Gun Violence and Public Health

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An Issue of Health

Health is determined by a wide variety of influences beyond biology, including familial, social, psychological, environmental, economic, political, legal, cultural and spiritual factors. Understanding and addressing these complex connections is a duty of health care providers.
A Public Health Crisis

There were 31,672 firearm related deaths in 2010, 87 deaths per day.

Firearm homicide rate in the US is 20 times higher than in other industrialized countries.

American children less than 15 years old are 12 times more likely to be killed by firearm than children in other industrialized countries.
A Public Health Crisis

Rather than provide protection, having a gun in the home is associated with an increased risk of completed suicide and homicide.

In states with more firearms people of all ages are more likely to be murdered.

11 children are killed with a gun every day in the U.S.
A Public Health Crisis

More than 1/3 of American households own guns

The majority of gun owners keep their guns unlocked and/or loaded

In 2010, firearms were the third-leading cause of injury-related deaths nationwide, trailing only poisoning and car accidents
Guns and Children

American children are 17 times more likely to be murdered by a firearm, 10 times more likely to die by suicide involving a firearm, and 9 times more likely to die from unintentional firearm injury than are children in other industrialized countries.

Rates of Homicide, Suicide, & firearm-Related Death Among Children—26 Industrialized Countries, Center for Disease Control Morbidity & Mortality Weekly Report, 1997
Gun Ownership

Americans own an estimated 310 million firearms.

Compared to states with the fewest guns, states with the most guns have, on average, nine times the rate of unintentional firearm deaths.

89% of unintentional shooting deaths of children occur in the home—and most deaths occur when children are playing with a loaded gun in their parents’ absence.
Guns and Suicide

Homes in which a suicide had occurred were 4.8 times more likely to contain a firearm than homes that had not experience a suicide.

90% of all suicide attempts with a firearm result in death while attempts by drug poisoning carry a 2% fatality rate.
Guns and Domestic Violence

Women in the U.S. are murdered by intimate or former partners approximately nine times more often than they are murdered by strangers.

An abusive partner’s access to a firearm increases the risk of homicide eightfold for women in abusive relationships.
High Risk Groups

The following groups are at higher risk than the general population of committing violent or firearms-related crimes, yet are not prohibited by law from purchasing guns:

Those convicted of violent or firearms-related misdemeanors
Those with a history of abusing alcohol
Those convicted of juvenile offenses
Groups: Prior Convictions

A study published in the Journal of the AMA looked at 5,923 authorized purchasers of handguns in California and found that those with at least one prior misdemeanor conviction were more than seven times as likely as those with no prior criminal history to be charged with a new offense after handgun purchase.

Groups: Alcohol Abuse

Similarly, numerous studies have associated alcohol abuse with a person’s tendency to engage in violent behavior. Studies have shown that heavy alcohol use was more common among firearm owners who also regularly carry the firearm for protection and who keep their firearm unlocked and loaded.

Proper Storage

The proper storage of firearms can reduce the danger.

The US General Accounting Office has estimated that 31% of accidental deaths caused by firearms might be prevented by the addition of two devices: a child-proof safety lock (8%) and a loading indicator (23%).

Risk and Mental Illness

Focusing only on mental health in relation to gun violence is a mistake.

Tackling the mental health issue won’t prevent a child from coming across an unsecured gun at home or make a difference in incidents like bar fights.

It must be recognized that persons with serious mental illness commit only a small proportion of firearm-related homicides.
Reporting Standards

The recent executive order from the President has modify reporting requirements to the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS). This will permit institutions or legal entities that adjudicate incompetence, make commitment decisions, or make legal (not clinical) judgments regarding danger to self or others, to report such actions to the NICS.
Reporting Standards

This order does not apply to clinicians, only to institutional and legal reporters.

It also does not apply to individuals who voluntarily seek admission to inpatient facilities.
Stopping Research

In 1996, wording was inserted into the CDC’s appropriations bill that prevented research on gun violence. Although the ban was lifted in 2012 by executive order, the House Appropriations Committee has refused to allow the CDC to study gun violence via funding restrictions.
Restricting Conversation

The Affordable Care Act prevents physicians from collecting information on patient gun ownership or use.

Brief counseling from a physician can favorably influence how patients store guns.

Strategies for Risk Reduction

An examination of the legal background reveals that, while absolute bans on all kinds of firearms are not an option, there is much that can be done to reduce the risk and frequency of gunshot injuries and deaths.

As with improvements in vehicle standards and the use of seatbelts that led to a reduction in traffic deaths, the same approach can be applied in gun safety.
Regulatory Strategies

Strengthen the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act with mandatory background checks on ALL gun sales. Re-institute waiting periods. Require states to provide NICS with information needed to do background checks.

Extending gun purchase and possession prohibitions to people known to be at high risk of committing firearm-related or violent crimes, such as violent misdemeanants, alcohol abusers, and serious juvenile offenders.
Regulatory Strategies

Renew and strengthen the Assault Weapons Ban of 1994 banning some semiautomatic firearms and most ammunition feeding devices holding more than 10 rounds of ammunition

A review of 56 mass shootings (incidents where at least four people were murdered with a gun) between 2009 and 2013 found that incidents where assault weapons or large capacity ammunition magazines were used resulted in 135% more people shot and 57% more killed, compared to other mass shootings

Mayors Against Illegal Guns, Analysis of Recent Mass Shootings 1 (Jan, 2013)
Mental Health Strategies

Increase access to mental health services
Individuals with mental illness engaged in regular treatment are considerably less likely to commit violent acts than those who could benefit from, but are not engaged in, appropriate health treatment

American Psychiatric Association Access to Firearm Arms by People with Mental Illness, 2009
Research Strategies

Support gun violence prevention research by removing legislative barriers to science based solutions to gun violence.

Build an evidence-based approach to gun violence prevention, which includes restoration of robust funding and training for epidemiological research in this area and gathering data that tracks gun-related deaths and injuries, safety interventions, and the impact of measures to reduce the incidence of gun violence over time.
Educational Strategies

Promote gun safety education by health care professionals

Make gun safety a public health priority and allow health care providers to provide gun safety education

Ensure that violence prevention, including gun safety is a core part of the training and continuing professional education of doctors, nurses, social workers, chaplains, teachers, and other professionals
Educational Strategies

Ensure that gun purchasers know:
The safe use, handling and storage of firearms;
Methods for securing and childproofing firearms;
The applicable laws relating to the possession, transportation and storage of firearms;
And knowledge of operation, potential dangers and basic competency in the ownership and usage of firearms.
Technology Strategies

Including product safety features, such as loading indicators and magazine disconnect mechanisms, and testing these for safety prior to sale.

Encouraging the development of new technologies that will increase gun safety, such as personalized guns.
Conclusions

Health professionals have always played a central role in solving public health crises. Just as the health care community has historically championed substantive injury prevention policies in other areas, it is time again for health care providers to demand concrete actions to reduce gun violence. We call on the health care community to give strong, vocal support to these powerful, life-saving recommendations2.