[Art On Issues - Home](http://www.artonissues.com/)

[**The Link Between Widespread Gun Ownership and Gun Violence in America**](http://www.artonissues.com/2013/01/the-link-between-widespread-gun-ownership-and-gun-violence-in-america/)

Arthur R. Kamm, PhD

Jan 7, 2013

**The US exhibits by far the largest per capita gun ownership and gun-related death rate of any other industrialized Western democracy.  With US citizens already in possession of nearly 300 million firearms, the current debate should include the broad-based interpretation of the Second Amendment, promulgated by the gun lobby, regarding our country’s current size, urbanization, and technological advancements in weaponry.**

The very first stopping point in the assessment of any product’s safety is a summary of deaths the product causes.  It is considered hard data, readily measurable, and is the ultimate negative outcome associated with a product’s use.   Guns carry a death rate associated with ownership and hospitalize people due to injury, some experiencing life-long debilitation, physical and/or psychological.  So despite claims by the NRA to the contrary, gun ownership, even legal gun ownership, has been shown to impact public health.

Regarding guns, the data are overwhelming that the US experiences a grossly disproportionate loss of life to gunfire than other wealthy industrialized countries.  This holds true whether we look at the general population or the subset of children.  Yet guns are virtually the [only consumer product not regulated for health and safety](http://www.massconsumer.org/gunsregulation.html" \t "_blank).

In large part the gun debate in America revolves around the issue of protecting/defending oneself.  But there is much loss of life reported in America that is outside of that intended purpose.  In the trade, that falls under what is known as product abuse potential.  These deaths include non-self defense killings and suicides.  Additionally, a high rate of accidental deaths have also been reported for the product, including in children.  Whereas it is easy to measure the deaths from product abuse and accidental events, it is difficult to measure the intended benefit of the product – protection.  Even if such benefit exists, it would have to be enough to offset the considerable number of unintended deaths.   And assuming such a level of benefit exists, there is a high price being paid in our country, a price that is not incurred in other wealthy industrialized countries.

Our review of the academic literature found that a broad array of evidence indicates that gun availability is a risk factor for homicide, both in the United States and across high-income countries.  Case-control studies, ecological time-series and cross-sectional studies indicate that in homes, cities, states and regions in the US, where there are more guns, both men and women are at higher risk for homicide, particularly firearm homicide.

We analyzed the relationship between homicide and gun availability using data from 26 developed countries from the early 1990s.  We found that across developed countries, where guns are more available, there are more homicides. These results often hold even when the United States is excluded.

Children and Guns

We analyzed the relationship between firearm availability and unintentional gun death, homicide and suicide for 5-14 year olds across the 50 states over a ten year period. Children in states with many guns have elevated rates of unintentional gun deaths, suicide and homicide.  The state rates of non-firearm suicide and non-firearm homicide among children are not related to firearm availability.

We analyzed data from the Arizona Childhood Fatality Review Team comparing youth gun suicide with suicide by other means. Children who use a firearm to commit suicide have fewer identifiable risk factors for suicide, such as expressing suicidal thoughts.  Gun suicides appear more impulsive and spontaneous than suicide by other means.

This article uses data from various locations to describe the circumstances of infant homicides. Guns are almost never used to kill infants.  The perpetrator is virtually always caught, and often is the one calling the police.

At family practice clinics in rural Alabama, over 400 parents were separated from their children, and both were asked questions about guns in the home.  We found that over 1/3 of parents who reported that their son had not handled a household gun were contradicted by the child.

(Note: The NRA backed legislation that would make it illegal for a physician to question a patient about guns in the home under threat of actually losing the license to practice.  Such law went into effect in Florida but was overturned by a federal court as being a violation of First Amendment rights).

We analyzed data from a telephone survey of over 5,800 California adolescents conducted in 2000-01. We found that one-third of adolescents reported handling a firearm, 5% without adult supervision or knowledge.  Smoking, drinking and parents not knowing the child’s whereabouts in the afternoon were associated with unsupervised gun handling.  These events usually occur away from home, with friends.  Half involve shooting the gun.