



Children, Youth, and Gun Violence: Analysis

Each year, more than 20,000 children and youth under age 20 are killed or injured by firearms in the United States. The lethality of guns, as well as their easy accessibility to young people, are key reasons why firearms are the second leading cause of death among young people ages 10 to 19. Only motor vehicle accidents claim more young lives.

A majority of youth gun deaths are homicides. Suicides account for about one-third of all youth gun deaths, and unintentional shootings for about 7% of those deaths. Older teens, males, African American and Hispanic youth, and young people residing in urban areas are at particularly high risk for gun homicide; white adolescents, males, and youth living in rural areas are at highest risk for gun suicide.

Recent research estimates the economic costs of gun violence against children and youth at \$15 billion per year. Studies suggest that children exposed to gun violence at home, at school, in the community, or through the media can experience negative psychological effects including posttraumatic stress, poor school performance, increased delinquency, risky sexual behaviors, substance abuse, and desensitization to violence. All of these effects can make children and youth more prone to violence themselves.

To reduce youth gun violence, four strategies are key:

- ▶ **Reducing children's unsupervised exposure to guns.** Research indicates that educational efforts aimed at persuading children and youth to stay away from guns or behave responsibly around them are of limited effectiveness. Therefore, parents must protect children from unsupervised exposure to guns through careful parental monitoring and, if they

choose to keep guns in the home, by storing guns locked, unloaded, and separate from ammunition.

- ▶ **Engaging communities and strengthening law enforcement.** Although research in this area is limited, available evidence suggests that community leaders can promote young people's safety by sending unequivocal messages to youth that gun violence is not an acceptable way to resolve conflict. Law enforcement agencies can partner with community leaders in this effort through community-based policing approaches, which emphasize close collaboration between police and citizens to prevent crime before it occurs.
- ▶ **Changing the design of guns.** Studies indicate that requiring product safety features on guns could reduce unintentional shootings among children and youth. In addition, emerging technologies that would enable manufacturers to personalize guns could prevent unauthorized users like teenagers or thieves from operating the weapons.
- ▶ **Limiting the flow of illegal guns to youth.** In one national study of male high school sophomores and juniors, 50% of respondents reported that obtaining a gun would be "little" or "no" trouble—even though federal law bans most minors from possessing weapons. Federal and state laws regarding gun sales should be tightened so that fewer weapons are accessible to youth.

The physical, economic, and emotional toll of gun violence against children and youth is unacceptable. Regardless of one's position regarding adult ownership and use of guns, aggressive efforts are needed by the federal and state governments, working in partnership with local communities and parents, to reduce youth gun violence in the United States.

Recommendations

RECOMMENDATION 1

Congress and federal health agencies should set a goal of reducing youth gun homicide to levels comparable to those of other industrialized nations, engaging in a comprehensive effort to identify the causes of youth gun homicide and reduce its prevalence in American society.

RECOMMENDATION 2

Federal and state public health agencies should make youth gun suicide a central focus of their gun violence prevention and suicide prevention activities, developing and assessing methods for keeping guns away from youth at risk of suicide.

RECOMMENDATION 3

Federal, state, and local public health and law enforcement agencies should make a commitment to collecting better data about gun-related fatalities and injuries by supporting development of a national system for reporting violent deaths and injuries and a system for tracing all guns used in crimes.

RECOMMENDATION 4

Policymakers, mental health professionals, and educators should develop, implement, and evaluate treatment programs that help youth exposed to gun violence cope with trauma.

RECOMMENDATION 5

Federal and state policymakers, in conjunction with public health experts and educators, should initiate creative public awareness and educational efforts—and evaluate existing approaches—to encourage stronger parental monitoring of children’s exposure to guns and safe storage of guns in the home.

RECOMMENDATION 6

Federal, state, and local policymakers should develop and evaluate comprehensive, community-based initiatives to reduce youth gun violence—partnering with schools, faith communities, community service programs, parents, and young people.

RECOMMENDATION 7

Police should complement their existing efforts to deter youth gun carrying by developing and evaluating law enforcement approaches that include extensive police–community collaboration.

RECOMMENDATION 8

Congress should extend the jurisdiction of the Consumer Product Safety Commission or the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms to regulate guns as consumer products, establish regulations requiring product safety features on guns, and evaluate the effectiveness of product safety interventions. State governments should extend similar authority to their consumer product safety agencies.

