

## Gun violence

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Drawing on the World Health Organization's ecological model, this review explores how contextual and institutional factors shape individual choice and behavior with respect to gun violence. Young men are disproportionately represented among both perpetrators and victims of violence. Although specific characteristics and behaviors present risks, these vary with the specific forms of violence. There is ample international research that suggests the availability of guns increases the risk of lethal violence. When guns are present, suicide attempts are more likely to succeed and assaults are more likely to become homicides. Some research has indicated that stockpiling guns and the fascination with guns is an indicator of antisocial behavior. Broad social, cultural, and political forces both shape and reflect guns violence.

### Addresses

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Current Opinion in Psychology 2017, 19:109–112

This review comes from a themed issue on **Aggression and violence**

Edited by **Brad J Bushman**

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2017.04.008>

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*“While male-dominated societies often justify small arms possession through the alleged need to protect vulnerable women, women actually face greater danger of violence when their families and communities are armed” [1]*

This review draws on the injury-prevention model to explore individual, situational, and contextual factors shaping gun violence internationally, recognizing the complex interactions between these factors. Research shows that access to guns increases lethality of violence particularly in cases of murder, domestic violence, and suicide attempts. Murder and suicide risk factors are linked to one another [2]. There is ample evidence that guns increase lethality of violent attempts, whether in the context of interpersonal violence or in the context of self-

directed violence (suicide attempts). Legally owned guns are often misused by their owners, particularly in cases of violence against women and in suicide [3]. Guns are also sold illegally or stolen, fueling illegal markets [4]. Much attention has been focused on the characteristics of individuals who commit violence in order to inform strategies to improve safety. Certain populations are at risk for certain types of violence, youth, drug use, and a history of violence are all strongly connected [5]. Above all, males are more likely to be both the perpetrators and the victims of violence. Therefore the contextual factors shaping masculinity are important to consider [6]. Environmental factors also play a role: Guns figure prominently in the culture of violence and notions of masculinity that link maleness to violence [6], and this in turn is reinforced by the guns industry and gun lobby [7]. This review considers the research on individual, situational and societal factors that drive the demand and supply of guns.

## The problem of guns

The Small Arms Survey [8] estimates that there are 214 000 deaths caused by guns worldwide, with most of the deaths occurring in countries that are not at war. Globally, guns are used in almost 40% of reported homicides. Homicides are only the tip of the iceberg, yet they tend to be better reported than non-fatal injuries or assaults. In the US for example, for every homicide there are approximately 7 cases of nonfatal gunshot wounds treated in emergency departments and many threats and crimes which are not reported with broad physical and psychological impacts [9]. Often overlooked in discussions of violence is the problem of suicide. Nearly half the world's reported suicides with guns occur in North America and Western [9]. In industrialized countries, the mortality rates for gun suicides are greater than the mortality rates for gun homicides. Every year in the US, more than 30 000 people commit suicide, more than half of them with a gun. Young people (15–24) and the elderly (over 65) are particularly prone to using guns for this purpose [10]. But the negative effects of gun violence are not just physical. People who live in environment inundated by arms have been found to have symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder, such as overwhelming anxiety and a lack of motivation. Studies have shown that in high crime areas, residents are more reluctant to venture out and become victims of a wide range of health problems [11\*].

Increasingly there is recognition that there are no simple solutions to complex problems, and scholars exploring ‘wicked problems’ are attempting to map and understand the intricate systems that shape and are shaped by

individual behavior. The World Health Organization has advanced a multi-layered ecological model [12] to understand the complex interplay among factors that cause violence generally in order to better inform prevention strategies. This model applies well to our understanding of gun violence. Although individual factors, such as substance abuse and victimization often play a critical role, contextual factors also matter. Situational factors – such as the availability of guns – do not cause violence directly, but increase the risk that violent encounters will be fatal [13\*\*]. Additionally, environmental factors, for example, economic, social and political disparity, cultures that glorify violence, and policies that both shape and reflect this culture, also play a role. By understanding the factors that shape gun violence, public health and safety professionals have proposed integrated strategies to promote safe communities. Well-accepted injury prevention strategies require that we consider individual, situational, and contextual factors in understanding problems and crafting solutions. Much research has focused on the instruments of violence, including guns, and their significance.

