



**NATIONAL  
ASSOCIATION OF  
SCHOOL  
PSYCHOLOGISTS**

# Youth Gun Violence Fact Sheet

Gun violence poses a serious threat to America's children and youth. Existing data clearly point to the need for improved strategies for keeping guns out of the hands of children and youth and those who would harm them. Gun violence in schools is extremely rare, as are violent crimes committed by people with mental illness. However, the majority of youth murdered are killed with a firearm and nearly half of youth suicide deaths involve the use of a gun. Efforts to end youth gun violence must focus on accessibility and prevention. Additionally, federal safety and health agencies must be empowered to conduct comprehensive research into the causes of and solutions to this unacceptable source of harm to our children, families, and communities.

## **Firearm Deaths in the United States (CDC, 2012)**

- In 2010, there were 2,711 infant, child, and teen firearm deaths. On average there were seven such fatalities daily and 52 weekly.
- Between 1981 and 2010, 112,375 infants, children, and teens were killed by firearms. This is 25,000 more deaths than the number of soldiers killed in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, combined (Children's Defense Fund, 2013a).
- Of the 1,982 youth (age 10-19) murdered in 2010, 84% were killed by a firearm.
- Of the 1,659 teens (age 15-19) who committed suicide in 2010, 40% were by firearm.
- Of the 1,323 males (age 15-19) who committed suicide in 2010, 45% were by firearm.
- Of the 336 females (age 15-19) who committed suicide in 2010, 20% were by firearm.
- In 2010, across all age groups (and including adults), there were 31,672 individuals killed by firearms (with 61% of these deaths being suicide and 35% homicide).

## **Homicide and Suicide at School**

- Less than 1% of student homicides and suicides take place at school, on the way to or from school, or at a school sponsored event (Robers, Zhang, & Truman, 2012).
- During the 2009/2010 school year the odds of a student (age 5-18) being the victim of a school-associated homicide was one in 2.5 million. In comparison, the odds of a 5 to 19 year old being killed in a motor vehicle accident in 2010 were 1 in 16,000. (CDC, 2012).
- Most school-associated student homicides involve a firearm and a single victim and offender (Modzeleski et al., 2008).
- In 80% of school-associated firearm-related homicides and suicides, the weapons used were obtained from the home or from a friend or relative (Reza et al., 2003).

## **Guns and Other Weapons at Home and in School (CDC, 2012; Eaton et al., 2011; Okoro et al., 2005)**

- In 2011, 5% of high school students carried a gun on school property, and 7% were threatened or injured by a weapon (e.g., gun, knife, or club) on school property.
- Of the 50 states and the District of Columbia, Wyoming has the highest percentage of homes with guns (63%), the highest suicide rate (23 per 100,000), and the highest percentage of students carrying a gun to school (11%). Conversely, Massachusetts ranks 48th (out of 51) in terms of percentage of homes with firearms (13%), has one the lowest suicide rates (9 per 100,000), and the lowest reported percentage of students who acknowledged bringing a gun to school (2.5%).
- Among selected larger urban school districts Washington, DC, had the highest percentage of students carrying a gun to school (7.5%), and New York City had the lowest (2.3%).
- Overall, the prevalence of having carried a weapon on school property decreased during 1991–1999 (26%–17%) and did not change significantly during 1999–2011.

## Factors Related to School Shootings

- Studies of school shootings in the 1990s suggested that: a) shooters often had multiple, non-automatic guns; b) killers shot deliberately at individual victims and took their time doing so; c) theft was the dominant method by which shooters obtained weapons; d) all shootings were planned in advance; e) most youth had told peers before committing the acts; f) most reported having a history of feeling bullied or threatened; g) shooters often had a history of mental health problems; and h) many had made suicidal gestures before the incidents (Fein et al., 2002; Kleck, 2009; Redding & Shelf, 2001).
- According to the U.S. Secret Service, there is no profile for a school shooter. However, since shootings tend to be planned in advance and oftentimes youth tell others of the plan, a threat assessment approach is recommended (Fein et al., 2002).

## Youth Suicide and Firearms

The *Youth Suicide by Firearms Task Force* (1998), a group that included representatives from the American Medical Association; American Firearms Association; National Shooting Sports Foundation; National Center for Injury Control and Prevention Centers for Disease Control; and Children's Defense Fund reported the following:

- Firearms are the most common method of suicide by youth. This is true for males and females, younger and older adolescents, and for all races.
- The increase in the rate of youth suicide (and the number of deaths by suicide) over the past four decades is largely related to the use of firearms as a method.
- The most common location for the occurrence of firearm suicides by youth is the home.
- There is a positive association between the accessibility and availability of firearms in the home and the risk for youth suicide.
- The risk conferred by guns in the home is proportional to the number and accessibility (e.g., loaded and unsecured) of guns in the home.
- Guns in the home, particularly loaded guns, are associated with increased risk for suicide by youth, both with and without identifiable mental health problems or suicidal risk.
- If a gun is used to attempt suicide, a fatal outcome will result 78-90% of the time.
- Public policy initiatives that restrict access to guns (especially handguns) are associated with a reduction of firearm suicide and suicide overall, especially among youth.

