

EMERGING ISSUES IN PUBLIC HEALTH



Gun Violence

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About the Author

Bradley Steffens is a poet, a novelist, and an award-winning author of more than forty nonfiction books for children and young adults.

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Printed in the United States

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ReferencePoint Press, Inc.
PO Box 27779
San Diego, CA 92198
www.ReferencePointPress.com

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

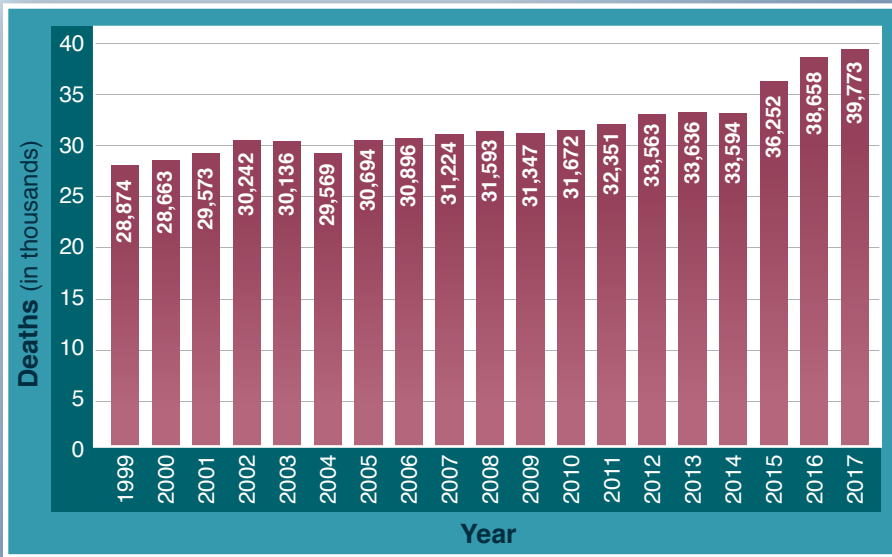
Name: Steffens, Bradley, 1955– author.
Title: Gun Violence/by Bradley Steffens.
Description: San Diego, CA: ReferencePoint Press, Inc., 2020. | Series:
Emerging Issues in Public Health | Includes bibliographical references and
index. |
Identifiers: LCCN 2018058354 (print) | LCCN 2019002185 (ebook) | ISBN
9781682826706 (ebook) | ISBN 9781682826690 (hardback)
Subjects: LCSH: Firearms ownership—Health aspects—United States—Juvenile
literature. | Gunshot wounds—United States—Juvenile literature. | Gun
control—United States—Juvenile literature. | Public health—United
States—Juvenile literature.
Classification: LCC HV7436 (ebook) | LCC HV7436 .S749 2020 (print) | DDC
363.330973—dc23
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018058354>

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US Gun Deaths Surge to Fifty-Year High

In 2017 firearm-related deaths surged to the highest level in fifty years, according to a 2018 report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). It was the third consecutive year of dramatic increases in gun deaths in the United States. The number of deaths per 100,000 people also increased markedly. After remaining steady at about 10.3 gun deaths per 100,000 people throughout the 2000s, the rate jumped to 11.8 per 100,000 in 2016 and then to 12.0 per 100,000 in 2017.



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Underlying Cause of Death, 1999–2017 Results," 2018.
<https://wonder.cdc.gov>.

jet full of passengers crashing every four days. But if that many planes were crashing, it would be a national crisis. Flights would be grounded. Everything would come to a halt to find out what was killing so many people. But for most people, gunshot deaths are just a statistic, something political leaders and the media discuss only before elections or after mass killings.