### Individual factors

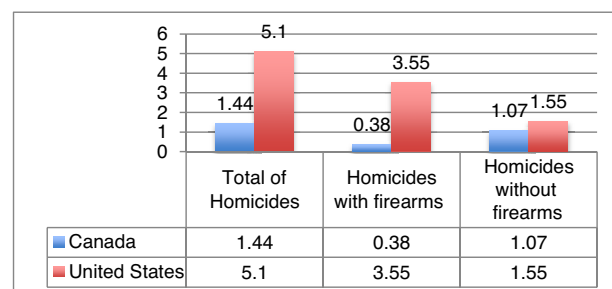
Extensive research has been undertaken worldwide to try to understand the factors that lead people to violence against themselves and others. Homicide rates are driven by a variety of factors, including demographics: the most persistent factor across cultures is that men are more likely to be perpetrators and victims of homicide and suicide [14]. The percentage of young males in a population is positively related to the rates of homicide [15]. Reported risk factors for youth violence include individual characteristics, relationship factors as well as family influences. Peer influence is considered to play a critical role, particularly in gang-related violence, as is substance abuse [16\*]. Studies suggest that violence is like a contagious disease that spreads through social networks [17]. In the United States, young African American men are most likely to be victims of violence generally and gun violence in particular, in part because of the intersectionality between race and socio economic factors [18\*\*]. In many forms of violence, victims and perpetrators are bound in a relationship—women and children, for example, are more likely to be injured by someone they know than by a stranger, in spite of public perceptions [19\*]. For some forms of violence, there are precipitating factors such as rejection or loss—unemployment, marriage breakdown, and so on [20]. Predisposing factors include a fascination with guns [21]. Understanding individual risk factors has informed many of the efforts to combat gun violence by, for example, screening individuals who wish to acquire or possess guns [22\*\*].

### Situational factors—access to guns

Although the issue is contentious, the burden of evidence suggests that where other factors are comparable, the

availability of guns increases rates of lethal violence, including homicides and suicides [23,24\*\*]. Although some argue that the research on the association between guns and violence is inconclusive [25], in 2009, the World Health Organization identified ‘reducing access to lethal means’ as one of its key violence prevention strategies. While rates of violence *per se* are not directly affected by the availability of guns, rates of lethal violence tend to be, particularly in industrialized countries [26]. A study of mortality data from the World Health Organization showed US homicide rates were 7 times higher than other high income countries, primarily driven by a gun homicide rate that was 25.2 times higher overall and 49 times higher for 15–24 year olds [27]. Suicide mortality is only modestly associated with suicide attempts or other risk factors such as major psychiatric disorders, but 93% of suicides attempts using guns result in death [28]. Choice of means often accounts in part for the gender differences in suicide rates—as women are less likely to own or use guns [29]. Other studies [30\*\*] particularly using case-control methods, have tended to reinforce the link between gun ownership and violent crime [31] and called into question scholars who suggest more guns make people safer [32]. Debates continue about methodology and assumptions. In considering particular forms of violence – in particular violence against women as well as suicide – easy availability of guns is a major risk factor [33\*]. The presence of a gun is one of the strongest risk factors for domestic homicide in both the United States [33\*] and Canada [34].

### Comparison of homicide rates in Canada and the US in 2013 (per 100 000)



The U.S. has a higher rate per capita of gun ownership than any other industrialized country in the world – with more than 300 million guns in the US that is the equivalent of one gun per person compared to 7 million guns (less than 10% handguns) in Canada – a country of 30 000 million [35]. Nearly 1/3 of US homes contain guns. More importantly, nearly 40% of these weapons are handguns, the type of gun used most often in homicides in part because they are easily concealed [35]. Indeed, 40% of the world’s privately owned guns are found in the United States [35]; these guns not only fuel lethal US violence, but are linked to international violence as well.

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