

Gun violence in the USA: children's right to health

An epidemic of preventable violence is killing and harming Americans—especially, children and adolescents. On May 24, an 18-year-old man killed 19 children and two adults in Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas. As the world mourns for the US and its children, the familiar cycle of grief, anger, activism, deflection, and inaction seems to have begun again. We share the view of those who argue that gun violence should be framed as a public health issue rather than a debate over the US Constitution's Second Amendment. But despite tragic school shooting events, such as at Columbine and Sandy Hook, little has changed in the protection of young people in the US from the harms of guns. Society and the legislature still refuse to act.

The USA is the high-income country with greatest burden of gun-related injury. An estimated 251 000 people died from firearm injuries worldwide in 2016, but roughly half of these deaths occurred in six countries in the Americas. Every day, more than 100 people in the US die from firearms and hundreds more are injured. Just a week before the shooting at Robb Elementary, an 18-year-old reportedly white supremacist killed ten people in a grocery store in Buffalo, New York. According to the US CDC, 45 222 people died from gun-related injuries in 2020, 43% higher than a decade earlier.

Mass shootings make up a small percentage of the gun-related mortality and morbidity that haunts the USA. The most common causes are suicide (53% of gun-related deaths), homicide, or unintentional injuries with firearms. Many are preventable. The increase of firearm-related injuries in children and adolescents is particularly concerning. According to researchers at the University of Michigan, in 2020, firearm-related injury overtook motor vehicle crashes to become the leading cause of death in the US in people aged 1–19 years, driven largely by homicides, which spiked by a third. These data expose the vulnerability of this group, with gun-related injuries more than doubled compared with the general population. The health effects go beyond the loss of lives, with long-term physical and mental health consequences for survivors. The social costs of gun violence in the USA are estimated to be more than \$150 billion annually.

Gun rights groups, such as the National Rifle Association (NRA), spend millions of dollars each year to limit legislation on guns. For two decades, gun lobbying

managed to stall federal funding for gun-control research. As a result, gun violence has been less funded than other public health issues with similar mortality rates, such as sepsis. Despite being one of the three leading causes of mortality in children and adolescents between 2008 and 2017, gun-related injuries research in this age group received only \$12 million per year, compared with \$88 million for motor vehicle crashes and \$335 million for cancer.

Even with underfunding of research, there is clear evidence for gun regulation as an approach to prevent gun violence. Firearm-related harm is associated with firearm availability, and US states with stricter gun laws have lower gun-related morbidity and mortality. Australia and Canada, which in many ways have a similar gun culture to the USA, have introduced gun control policies to protect lives and wellbeing. Mental health, poverty, and crime correlate with gun violence, but these factors also exist in comparable countries. What singles out the USA is gun availability and ineffective gun-control policies and regulations resulting from a unique political and marketing landscape shaped by lobbying from the gun industry. There are more guns than people in the USA and US civilians possess almost 40% of the world's firearms. Gun violence is a complex multifaceted issue, but, clearly, more guns are not the answer.

Public health research also needs to go beyond gun owners, and interrogate the strategies and practices of the gun industry and its supporters—a classic example of a commercial determinant of health. Similar to the tobacco and alcohol industry, there is a need to study and counteract the marketing, lobbying, and corporate social responsibility strategies that the gun industry use to promote sales of their products. Public health practitioners have called for restrictions on marketing and advertising to vulnerable groups, and legislation for gun access.

Given the political realities of the USA, there is no easy solution. There is no shortage of practical measures, but even small changes will be hard fought. What is really needed is courageous leadership from Democrats and Republicans, and a good-faith bipartisan effort to discuss what can be done to protect the most vulnerable—children—from firearm-related harms. ■ *The Lancet*



Michael M. Santiago/Saff/Getty Images

For global mortality data on gun violence see *JAMA* 2018; **320**: 792–814

For more on US mortality and morbidity data see https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/wr/mm7119e1.htm?s_cid=mm7119e1_w

For more on the leading causes of death among children and adolescents see *N Engl J Med* 2022; **386**: 1955–56

For the social costs of gun violence see *Ann Rev Publ Health* 2015; **36**: 5–19

For more on federal funding for gun violence research see *Health Aff (Millwood)* 2019; **38**: 1653–61