more than 25,000 students exposed to gunfire.¹⁵
- 57 school shootings killed or injured at least one victim at a K-12 school since December 2012. Victims included 63 students killed, 14 adults killed, and 112 students or adults wounded.¹⁶
- More than 4 million children endured school lockdowns during the 2017-18 school year, and at least 61% were related to firearms. On a typical day, at least 16 campuses locked down.¹⁵
- A 2018 Pew Research Center study found 57% of teens are “very worried” or “somewhat worried” about a mass shooting at their school; 63% of parents shared their fears of a shooting at their children’s school.¹⁷
- Children’s witnessing, or even worrying about the threat of gun violence, has been associated with increased anxiety, anger, depression, hyper-vigilance, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and other symptoms of trauma.¹⁸

Law Enforcement

- Law Enforcement Officers (LEOs) in high gun states were 3 times more likely to be murdered than LEOs working in low-gun states over a 14-year period.¹⁹
- A RAND report reviewing high-quality firearm studies found some evidence that “stand your ground laws” (which remove the requirement for gun owners to attempt to retreat from a situation before using lethal force) were associated with increased rates of homicide. For example, a 2013 study found states passing such laws saw a 6%-11% increase in homicide rates. A Florida study found a 32% increase in firearm homicides following enactment of the law in 2005.²⁰
- Problem-oriented police initiatives (e.g., focusing on problem identification, risk analysis, targeted prevention/intervention) to reduce gun violence vs “zero tolerance” policing (e.g., indiscriminate crackdown on all crimes) are associated with statistically significant decreases in gun homicides, gun-related assaults, and youth homicides. These initiatives address the culture and community of gun violence in addition to providing sanctions.²¹

Economic Burden in the U.S.

- The estimated annual cost of gun injury in 2012 exceeded \$229 billion, about 1.4% of GDP.^{3,14}
- Gun violence costs each American taxpayer approximately \$700 every year.¹⁴
- Societal costs of firearm injury include work loss, medical and mental health care, emergency transportation, police and criminal justice activities, insurance claim processing, employer costs, and decreased quality of life. Areas of high violent crime also decrease property values, disrupt social services, and diminish investment in communities.²²

Gun Injury Prevention Research

- Congressional legislation (aka the “Dickey Amendment”) under pressure from gun lobbyists in 1996 stated that “none of the funds made available for injury prevention and control at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) may be used to advocate or promote gun control.” Extended to the National Institutes of Health in 2011, this policy effectively prevented federal funding for firearm research. In March 2018, a new spending bill clarified that CDC can conduct gun violence research but did not provide funding for this effort. ²
- Research on gun violence prevention has recently increased, with some support from private and state funding. Project LongSHOT, a joint venture between Dr. Garen Wintemute (UC Davis) and Dr. David Studdert (Stanford) is studying 25 million Californians to determine: “Are you more or less likely to die if you own a firearm?” ²³

California Gun Violence Statistics

- Over 3,000 Californians are killed by gun violence each year, and more than 6,000 are shot. ²⁴
- From 2000-2015, 49% of California’s firearm-related deaths were homicides, resulting in 24,922 deaths. ²⁵
- California men were 7.2 times more likely to be homicide victims than women. ²⁵
- Nearly 50% of California’s intimate partner homicides involved a gun. ²⁵
- Black men had the highest rate of firearm mortality, but Hispanic men had the greatest number of gun deaths. ²⁶
- In 2015, Central Valley counties had the highest homicide rates. Since 2002, Los Angeles County homicide rates dropped among Black and Hispanic men. ²⁵
- From 2000-2015, 47% of California’s firearm deaths were suicides, resulting in 23,682 deaths. ²⁵
- California men had 8.5 times more suicides than women; White men had the highest rate. ²⁵
- In 2015, suicides were highest in rural California counties and lowest in Los Angeles County and the Bay Area. ²⁵
- California has had 137 mass shooting deaths since 1982, but has a low gun death rate per 100,000 people. ²⁷
- Gun violence is estimated to cost Californians about \$18 billion annually, or \$479 per resident. ²⁴
- Giffords Law Center rated California #1 (“A”) among states based on strength of their gun laws and low gun death rate, but also encouraged more laws to regulate the sale of dangerous firearm assembly kits and more investment in lifesaving-community based programs to reduce gun homicides and suicides. ²⁸

Public Health Strategies for Reducing Firearm Violence

Public health strategies draw on research and focus on prevention, addressing factors that increase or decrease the risks of firearm violence. This approach has reduced deaths, injuries, and illness in other areas, such as auto safety (seatbelts, airbags), smoking, and obesity. Below are examples of public health strategies.

- Ban the purchase and sale of assault weapons and high capacity ammunition magazines throughout the U.S. States that restrict assault weapons have the lowest per capita homicide rates. ²
- Establish universal criminal background checks for all firearm purchases, including private sales at gun shows, on the Internet, and in classified ads. Currently, 22% of firearm transfers nationwide proceed without a check. ²⁹ States with universal background checks and a mandatory waiting period prior to purchase have lower suicide rates than states without this legislation. ²

Public Health Strategies for Reducing Firearm Violence (continued)

- Prohibit dealers in every state from transferring a firearm before receiving a confirmed background check approval. Currently, in most states, if the National Instant Criminal Background Check System takes longer than 3 days to approve a sale, the store owner can sell the gun without approval (aka the “Charleston Loophole”).³⁰
- Prohibit sale of gun kits and parts that enable people to build unregistered and untraceable firearms.
- Expand mental health prohibitions against gun ownership.³¹
- Enact gun violence restraining order laws (also called Extreme Risk Protection Orders) in all states to temporarily prohibit an individual from purchasing firearms when deemed by a judge to pose a danger to self or others.
- Pass laws in all states requiring domestic abusers and other prohibited possessors to turn in their guns to law enforcement or licensed gun dealers when they become prohibited from owning firearms.³¹
- Close loopholes in federal gun prohibitions to ensure that stalkers and dating partners are barred from gun ownership just like other dangerous abusers.
- Implement Child Access Prevention (CAP) laws in all states and launch a media campaign to prevent child access to firearms.³¹ Currently, states with CAP laws have lower unintentional deaths than those without CAP laws.²
- Improve gun safety technology to prevent unauthorized gun access and misuse, including accidental shootings. The U.S. General Accounting Office estimated that 31% of accidental deaths could be prevented with 2 devices: a child proof safety lock and a loading indicator.²
- Oppose concealed carry reciprocity legislation, which would allow anyone with a concealed carry permit in one state to carry a concealed weapon in all states. In Right-to-Carry States, many persons with criminal histories may legally carry concealed guns. A 2017 Johns Hopkins study found that 83% of gun owners want much higher safety standards for concealed carry permit holders than are now required in Right-To-Carry states and states that do not require permits to legally carry a concealed weapon.³²
- Pass laws to require the reporting of lost or stolen firearms.³¹
- Restore funding to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for research on gun violence.¹⁴
- Train healthcare providers to question patients about firearm access and provide information about gun safety. No state or federal statutes prohibit providers from asking about firearm access when the information is relevant to the health of the patient or someone else (e.g., child, spouse, elderly relative). Research has shown patients are receptive to provider questions about firearm access and safety.³
- Support school initiatives to prevent gun violence, including risk assessment, interpersonal skills training and conflict resolution programs, mental health services for at-risk youth, resource officers, security systems, anonymous reporting tip lines, crisis plans and training, school preparedness drills, and annual reviews of school safety and emergency response procedures.
- Provide resources for school- and community-based prevention and intervention programs to prevent gun violence and prepare schools and communities for an emergency. Support multidisciplinary policies and programs that engage multiple sectors, including public health, primary and emergency health care, mental health care, education, law enforcement, juvenile justice, social services, local government, community organizations, business, media, faith-based groups, youth organizations, and victims of violence and their families.