The reason for this is simple. Gun violence does not have a single cause that can be easily addressed. Instead it has many underlying causes. For example, 60 percent of firearm deaths are suicides, which is itself an epidemic with many different causes. Some gun deaths are the result of criminal activity. Others result

The Making of a Crisis

More people die from gunshot wounds in the United States than in any other country in the world except Brazil. This is the finding of a 2018 study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* by researchers at the University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation. The United States is the world's third-largest country by population, so it is not surprising that it would rank near the top of all nations in the number of deaths from any cause. But the United States has a much higher number of firearm deaths per 100,000 people—the common way to measure the frequency of death and disease among populations—than most other countries do. The rate of firearm deaths in the United States is 12.0 per 100,000 people, according to a 2017 study done by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). That is more than four times higher than the world's second-most populous country, India, which has a rate of 2.6 per 100,000.

The difference in firearm mortality rates is even greater when the United States is compared with countries with similar levels of governmental stability and economic development. The US firearm mortality rate is six times higher than that of its next-door neighbor, Canada (2.1 per 100,000). It is thirteen times higher than that of Germany (0.9 per 100,000). And it is an astonishing forty times higher than that of the United Kingdom (0.3 per 100,000). “It is a little surprising that a country like ours should have this level of gun violence,” says Ali Mokdad, a professor of global health and epidemiology at the University of Washington's Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation. “If you compare us to other well-off countries, we really stand out.”⁵ The United States is the only advanced nation where gun violence is an emerging public health crisis.

Gun Ownership

One of the main reasons why the United States leads the developed world in firearm mortality is that it also leads the world in the number of privately owned firearms. Obviously, if guns are scarce, firearm deaths will be rare.

For example, the gun ownership rate in China is just 3.6 guns per every 100 people—thirty-three times lower than the US rate—and its firearm mortality rate is just 0.2 per 100,000 people—fifty times lower than the US rate. If guns are plentiful, as they are in the United States, the number of firearm deaths will be higher. The sheer availability of guns means they can be used more often in suicides, homicides, and defensive acts, all of which contribute to the overall US firearm mortality rate.

“We see a fairly consistent relationship, when you control for other factors, the more firearms there are, the greater the risk for both firearm homicide and suicide.”⁶

—Daniel W. Webster,
director of the Center for
Gun Policy and Research
at Johns Hopkins
University

“We see a fairly consistent relationship, when you control for other factors, the more firearms there are, the greater the risk for both firearm homicide and suicide,”⁶ says Daniel W. Webster, director of the Center for Gun Policy and Research at Johns Hopkins University.

Americans are affluent by global standards and have more money to spend on guns than most people in the world do. US civilians own more than 343 million firearms, according to the 2018 Small Arms Survey, a study conducted by the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland. This amounts to 120.5 firearms for every 100 residents. This is more than ten times higher than the global average of 11.3 firearms for every 100 residents. The United States is the only country in the world where the number of guns exceeds the number of people. Canada, with 34.7 guns for every 100 residents, is a distant second in gun ownership among industrialized countries.

Americans make up 4.2 percent of the world's population yet own 46 percent of the world's privately held firearms.

Not every American owns a gun, of course, but firearms are spread throughout the population in greater numbers than in other countries. According to a March 2018 survey by NBC News and the *Wall Street Journal*, 47 percent of Americans live in a household with a gun. This is far more than any other country. The country with the second-highest level of gun ownership is Switzerland, in which 28.6 percent of households have a gun.

US polls probably underestimate the number of households with guns. This is because pollsters rely on the truthfulness of the people they interview. However, it is unlikely that people in households where someone possesses a stolen gun report having them, and a 2018 study by Harvard found that between three hundred thousand and six hundred thousand guns are stolen every year in the United States. Some lawful gun owners might

*Guns are widely available in the United States.
People can buy them in gun stores, sporting goods
stores, pawn shops, at gun shows, and even online.*





People shop at the Dallas Gun Show in Texas. While you must be eighteen to buy a rifle from a licensed dealer, there is no federal minimum age to purchase these guns from private sellers at gun shows.

To ensure that people prohibited by law from buying guns do not do so, federally licensed gun sellers are required to verify a buyer's identification and run a background check prior to selling the firearm. To do this, the licensed gun dealer contacts the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS), an electronic database maintained by the FBI. Most NICS background checks take only minutes to complete. Since NICS was launched in 1998, the FBI has performed 230 million background checks, leading to more than 1.3 million denials of sales.