RECOMMENDATION 9

Congress and state legislatures should institute tighter restrictions on gun sales so that fewer guns illegally end up in the hands of youth. A variety of approaches should be implemented and evaluated—in particular, closer oversight of licensed dealers, regulation of private sales, and mandated licensing of gun owners and registration of guns.

Article Summaries

Firearm-Related Death and Injury among Children and Adolescents

Lois A. Fingerhut and Katherine Kaufer Christoffel

Gun violence affects children and youth in many ways: psychologically, emotionally, financially, and legally. But first and foremost, it affects children's physical safety. This article reviews trends in firearm-related injury and death among Americans under age 20, and assesses which youth are most at risk for firearm death. The authors call for a concerted effort to reduce youth firearm deaths to levels comparable to those of other industrialized nations, using approaches that span the public health, criminal justice, and educational spheres.

Youth, Guns, and Violent Crime

Alfred Blumstein

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, youth homicide rates rose to extremely high levels, then fell dramatically by the end of the decade. This article describes how several interrelated factors fueled the rise in youth violence, including increased use of handguns by youth, the rise of illegal drug markets, and increased youth gun carrying. The author observes that youth violence declined beginning in the mid-1990s as drug markets shrank, law enforcement increased efforts to control youth access to guns, youth gun carrying decreased, and the robust economy provided legitimate jobs for young people.

Where the Guns Come From: The Gun Industry and Gun Commerce

Garen J. Wintemute

It is illegal for youth under 18 to own rifles or shotguns, and for those under 21 to own handguns. However, young people who want to obtain guns illegally often report little difficulty in doing so. This article focuses on how guns in the United States are manufactured, marketed, and sold in ways that make them attractive and accessible to youth. The author describes policies that hold promise for decreasing the flow of guns to youth.

Mitigating the Effects of Gun Violence on Children and Youth

James Garbarino, Catherine P. Bradshaw, and Joseph A. Vorrasi

Countless children and youth are exposed to gun violence at home, at school, in their communities, or through the media. This article reviews research regarding the psychological effects of exposure to gun violence on children and youth, which include anger, withdrawal, posttraumatic stress, and desensitization to violence. The authors recommend strategies that adults can employ to help children cope with gun violence.

The Costs of Gun Violence against Children

Philip J. Cook and Jens Ludwig

Gun violence imposes significant costs on society, but these costs can be difficult to quantify. This article estimates the costs of gun violence by assessing how much Americans would be willing to pay to reduce such violence. The authors find that although gun violence disproportionately affects the poor, it imposes costs on all Americans. Their analysis suggests that the cost of gun violence is approximately \$100 billion per year, of which at least \$15 billion is directly attributable to costs associated with gun violence against youth.

Behavior-Oriented Approaches to Reducing Youth Gun Violence

Marjorie S. Hardy

Advocacy groups on both sides of the guns issue frequently point to changing personal behavior—of both parents and children—as a key element in reducing youth gun violence. This article reviews research surrounding behavioral approaches to gun violence prevention, and highlights obstacles that hamper these programs' effectiveness, with particular focus on programs aimed at children and youth. The author concludes that overall, although behavioral programs can be improved, they hold only limited promise for reducing youth gun violence.

Product-Oriented Approaches to Reducing Youth Gun Violence

Stephen P. Teret and Patti L. Culross

Research from the injury prevention field suggests that changing the product design of guns may be a more effective way to prevent injuries than trying to change personal behaviors. Adding product safety features to guns could make them more difficult for children to fire unintentionally, or more difficult to use if stolen or obtained illegally. This article gives a brief history of efforts to make safer guns, and assesses the potential of the product safety approach for reducing youth gun violence.

Policing Guns and Youth Violence

Jeffrey Fagan

To combat youth gun violence, law enforcement agencies across the United States have adopted a variety of strategies. This article presents case studies of how eight cities policed gun crime, through police–citizen partnerships, aggressive enforcement against youth suspected of even minor criminal

activity, alternatives to arrest to change youth behavior, or a combination of approaches. The author concludes that although policing alone cannot contain youth gun violence, police departments can help shift social norms that contribute to such violence by carefully balancing enforcement with community collaboration.

Public Perspectives

The articles in this section shed light on the deeply held beliefs of Americans on both sides of the debate about youth gun violence. The first article, by Smith, reviews trends in public opinion regarding gun control, particularly policies that restrict youth access to guns. The second article, by Forman, examines how opinions are expressed by advocacy groups working on both sides of the gun issue.

Public Opinion about Gun Policies

Tom W. Smith

Children and Guns: Advocacy Groups Speak Out

James Forman, Jr.

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