

A Family Health Impact Analysis of Current United States Gun Policy

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ABSTRACT

Gun violence in the United States is an epidemic that threatens the health and safety of individuals and families. It also has a particularly disproportionate impact on Black and Brown communities, women, sexual and gender minorities, and those living in poverty. However, despite increased recognition of the pervasive, pernicious, and inequitable impacts of gun violence, federal policy to curb them remains relatively stagnant. A family health impact analysis suggests that public policy efforts can best support family well-being through laws that restrict gun ownership for those who have identifiable risk factors for violence; through expanded implementation of gun violence restraining orders; through requirements for both universal background checks at the federal level and national and community-specific gun violence awareness campaigns; and through incorporation of the expertise of family professionals.

Gun violence in the United States is a public health crisis.¹⁻⁵ The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention lists firearm-related injuries as one of the top five leading causes of death for Americans of all ages.⁶ In 2018, nearly 40,000 Americans were killed by guns—an average of 109 people per day—more than 30% of which were a result of homicide and 60% a result of suicide.⁶ Each year, 2,555 children die as a result of gun-related injuries, and more

than 600 women are shot and killed by an intimate partner.⁷

Gun violence does not affect all Americans equally. Disparities exist in the rates of both gun violence incidents and firearm deaths across race, class, and gender. For example, Black Americans are 10 times more likely than White Americans to be victims of gun violence,⁸ and 58% of homicide victims are Black, although they account for only 13% of the U.S.

population.⁹ Black men in particular are further disproportionately affected by gun violence: 91% of all Black homicide victims are male,⁹ and these victims are three times more likely to die by police than are White men.¹⁰ Socioeconomic disparities exist as well: neighborhoods with higher percentages of residents living in poverty are more likely to experience firearm homicides than are wealthier neighborhoods.¹¹ Additionally, women are far more likely than men to

TALKING POINTS

- Researchers, politicians, and public health professionals are increasingly referring to gun violence in the United States as an epidemic, one that continues to have a disproportionate impact on underprivileged and minority families and communities.
- Despite growing recognition of this public health crisis, legislation intended to curb gun violence at both the federal and the state level has been limited, whereas legislation that expands access to guns has flourished.
- Akin to gun violence itself, gun violence policy has an impact on families—on their structures, functions, and diversity.
- To mitigate these impacts, direct political advocacy must be multifaceted, informed by targeted research, include programmatic interventions, and be conducted through a lens of equity.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

1. Increase research funding to explore (a) the role of families in preventing gun violence and (b) the impact of gun violence on family health and family functioning.
2. Adopt state- and federal-level policies that restrict the purchase or possession of guns by persons whose actions represent identifiable risk factors for violence.³³
3. Expand implementation of gun violence restraining order laws (e.g., ERPOs) which allow family members and intimate partners to petition for temporary removal of guns from an individual with significant, evidence-based risk factors for causing harm to self or others.
4. Adopt and streamline universal background checks at the national level.
5. Develop both national and community-specific awareness campaigns that would (a) alert families to the evidence-based, individual-level risk factors for gun violence as a way to prophylactically prevent family gun violence and (b) promote safest practices for gun storage and usage.
6. Engage family professionals' expertise when developing new violence legislation.

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be victims of gun violence perpetrated by an intimate partner, and Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous women are all more likely than their White counterparts to be victims of firearm homicide.¹² Intersectional disparities have recently been noted, too: for example, lesbian women, bisexual men and women, and transgender persons experience the highest rates of lifetime intimate partner violence (IPV), as compared to their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts;¹³ the rates of IPV involving a firearm are highest among Black and Latina transgender women.¹⁴

One of the reasons gun violence is so widespread in the United States is that guns are so ubiquitous in the United States. According to the Small Arms Survey's most recent report on civilian-owned firearms,¹⁵ American civilians own an estimated 393 million guns, nearly 50% of the entire world's privately owned firearms and almost six times the amount owned by residents of any other country. The rate of national firearm ownership—or the number of guns per 100 residents—is 120.5 in the United States, which is the highest in the world and more than twice that of any other country.¹⁵ Indeed, there are more guns in the United States than there are residents.¹⁶ Similar to the above-mentioned disparities in gun violence incidents and deaths, analogous inequalities exist in rates of gun ownership: more men own guns than women, more White people own guns than Black or Hispanic people, and those with a high school diploma or less are more likely to own guns than are those with a college degree.¹⁷

Although high rates of gun ownership do not necessarily portend high rates of gun violence, the absence of policies that limit gun usage do. Such policies include, but are not limited to, regulations around who can own guns, which types of guns can be owned, and in which situations guns can be used. Research has emphasized an empirical and verifiable association between stricter gun policies and a reduction in gun-related death.¹⁸

Conclusion

This brief provides a snapshot of the current landscape of policies to prevent gun violence in the United States, enumerates how policies may be inciting more violence, and discusses the potential impacts of this policy landscape on family and community health. Improving the health and well-being of families requires a family-centered, multifaceted, and equity-focused approach to gun policy. Such an approach suggests that future policy initiatives could include increased family-focused research, legislation that expands gun violence–related restraining orders, federal implementation of universal background checks, and the expansion of community-specific gun violence awareness campaigns. Additionally, gun violence prevention is a critical component of achieving health equity for individuals, families, and communities. Effective advocacy and prevention strategies must recognize the disproportionate impacts of gun violence and engage those most vulnerable to gun violence victimization in the United States.

Please see the full brief for a complete set of references and more information about the authors.



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