## Availability and Storage of Firearms in the United States and Association With Violence

- A significant percentage of adults who have minor children living in their homes report that their firearms are not safely stored (Figure 1; Johnson, Miller, Vriniotis, Azrael, & Hemenway, 2006).
- Keeping firearms locked and unloaded and storing ammunition in a separate locked location are feasible and protective strategies to reduce injuries (Grossman et al., 2005; Reza et al., 2003).
- Parents should discuss safe storage and handling of firearms with their children (Reza et al., 2003). However, children's reports often contradict parental reports about their children's access to firearms, with children reporting knowing the location of firearms and handling firearms when parents said they did not. This is true whether or not parents lock firearms and discuss firearm safety with their children (Baxley & Miller, 2006; Grossman et al., 2005).
- The number of suicide, homicide, and unintentional firearm deaths among youth (ages 5-14) is higher in states and regions where guns are more prevalent (Miller, Azrael, & Hemenway, 2002b).
- States with a higher percentage of homes with firearms (as estimated by Okoro et al., 2005), tend to have higher rates of suicide by firearm (CDC, 2012;  $r = .78$ ).
- In the U.S., youth are disproportionately represented as victims and perpetrators of firearm homicide. Victimization is especially high among males, and African-American and Hispanic youth (Child Trends Data Bank, 2012; Dahlberg, 1998; Hepburn & Hemenway, 2004).
- One-quarter of adolescents in the U.S. reported having easy access to a gun in the home (Swahn, Hamming, & Ikeda, 2002).
- Increases in the overall homicide rate appear to be primarily attributable to an increase in firearm homicide by youth (Hepburn & Hemenway, 2004).
- There is a strong, significant relationship between gun availability and homicide; of all developed nations, the U.S. has the highest rate of civilian gun ownership, highest homicide rates, and weakest gun control laws (Hemenway & Miller, 2000; Hepburn & Hemenway, 2004).
- Cross-sectional studies have shown that areas with higher rates of possession of household firearms have disproportionately higher numbers of death by homicide (Miller, Azrael, & Hemenway, 2002a; Miller, Hemenway, & Azrael, 2007).
- The risks associated with a gun in the home (e.g., increased gun accidents, homicide, intimidation, completed suicide) are greater than their benefits, with no credible evidence showing that having a gun in the home assists in self-defense and reduced injury (Hemenway, 2011). Each time a home firearm is used in

self-defense there are on average, eleven completed and attempted firearm suicides, seven assaults and homicides with a firearm, and four accidental firearm deaths or injuries (Kellermann et al., 1998).

### Policy Issues Related to Curbing Gun Violence

- According to the Children's Defense Fund (2013b), loopholes in firearm safety laws have reduced their effectiveness. For example, the Brady Law, which required federal background checks for guns purchased from licensed retailers, did not require such checks for guns bought through private sales (and it is currently estimated that 40% of guns are bought from private sellers).
- States that conducted background checks for restraining orders and fugitive status had fewer homicide and suicide deaths. Firearm suicide deaths were lower for states with background checks for mental illness, fugitive status, and misdemeanors (Sen & Panjamapirom, 2012).
- Although development and evaluation is necessary, some have proposed that altering the design of firearms themselves will reduce accidental and intentional injury and/or death by firearm (Teret & Cluross, 2002).
- Most people with serious mental illness do not commit violent crimes, and the very few who do are unlikely to use a gun (Appelbaum & Swanson, 2010).
- Among the general public, there is fear and stigma of people with mental illness when, in fact, people with mental illness are far more likely to be the victims than perpetrators of violent crime (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, n.d).

### Effectiveness of Initiatives to Curb Gun Violence

- Problem-oriented police initiatives (e.g., a focus on problem identification, analysis, response, and intervention) to reduce gun violence vs. "zero tolerance" policing initiatives (e.g., indiscriminate cracking down on all crimes) are associated with a statistically significant decrease in gun homicide, gun related assault, and youth homicide. These initiatives address the culture and community of gun violence in addition to providing sanctions (Braga et al., 2008; Braga & Weisburd, 2012; Kennedy et al., 1996).
- "Pulling levers" is an approach with growing research support that deters continued offending by providing varied responses to violent offenders including direct and repeated communication that stresses crime deterrence and coordination with social services and community resources (Braga et al., 2008; Braga & Weisburd, 2012).
- Among those with a felony arrest, denial of gun purchase requests is associated with lower rates of gun offenses and violent crimes, compared to those who are allowed to buy a gun (White, Wintente, & Rivera, 1999).

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