Study finds spike in pediatric firearm injuries during pandemic
by Melissa Jenco, News Content Editor

Researchers have found spikes in firearm injuries sustained by and inflicted by children during the pandemic, a time when gun sales to first-time owners also were rising.


The data show 247 firearm injuries (89 fatal) to children in the first six months of the pandemic compared to a six-month average of 137.5 in the years prior. The semiannual rates of firearm injuries per million children rose from 2.8 to 5.09.

The team also looked at firearm injuries inflicted by children on people of any age. It found 106 such incidents (44 fatal) during the first six months of the pandemic compared to an average of 71.75 in the half-year periods before the pandemic. The rate of children inflicting injuries rose from 1.48 per million children before the pandemic to 2.18 per million during the pandemic.

The study also looks at the rate of federal background checks for firearms, which it equated with purchases by first-time owners. Before the pandemic, there was an average of 21 new background checks per 100,000 people, which rose to 33 per 100,000 people during the pandemic.

"High levels of firearm ownership in the US coupled with a rise in firearm acquisition likely contribute to an increase in firearm violence," authors wrote. "Furthermore, factors specific to the pandemic, such as financial strain, psychosocial stress, and anxiety, may exacerbate the recent surge in gun violence."
Some children may have had less supervision if they were not in school and their parents were working, according to the study. Authors called for state and national policies around firearm safety. They recommended health care providers counsel families about gun safety, saying the pandemic may have prevented new gun owners from receiving such training. The AAP recommends families do not keep guns in their home. Those who do have a gun should keep it locked and unloaded with ammunition locked separately.

Authors of a related commentary pointed out some of the study's limitations. For example, it can't definitively tie new gun owners to the increase in youth firearm injuries and can't say for certain whether this group received safety training. They also questioned whether young children really had less supervision.

Other explanations for the rise in firearm injuries could be worsening mental health leading to self-inflicted injuries or overwhelmed parents injuring their child with a firearm, they said. This abuse may have gone undetected if children were not going to school in person.

"As a result, the imperative for clinicians to remain vigilant for signs of child abuse in their patients is heightened," they wrote. "They should also work to have conversations with children and their caregivers about mental health, home safety, and their perception of neighborhood safety. Although unintentional injuries in children whose caregivers are new firearm owners may have increased, physicians must address factors that lead to injury in all families, both during the pandemic and beyond."

Resources

- AAP policy statement "Firearm-Related Injuries Affecting the Pediatric Population"
- Information for parents from HealthyChildren.org on reducing gun injuries
- AAP News stories about firearms
- Pediatrics collection on firearms