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The health risk of having a gun in the home

By **Susan Perry** | 12/17/12



REUTERS/Joshua Lott

The health risks of owning a gun are so established and scientifically non-controvertible that the American Academy of Pediatrics issued a policy statement in 2000 recommending that pediatricians urge parents to remove all guns from their homes.

Having a gun in your home significantly increases your risk of death — and that of your spouse and children.

And **it doesn't matter** how the guns are stored or what type or how many guns you own.

If you have a gun, everybody in your home is more likely than your non-gun-owning neighbors and their families to die in a gun-related accident, suicide or homicide.

Furthermore, there is no credible evidence that having a gun in your house reduces your risk of being a victim of a crime. Nor does it reduce your risk of being injured during a home break-in.

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Notice that the recommendation doesn't call for parents to simply lock up their guns. It stresses that the weapons need to be taken out of the house.

Study after study has been conducted on the health risks associated with guns in the home. One of the latest was a **meta-review** published in 2011 by **David Hemenway**, director of the **Harvard Injury Control Research Center**. He examined all the scientific literature to date on the health risks and benefits of gun ownership.

What he found was sobering, to say the least.

Accidental deaths

To begin with, having a gun in the home is a risk factor for serious accidental injury and death. As Hemenway points out, death certificate data indicate that 680 Americans were killed accidentally with guns each year between 2003 and 2007. Half those victims were under the age of 25.

Children aged 5 to 14 in the United States are 11 times more likely to die from an accidental gunshot wound than children in other developed countries.

Nonfatal gun injuries occur at the average rate of 20 a day in the United States — and that doesn't include pellet-gun injuries (which average 45 a day) or injuries that don't involve a bullet wound (like powder burns and recoil injuries).

"One study of nonfatal accidental shootings found that the majority were self-inflicted, most involved handguns, and more than one third of the injuries required hospitalization," writes Hemenway. "Injuries often occurred during fairly routine gun handling — cleaning a gun, loading and unloading, target shooting, and so on."

Suicides

An average of 46 Americans committed suicide with guns each day between 2003 and 2007. In fact, more Americans killed themselves with guns during those years than with all other methods combined.

Gun owners and their families are not more suicidal than non-gun-owners, research shows. No are they more likely to have a history of depression or other mental health problems.

But they — and their families — are at significantly increased risk of successfully taking their lives with a gun. The reason: Guns are more lethal than other methods.

One study found, reports Hemenway, that “in states with more guns, there were more suicides (because there were more firearm suicides), even after controlling for the percentage of the state’s population with serious mental illness, alcohol dependence or abuse, illicit substance dependence or abuse, and the percentage unemployed, living below the poverty level, and in urban areas.”

But “there was no association between gun prevalence and a state’s nonfirearm suicide rate,” he adds.

Homicides

Two-thirds of all murders between 2003 and 2007 involved guns. The average number of Americans shot and killed daily during those years was 33. Of those, one was a child (0 to 14 years), five were teenagers (15 to 19 years) and seven were young adults (20 to 24 years), on average.

Children in the U.S. get murdered with guns at a rate that is 13 times higher than that of other developed nations. For our young people aged 15 to 24, the rate is 43 times higher.

“The presence of a gun makes quarrels, disputes, assaults, and robberies more deadly. Many murders are committed in a moment of rage,” writes Hemenway.

“For example, a large percentage of homicides — and especially homicides in the home — occur during altercations over matters such as love, money, and domestic problems, involving acquaintances, neighbors, lovers, and family members; often the assailant or victim has been drinking. Only a small minority of homicides appear to be the carefully planned acts of individuals with a single-minded intention to kill. Most gun killings are indistinguishable from nonfatal gun shootings; it is just a question of the caliber of the gun, whether a vital organ is hit, and how much time passes before medical treatment arrives.”

Benefits?

The possible health benefits of gun ownership are twofold: deterring crime and stopping crimes in progress. But there are no credible studies, says Hemenway, that higher levels of gun ownership

actually do these things.

“The main reason people give for having a handgun in the home is protection, typically against stranger violence,” he writes. “However, it is important to recognize that the home is a relatively safe place, especially from strangers. For example, fewer than 30% of burglaries in the United States (2003-2007) occur when someone is at home. In the 7% of burglaries when violence does occur, the burglar is more likely to be an intimate (current or former) and also more likely to be a relative or known acquaintance than a stranger. Although people typically spend most of their time at home, only 5% of all the crimes of violence perpetrated by strangers occur at home.”

In fact, adds Hemenway, research shows that most self-defense use of guns is not socially desirable. He describes one study in which “criminal court judges from across the United States read the 35 descriptions of the reported self-defense firearm uses from 2 national surveys and found that, even if description of the event was accurate, in most of the cases, the self-defense gun use was probably illegal. Many were arguments that escalated into gun use.”

Real risks

“There are real and imaginary situations when it might be beneficial to have a gun in the home,” Hemenway concludes. “For example, in the Australian film *Mad Max*, where survivors of the apocalypse seem to have been predominantly psychopathic male bikers, having a loaded gun would seem to be very helpful for survival, and public health experts would probably advise people in that world to obtain guns.”

“However, for most contemporary Americans, the scientific studies suggest that the health risk of a gun in the home is greater than the benefit,” he adds. “There are no credible studies that indicate otherwise.”

Hemenway’s review appeared in the [American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine](#) and [can be read in full online](#).

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