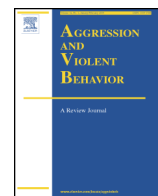




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Aggression and Violent Behavior



Gun violence and substance abuse

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ABSTRACT

Gun violence and substance abuse are prevalent, widespread public health issues that have recently received a great deal of media and political attention. In order to better understand how these phenomena are linked, this paper aims to explore the relationship between the two. First, it will describe the phenomena of gun violence and substance abuse individually. Next, this paper will detail the intersection of gun violence and substance abuse, including shared antecedents, the effect of intoxication on gun violence, and the effect of criminalization of drug use on gun violence. Finally, it will address treatment and policy recommendations.

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Gun violence and substance abuse are prevalent, widespread public health issues that have recently received a great deal of media and political attention. In order to better understand how these phenomena are linked, this paper aims to explore the relationship between the two. First, it will describe the phenomena of gun violence and substance abuse individually. Next, this paper will detail the intersection of gun violence and substance abuse, including shared antecedents, the effect of intoxication on gun violence, and the effect of criminalization of drug use on gun violence. Finally, it will address treatment and policy recommendations.

1. Gun ownership and violence

The U.S. leads in private gun ownership among developed and developing countries (Bungalow & Messerli, 2013). As such, across the

country, 40% of all households possess at least one firearm (Azrael, Cook, & Miller, 2004). Dimock, Doherty, and Christian (2013) found 37% of U.S. citizens report personally owning a gun, with 13% living with someone who owns a gun. Examining gender, men are three times more likely to own a gun compared to women (37% vs. 13%). Among men, 45% live in gun-owning households compared to 30% of women (Dimock et al., 2013). Considering age, 16% of adults under the age of 30 own a gun, compared to 37% of those over the age of 30. Accounting for race, 31% of gun owners are White, compared to 15% of African Americans and 11% of Hispanics (Dimock et al., 2013).

In addition to individual gun ownership statistics, there are trends consistent with geographic regions. According to Azrael et al. (2004), 25% of gun owners reside in the Northeast, while the majority reside in the Pacific States and East South Central regions (35% and 60%, respectively). Within these regions, those living in rural areas are more likely to own a gun compared to those in urban surroundings (39% vs. 18%) (Dimock et al., 2013). Higher gun ownership rates in rural areas is predominantly attributed to hunting (Dimock et al., 2013).

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In 2014, there were 33,599 fatal firearm-related injuries in the United States, an average of 646 deaths per week (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Injury Prevention and Control, 2014). Suicide by firearm was ranked fourth as a leading cause of death, with homicide by firearm ranked sixth (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Injury Prevention and Control, 2014). Moreover, Azrael et al. (2004) suggest gun ownership is closely linked to violence and crime patterns. They assert “availability of guns for use in crime is closely linked to population prevalence” (p. 44). Coupling this, their findings reveal gun ownership prevalence is positively correlated with gun use in instances of robbery and assault and is closely associated with homicide rates (Azrael et al., 2004). As stated by Bangalore and Messerli (2013), in comparison to other countries, 88 in 100 U.S. citizens own a gun. As a result, for every 100,000 deaths, 10 are gun related. These incident rates are exacerbated by higher accessibility to firearms, increasing the probability for “immediate use for a suicide attempt, escalating an episode of family violence, or self-defense against an intruder” (Azrael et al., 2004, p. 43).

In their research on gun violence from 2010 to 2012 in the United States, Fowler, Dahlberg, Haileyesus, and Annett (2015) found men composed 86% of all firearm deaths, and had an annual death rate 6.5 times higher than women. They also found men were more likely to utilize a firearm in a suicide attempt at a rate ratio of 7:1, and were more likely to utilize a firearm in a male-to-female homicide at a rate ratio of 5:1 (Fowler et al., 2015). Young adults aged 25–34 experienced the highest rates of firearm fatality, followed by 15–24 year-olds (Fowler et al., 2015). Of all racial/ethnic groups recognized by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, non-Hispanic blacks exhibited the highest overall rates of firearm death (18.1 per 100,000) and was posited by Fowler et al. (2015) to mostly be a function of the highest homicide rates seen in the non-Hispanic black community. Comparatively, non-Hispanic whites and non-Hispanic American Indian/Alaska Native communities exhibit the highest rates of firearm suicides (Fowler et al., 2015). In general, 85% of people who attempt to end their life by firearm complete suicide (Fowler et al., 2015).

With regard to non-fatal gun injury, almost 70,000 people annually receive nonlethal gun wounds (Fowler et al., 2015). Men, again, are disproportionately more likely to be seen in the emergency room, and composed 90% of all firearm injury related visits from 2010 to 2012 (Fowler et al., 2015). Seventy-two percent of people admitted to the emergency room with non-fatal gun injuries were under the age of 35 (Fowler et al., 2015). Considering medical costs and cost of productivity loss, the United States spends about \$50 billion each year related to firearm injury and death (Fowler et al., 2015). A further consideration to gun ownership and violence is the relationship to substance use.

2. Substance abuse

According to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014), 21.6 million Americans aged 12 or older were classified with substance abuse or dependence in the last year. Most commonly, individuals report abuse of or dependence on alcohol, marijuana, pain relievers and cocaine. More than half (52.2%) of respondents indicated occasional use of alcohol. Nearly one quarter (22.9%) of respondents reported binge-drinking, while 6.3% reported regular heavy drinking.

Rates of illicit drug and alcohol abuse are highest for those in their late teens through mid-twenties, though rates of illicit drug use are steadily increasing for those in their late 50s and early 60s. The rate of substance dependence or abuse is higher for males (10.8%) than for females (5.8%) (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014). In 2013, the rate of substance dependence or abuse was 4.6% in Asians, 7.4% in African Americans, 8.4% for whites, 8.6% for Hispanics, 10.9% for individuals identifying as two or more races, 11.3% for native Hawaiians or other Pacific Islanders, and 14.9%

for American Indians or Alaska Natives. (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014).

While rates of drug dependence or abuse are not associated with levels of educational attainment, they are correlated with employment: 15.2% of unemployed adults were classified with substance dependence or abuse compared to full-time (9.5%) or part-time (9.3%) employed adults. Substance abuse is also prevalent in criminal justice populations: 34.3% of adults who were on parole or released from jail in the past year reported drug or alcohol dependence or abuse compared to 8.4% of their counterparts who were not on parole or supervised release. The rate of substance dependence or abuse was 35% among adults on probation, while the rate of substance dependence or abuse for those not on probation was 8% (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014).

There are a number of costs associated with substance and alcohol abuse. Abuse of alcohol and illicit drugs costs \$417 billion annually in costs related to health care, crime, and lost work productivity (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2015). Substance abuse is known to be associated with impulsivity, impaired judgment, violence, crime, injury, death, and suicide (Branas, Han, & Wiebe, 2016). Although substance abuse and dependence is demonstrably a widespread issue with significant consequences, few who need treatment receive it: only 10.2% of those with substance abuse or dependence disorders received treatment in 2013 (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014).

3. Intersection of gun violence and substance abuse

A strong correlation between gun violence and substance abuse has been suggested in several studies (Sheehan, Rogers, Williams, & Boardman, 2013; Rivara et al., 1997; Reid, 2001). Although few studies exist that focus specifically on gun violence and substance abuse, several studies demonstrate a relationship between substance abuse and crime, gun ownership and violent death. Carter et al. (2013) found binge drinking and illicit drug use were positively correlated with gun possession among youth admitted to an emergency room for assault-related injury. Wintemute (2015) demonstrates that gun owners are more likely to engage in binge drinking and heavy drinking. Researchers have also found that substance abuse is a strong predictor of domestic violence (Rueve & Welton, 2008). Substance use is associated with violent death, including homicide and suicide (Rivara et al., 1997; Sheehan et al., 2013). Rivara et al., 1997 found individuals who used both alcohol and illicit drugs were 16 times more likely to commit suicide than the general population, and that individuals who lived with others who used alcohol or other drugs were at an increased risk of homicide, even if they did not use themselves. Sheehan et al. (2013) found 42.2% of victims of violent deaths in their study tested positive for alcohol, 13.5% for opiates, and 40.1% for “other drugs.” Only 12% of victims were found to have no drugs in their system (Sheehan et al., 2013). Reid (2001) found drug use and gun use are positively associated among incarcerated youth, with gun use increasing risk of drug use by 60% and drug use increasing risk of gun use in crime by 34%. In their totality, these data present strong evidence for the relationship between gun violence and substance use.

Although causality has not been established, the evidence suggests various explanations for the relationship between the two (Reid, 2001; Sheehan et al., 2013). The first is that gun violence and substance abuse share some of the same risk factors; although neither behavior causes the other, they are often found together due to their shared antecedents (Reid, 2001; Sheehan et al., 2013). A second explanation is that some of the immediate consequences of substance abuse, such as impaired judgment, impulsivity, and agitation, increase the risk of violent behavior, including gun violence (Rivara et al., 1997; Sheehan et al., 2013). A third explanation is that the criminalization of drug use generates a culture of illegal behavior and violence, including gun violence (Cundiff, 2001; Crockett, 2013). Individually, none of these theories

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