



# The impact of minimum age and child access prevention laws on firearm-related youth suicides and unintentional deaths



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## ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study is to quantify the association between child access prevention (CAP) and minimum age laws and state-level youth firearm-related suicide and unintentional death rates. This paper differs from prior research in several ways. First, this is one of the few studies to focus exclusively on youth death rates. Second, this study looks at those laws with the most impact on youth suicides and unintentional deaths. Finally, this study uses one of the largest and most recent data sets of any study on this topic. In order to estimate the determinants of youth firearm deaths, a fixed effects regression model, controlling for both state-level and year-specific effects, is used. Results indicate that state-level minimum age laws have no significant effects on either youth suicides or unintentional deaths and that state-level CAP laws have no significant effects on unintentional deaths. States with CAP laws, however, have lower rates of youth suicide, and, after the enactment of the Federal minimum age requirement, both youth suicide and unintentional death rates fell. Given the mixed results regarding state-level juvenile firearm laws, national restrictions on juvenile handgun possession may be more effective in reducing both youth suicides and unintentional deaths than state-level regulations.

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## 1. Introduction

In 1981, the firearm-related suicide rate for youths (ages 0–19) was 1.69 per 100,000 persons; in 2010, it was 0.9 per 100,000 persons, a decline of over 47%. Even more dramatic was the decline in firearm related unintentional deaths (ages 0–19) over the same time period. In 1981, the firearm-related unintentional death rate was 0.84 per 100,000 persons; in 2010, it was 0.16 per 100,000 persons, a decrease of over 80%. Although a variety of factors, including more prevalent use of gun locks and gun safes and better counseling services, may explain some of the decline in firearm-related deaths among youths, it is possible that

stricter gun control laws may be at least partly responsible for these dramatic declines in youth death rates.

Two gun control laws that primarily deal with children are child access prevention (CAP) laws and minimum age laws. CAP laws impose criminal liabilities on adults who allow children to have unsupervised access to firearms. One of the primary reasons for implementing CAP laws is to compel parents or guardians to supervise children's access to firearms under the belief that it prevents potentially dangerous situations that may arise when children have unsupervised access to guns.

Although there is no federal CAP law, many states have enacted such laws. According to the Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, as of 2010, 16 states have enacted some type of CAP law. These laws, however, vary widely. Some impose a criminal liability when an adult does not secure a weapon. Others only prohibit an adult from providing a firearm to a

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child. Many of these laws also have varying definitions of what a minor is. In some states, adults only have to secure firearms from children who are at most 14 years of age; for others, the age at which supervision is required is as high as 18. Some states require secured access for all types of firearms; other states only require it for handguns. Finally, most states have exceptions for hunting, sport shooting, and other legitimate purposes. [Table 1](#) presents the status of CAP laws at the state level for the period 1981–2010.

In addition to CAP laws, many states also have laws requiring minimum ages to possess firearms, especially handguns. In some states, the minimum age for possession is as old as 21. Some states also have minimum age requirements for possession of long guns (rifles and shotguns); the federal government has no long gun possession minimum age requirement. There are, of course, exceptions to these laws, including hunting, target practice, and other legitimate activities. [Table 2](#) presents the status of minimum age laws at the state level for the period 1981–2010. In addition to these state regulations, federal law prohibits possession of handguns by any person under the age of 18.

There has been much prior research on the effects of gun control or gun availability on unintentional deaths ([Lott & Whitley, 2001](#); [Leenaars & Lester, 1997](#); [Lester, 1993](#); [Lester & Murrell, 1981](#)) and on suicides ([Gius, 2011](#); [Conner & Zhong, 2003](#); [Marvell, 2001](#); [Ludwig & Cook, 2000](#); [Cummings, Koepsell, Grossman, Savarino, & Thompson, 1997](#); [Carrington & Moyer, 1994](#); [Kellerman et al., 1992](#); [Yang & Lester, 1991](#); [Lester, 1988](#); [Sommers, 1984](#); [Lester & Murrell, 1982](#)). The results of these prior studies are mixed. Some find stricter gun control laws or lower levels of gun availability reduce firearm-related unintentional death rates and suicide rates ([Conner & Zhong, 2003](#); [Marvell, 2001](#); [Ludwig & Cook, 2000](#); [Cummings et al., 1997](#); [Leenaars & Lester, 1997](#); [Carrington & Moyer, 1994](#); [Lester, 1993](#); [Kellerman et al., 1992](#); [Yang & Lester, 1991](#); [Lester, 1988](#); [Sommers, 1984](#); [Lester & Murrell, 1982](#); [Lester & Murrell, 1981](#)). Other studies find either no significant relationship or an ambiguous relationship between these death rates and gun availability or gun control ([Gius, 2011](#); [Duggan, 2003](#); [Lott & Whitley, 2001](#); [Marvell, 2001](#)). When prior studies did find relationships between guns and unintentional deaths and suicides, the relationships tended to be weak and were typically overshadowed by the effects of socioeconomic factors. In addition, some studies find stricter gun control laws actually increase non-firearm related suicides. Finally, many studies look at overall suicide and unintentional death rates, instead of just youth death rates, and most do not focus on the gun control laws that would have the most significant impact on youth deaths. The present study attempts to fill that void.

The aim of the present study is to quantify the association between CAP and minimum age laws and state-level youth firearm-related suicide and unintentional death rates. This paper differs from prior research in several ways. First, it is one of the few studies focusing exclusively on youth (0–19 years of age) death rates. Most studies look at overall death rates. Second, this study looks at those laws with the most impact on youth suicides and unintentional deaths: CAP laws and minimum age laws. Third, this study uses a much larger data set than prior studies, containing

30 years of data for all 50 states. Using fixed effects regressions and controlling for both state-level and year-specific effects, the results of the present study suggest that state-level minimum age laws have no significant effect on either youth suicides or unintentional deaths. States with CAP laws, however, have lower youth suicide rates, but these laws have no significant effect on unintentional deaths. Finally, after the Federal government imposed minimum age requirements for handgun possession, both youth suicide rates and unintentional death rates fell. Although state laws appear mixed in their effects on youth deaths by firearms, Federal minimum age requirement laws appear to be effective in reducing both suicides and unintentional firearm related deaths among youths.

## 2. Literature review

As noted earlier, a number of studies examine the issue of gun control and its relationship to unintentional deaths and suicides. Some studies look at the effects of gun control laws or gun availability on overall suicide rates ([Gius, 2011](#); [Duggan, 2003](#); [Conner & Zhong, 2003](#); [Yang & Lester, 1991](#); [Lester, 1988](#); [Sommers, 1984](#); [Lester & Murrell, 1982](#)). Other studies look at the effects of gun control laws on overall unintentional firearm deaths ([Leenaars & Lester, 1997](#); [Lester, 1993](#); [Lester & Murrell, 1981](#)). Finally, a limited number of studies look at the effects of gun control laws on youth suicides and unintentional deaths, which is the topic of the present study ([Lott & Whitley, 2001](#); [Marvell, 2001](#)).

[Lott & Whitley \(2001\)](#) examine the effects of safe-storage laws on juvenile firearm-related suicides and unintentional deaths. The authors look at CAP laws and laws requiring some type of gun lock to be used to secure a firearm. State-level data for the period 1977–1996 is used. According to the authors, by 1996, fifteen states had adopted safe-storage laws. The authors use a fixed effects tobit model that includes as explanatory variables a safe-storage dummy variable, non-firearm unintentional death rates, adult firearm unintentional death rates, and various control variables. [Lott and Whitley](#) find that safe-storage laws had no significant effects on youth firearm-related unintentional deaths or suicides.

[Marvell \(2001\)](#) looks at the effects of the Federal Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 on homicides and suicides. This act banned the possession of handguns by persons under 18 years of age. The author looks at the effects of this law on both juvenile and overall homicide (1979–1998) and suicide (1976–1999) rates. Using state-level data, [Marvell](#) finds that Federal and state laws on underage possession of handguns have no statistically-significant effects on youth suicide rates.

As noted earlier, the present study differs from this prior research in several ways. First, this is one of the few studies focusing exclusively on youth death rates. Second, this study looks at those gun control laws with the most impact on firearm related youth suicides and unintentional deaths. Third, this study uses a large and recent data set. The empirical technique in the present study is discussed in the next section.

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