Stronger Laws in Canada

Restrictions on gun ownership are weaker in the United States than they are in most advanced countries, and the lack of screening could be one factor in the high US firearm mortality rate. For example, Canadians are required to have a valid license to own and purchase guns. There is no loophole for guns purchased privately or given as gifts. To obtain a gun license, the individual must pass a background check that is tighter than the US background

Nonfatal Firearm Injuries

Most of the attention in the gun violence debate focuses on firearm deaths. However, two-thirds of gunshot victims are not fatally injured. When suicides are excluded, the ratio of nonfatal firearm injuries to fatal injuries is even higher: Six out of every seven people wounded in a shooting survive.

According to the CDC, the number of fatal firearm injuries per 100,000 people increased by 16.5 percent from 2001 to 2017, from 10.3 to 12.0 per 100,000 people, but the number of nonfatal firearm injuries increased a staggering 92 percent, from 21.7 to 41.7 per 100,000. “This country has a real challenge—an epidemic of firearm injury,” says Sandro Galea, dean of the Boston University School of Public Health. About 80 percent of gunshot wounds require hospitalization. Despite advanced treatment, many gunshot victims end up having a poor quality of life. In fact, a large number of the wounded later die of health consequences related to the gunshot trauma.

Gunshot wounds scar not only the body but also the mind. “I’m still waiting for my old self to come back,” says a woman who sustained a gunshot wound in the arm during an episode of workplace violence fifteen years earlier. Thea James, director of the Violence Intervention Advocacy Program in Boston, says that gunshot wounds are particularly damaging to African American men, who often do not seek psychological help after receiving them. When they later act out or refuse to cooperate with authority figures, “that’s not bad behavior,” says James, “it’s a manifestation of their trauma.”

Quoted in David S. Bernstein, “Americans Don’t Really Understand Gun Violence,” *Atlantic*, December 14, 2017. www.theatlantic.com.

check. Applicants also must present third-party character references to the licensing bureau. Significantly, applicants must successfully complete a safety course to be eligible for a license. Finally, a mandatory twenty-eight-day waiting period is imposed on first-time applicants. Measuring the impact of licensing alone is difficult, because Canada has enacted many guns laws since the Firearms Act of 1995, when licensing became a requirement. Nevertheless, Canadian gun homicides reached a fifty-year low in 2013 and remained 15 percent lower in 2016 than they were in 1995, when the licensing law was passed.

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5. Quoted in Nurith Aizenman, “Gun Violence: How the U.S. Compares with Other Countries,” *Goats and Soda* (blog), NPR, October 6, 2017. www.npr.org.
6. Quoted in Elena Guobyte et al., “Global Mortality from Firearms, 1990–2016,” YouTube, August 28, 2018. <https://youtube.com/VucFxSkbDwY>.
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9. Charles M. Blow, “America Is the Gun,” *New York Times*, February 25, 2018. www.nytimes.com.
10. Anthony Fabio, interview with the author, November 28, 2018.
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American Public Health Association

800 Eye St. NW
Washington, DC 20001
www.apha.org

A nonprofit organization, the American Public Health Association speaks out on public health issues and policies. The gun violence area of its website provides articles, fact sheets, research and data, news, useful links, and other resources.

Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence

840 First St. NE, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20002
www.bradycampaign.org

Founded in 1974 as the National Council to Control Handguns, the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence was renamed in 2001 in honor of James Brady and his wife, Sarah. The organization has a goal of cutting the number of US gun deaths in half by 2025 through stronger background checks, cracking down on irresponsible gun dealers, and educating the public about gun violence.

Coalition to Stop Gun Violence (CSGV)

805 Fifteenth St. NW
Washington, DC 20005
www.csgv.org

The CSGV is a nonprofit organization founded in 1974 with the goal of building communities free from gun violence. The organization pursues this goal through research, policy development, and lobbying for gun control legislation.

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