DO GUNS MAKE YOU SAFER? THE EVIDENCE SAYS “NO”

When discussing firearms and violence, we often hear the belief that “guns make us safer.” However, this belief is not supported by the evidence. With a recent study estimating that there are more guns than people in the United States\(^1\) and with a rate of gun violence continually increasing, it is more imperative than ever to consider the evidence surrounding guns and gun violence. Below is an outline of peer-reviewed research that shows how easy access to firearms is associated with increased gun violence in all its forms.

**GUN OWNERSHIP**

U.S. firearm ownership rates exceed those of other high-income countries\(^2\) and Americans own 46% of the world’s civilian-owned firearms.\(^1\) Thirty percent of Americans report owning a gun,\(^3\) with estimates of the total number of privately-owned guns in the U.S. ranging from 265 million to nearly 400 million.\(^1,4,5\). The majority of gun owners (66%) report owning multiple guns\(^3\) and it is estimated that half of all guns are in the hands of just 3% of the US population.\(^4\)

**REASONS FOR GUN OWNERSHIP -- “PROTECTION”**

More than 6 in 10 Americans believe that a gun in the home makes it safer - a figure that has nearly doubled since 2000.\(^6\) This increase in perceived safety is reflected in shifting reasons for gun ownership. In a 2017 Pew Research survey, two-thirds (67%) of gun owners cited protection as a major reason for gun ownership.\(^3\) This represents a notable increase from the mid-1990s, when the majority of American gun owners cited recreation as their primary reason for gun ownership and fewer than half owned guns primarily for protection.\(^7\)

**HOW DOES ACCESS TO FIREARMS AFFECT GUN DEATHS?**

**HOMICIDE**

- Access to firearms - such as the presence of a gun in the home - is correlated with the increased risk for homicide victimization.\(^8,9\)
- State-level gun ownership is significantly related to firearm homicides.\(^10,11,12\)
- Among high-income countries, firearm ownership rates are associated with increased firearm-related death rates; the U.S. had the highest firearm ownership and death rates of all 27 countries examined in one study.\(^2\)

**DOMESTIC VIOLENCE HOMICIDE**

- An abused woman is 10 times more likely to be threatened with a gun than to defend herself with one.\(^13\) In fact, when an abuser has access to a firearm, the risk that their female partner will die increases more than five-fold.\(^14\)
- Access to firearms is associated with femicide across high-income countries. Women in the U.S., where gun ownership is highest, are at higher risk of homicide victimization than are women in any other high-income country.\(^15\)
SUICIDE

- Empirical evidence from ecologic and individual-level studies has consistently shown that access to firearms increases the risk of suicide.\(^8\)\(^,\)\(^9\)\(^,\)\(^16\)\(^,\)\(^17\)\(^,\)\(^18\)\(^,\)\(^19\)\(^,\)\(^20\)\(^,\)\(^21\)\n- Access to a gun in the home increases the odds of suicide more than three-fold.\(^8\)
- When there is easy access to a gun, firearm suicide risk increases further when that weapon is stored loaded and unlocked.\(^22\) In the U.S. where two out of five gun owners (38%) report there is always a loaded gun within easy reach at home,\(^3\) the ready availability of firearms is a significant risk factor for suicide and safer storage must be considered in prevention efforts.

CHILD AND UNINTENTIONAL DEATHS

- Availability of firearms is associated with an increased risk of unintentional firearms deaths for every age group; the mortality rate is seven times higher in the four states with the highest gun ownership rates as compared to the four states with the lowest gun ownership rates.\(^23\)
- The majority of victims killed in unintentional shootings are under age 25 - as are four out of five of the shooters.\(^24\)

GUNS AND CRIME RATES

- “Right-to-carry” (shall-issue) concealed carry laws are associated with higher rates of violent crime, and the size of the detrimental effects increase over time - presumably as more citizens carry guns on their person.\(^25\)
- State-level firearm ownership is associated with higher levels of firearm assault and firearm robbery.\(^26\)

**Bottom Line:** Despite many Americans believing that guns increase safety, overwhelming evidence shows firearm ownership and access is associated with increased homicide, suicide, unintentional firearm deaths, and injuries.

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References:


