Unintentional Firearm Deaths among Children

Nichole L. Michaels, PhD, MPH
Center for Injury Research and Policy
Abigail Wexner Research Institute at Nationwide Children’s Hospital
Disclosures

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When Children Shoot Children

88 Unintended Deaths in California

Garen J. Wintemute, MD, MPH; Stephen P. Teret, JD, MPH; Jess F. Kraus, MPH, PhD; Mona A. Wright; Gretchen Bradfield, MS

Between 1977 and 1983, eighty-eight California children 0 to 14 years of age were unintentionally shot and killed either by other children or by themselves. The majority of cases occurred while children were playing with guns they had found. Easy accessibility to guns, the resemblance of guns to toys, and gun malfunctions were all contributing factors. Handguns, particularly those of .22 caliber, were frequently involved.

(JAMA 1987;257:3107-3109)

From the Department of Family Practice, University of California, Davis (Dr Wintemute and Ms Wright and Bradfield); the Department of Health Policy and Management, School of Hygiene and Public Health, The Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore (Mr Teret); and the Department of Epidemiology, School of Public Health, University of California, Los Angeles (Dr Kraus).

Reprint requests to the University of California, Davis, Medical Center, Department of Family Practice, 2221 Stockton Blvd, Sacramento, CA 95817 (Dr Wintemute).

FIREARMS rank among the United States’ ten leading causes of death, accounting for more than 30,000 deaths annually.¹⁻² Unintentional firearm deaths are most common among children and young adults.³⁻⁴ Such deaths may be susceptible to preventive measures beyond those available for youthful firearm suicide and homicide. This study describes the 88 unintentional firearm deaths in which both the shooter and the victim were California children 14 years of age or younger, occurring during the years 1977 through 1983.
An epidemiological study of unintentional pediatric firearm fatalities in the USA, 2009–2018

Arti Vaishnav¹, Gary A. Smith¹,², Jaahnavi Badeti² and Nichole L. Michaels¹,²*

Abstract

Background  Firearm injuries are the leading cause of mortality among children and adolescents 1–19 years old in the USA. Many prior studies on this topic lack detailed information about the circumstances of the firearm fatalities and include decedents and shooters of all ages. This study characterizes firearm fatalities in the USA in which children <15 years old unintentionally killed themselves or another child.

Methods  Ten years of data from the National Violent Death Reporting System were analyzed. Unintentional firearm fatalities among children were reviewed to identify characteristics of decedents and the children who inflicted the deaths, their relationship, and circumstances of the deaths. There were 279 firearm fatalities during the study period involving children <15 years old who unintentionally killed themselves or another child < 15 years old.

Results  Most victims were male (81.4%), and 40.9% were 2–4 years old. Most incidents (64.0%) occurred at the victim’s residence, and in 80.9% of cases the firearm owner was a relative of the shooter. In the <5-year age group, 80.3% of injuries were self-inflicted, and in the 10–14-year age group, 32.3% of shooters were a friend of the victim.

Conclusion  This study highlights that children in the USA are shooting themselves and each other in their own homes, and often accessing firearms owned by family members. These findings can be used to guide prevention efforts, such as child access prevention laws, to reduce the number of pediatric firearm fatalities in the future.
Unintentional Firearm Injuries

• NVDRS restricted access data from 2009-2018, included 33 states
  • 279 unintentional firearm fatalities in which a child <15 years old shot and killed themselves or another child <15 years old
    • 57% self-inflicted
    • 43% inflicted by another child
Demographics

Decedents (all)
Mean age: 7.1 years
81% male

Race and ethnicity
51% White, non-Hispanic
40% Black, non-Hispanic

Child who shot firearm
Self-inflicted
Mean age: 5.9 years
87% male

Other-inflicted
Mean age: 9.9 years
93% male
Number of Firearm Fatalities by Victim Age and Sex

Number of firearm fatalities

Age of victim (years)

- Male
- Female
- Total

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14
Number of Firearm Fatalities by Victim Age and Sex

Age of victim (years)

Number of firearm fatalities

- Male
- Female
- Total
Who Shot the Gun?

• Among victims < 5 years old, 80% of deaths were self-inflicted

• 38% of victims 5-9 years old were shot by a brother

• 32% of victims 10-14 years old were shot by a friend
Incident Location

• Overall, nearly **2/3 of shootings** occurred at the victim’s residence
Firearm Storage

• When information was available, most firearms were stored loaded (92%) and unlocked (92%)

• Firearm owner was most frequently a parent (61%) or other relative (20%) of the child who shot the gun
Incident Circumstances

• Playing with the firearm or mistaking the firearm for a toy were the most common circumstances (53%)

• Among older children, it’s often a child “showing off” the gun to a family member or friend
Limitations

• Study only includes data from 33 states
• NVDRS abstractors only have the information provided in investigative reports, which may be inaccurate or incomplete
• Some NVDRS variables only collected for certain manners of death
• Case narratives sometimes missing or inconsistent
• Data often missing with regard to how firearms were stored or who owned them
A Final Note…

- An important aspect of this work is that in many cases, we are talking about one child **unintentionally** killing another child.
  - We must not forget to care for the child who shot the gun, but may be physically unharmed.
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Contact Information

Nichole Michaels, PhD
Principal Investigator
Center for Injury Research and Policy
Abigail Wexner Research Institute
Nationwide Children's Hospital
Assistant Professor of Pediatrics
The Ohio State University College of Medicine
614.355.5870
Nichole.Michaels@NationwideChildrens.org
Twitter: @NLMichaelsPhD