

UNINTENTIONAL FIREARM INJURY

Unintentional shootings account for nearly 20 percent of all firearm-related fatalities among children ages 14 and under, compared with 3 percent for the entire U.S. population. Americans possess nearly 200 million firearms, including 65 million handguns. Approximately one-third of families with children (representing more than 22 million children in 11 million homes) keep at least one gun in the home. Gun owners keep firearms in the home for hunting and recreation (60 percent) or for protection and crime prevention (40 percent). Guns in the home for protection are more likely to be handguns, found in a home with children, and stored loaded and unlocked.

Exposure to guns and access to a loaded firearm increase the risk of unintentional firearm-related death and injury to children. Unrealistic perceptions of children's capabilities and behavioral tendencies with regard to guns are common. These include misunderstanding a child's ability to gain access to and fire a gun, distinguish between real and toy guns, make good judgments about handling a gun and consistently follow rules about gun safety. Promoting the safe storage of firearms in the home and reducing their availability and accessibility are important steps in preventing unintentional firearm-related death and injury among children.

FIREARM DEATHS AND INJURIES

- In 2001, 72 children ages 14 and under died from unintentional firearm-related injuries. Children ages 10 to 14 accounted for 54 percent of these deaths.
- In 2002, more than 800 children ages 14 and under were treated in hospital emergency rooms for unintentional firearm-related injuries; 35 percent of these injuries were severe enough to require hospitalization.
- The unintentional firearm injury death rate among children ages 14 and under in the United States is nine times higher than in 25 other industrialized countries combined.
- In 2002, nearly 8,500 children ages 14 and under were treated in hospital emergency rooms for unintentional non-powder gun-related injuries (e.g., BB guns, pellet guns).

WHEN AND WHERE FIREARM DEATHS AND INJURIES OCCUR

- Nearly all childhood unintentional shooting deaths occur in or around the home. Fifty percent occur in the home of the victim and nearly 40 percent occur in the home of a friend or relative. Firearm ownership in the home (especially a firearm kept loaded and unlocked) is associated with an increased risk of unintentional firearm fatalities among children.
- Most childhood unintentional shooting deaths involve guns that have been kept loaded and accessible to children and occur when children play with loaded guns. In one recent study of parents of children ages 4 to 12, more than half of gun-owning parents reported storing a firearm loaded or unlocked in their home.
- An estimated 3.3 million children in the United States live in households with firearms that are always or sometimes kept loaded and unlocked.
- Unintentional shootings among children most often occur when children are unsupervised and out of school. These shootings tend to occur in the late afternoon (peaking between 4 p.m. and 5 p.m.), during the weekend and during the summer months (June to August) and the holiday season (November to December).
- More than 70 percent of unintentional firearm shootings involve handguns.
- Rural areas have higher rates of firearm ownership and unintentional firearm-related deaths and injuries than urban and suburban areas. Shootings in rural areas are more likely to occur outdoors and with a shotgun or rifle; shootings in urban areas are more likely to occur indoors and with a handgun.

WHO IS AT RISK

- Male children are far more likely to be injured and die from unintentional shootings than female children. Of those children ages 14 and under who are killed from an unintentional shooting, 85 percent are male.
- Children living in the South have an unintentional shooting death rate that is seven times that of children living in the Northeast.

- Nearly two-thirds of parents with school-age children who keep a gun in the home believe that the firearm is safe from their children. However, one study found that when a gun was in the home, 75 to 80 percent of first and second graders knew where the gun was kept.
- Before age 8, few children can reliably distinguish between real and toy guns or fully understand the consequences of their actions. A recent study found that half of boys ages 8 to 12 who found a real handgun were unsure whether or not it was a toy.
- Children as young as age 3 are strong enough to pull the trigger of many of the handguns available in the United States.
- According to a recent study in a large metropolitan area, child access was reported as a contributing cause of 14 percent of all unintentional shootings.
- In a recent controlled experimental study, more than 90 percent of children who found and handled a gun or pulled the trigger reported previously having some type of firearm safety instruction.

FIREARM PREVENTION EFFECTIVENESS

- Declines in child firearm- and BB/pellet gun-related injury rates during the 1990s coincided with increased prevention efforts, including legislation and education, aimed at reducing unsupervised access to guns by children.
- Two safety devices — gun locks and load indicators — could prevent more than 30 percent of all unintentional firearm deaths.
- Product design modifications can prevent unintentional firearm death and injury. Every unintentional shooting in which a child age 5 and under shot and killed himself or another could have been prevented by a safety device.

FIREARM LAWS AND REGULATIONS

- In October 1997, Massachusetts became the first state to issue consumer product safety regulations for guns by establishing safety standards for all handguns made or sold in the state. California and New York have passed similar regulations.
- At least 18 states have enacted child access prevention (CAP) laws, which may hold adults criminally liable for failure to either store loaded firearms in a place inaccessible to children or use safety devices to lock guns.
- State safe-storage laws intended to prevent child access to guns have reduced unintentional firearm-related deaths among children ages 14 and under by an average of 23 percent.
- Nine states and several local jurisdictions have passed laws or ordinances requiring a gun lock to be sold with every handgun.
- A national gun policy survey found that 68 percent of Americans endorse government regulation of the safety design of guns and 88 percent support laws requiring all new handguns to be childproofed.

HEALTH CARE COSTS AND SAVINGS

- The total annual cost of unintentional firearm-related deaths and injuries among children ages 14 and under is more than \$1.2 billion. Children ages 5 to 14 account for more than \$1 billion, or 83 percent, of these costs.
- Among children ages 14 and under, unintentional firearm-related injuries account for half of the total cost of all firearm injuries, which include homicide, suicide and unintentional firearm injuries.
- Hospital treatment for a firearm-related injury averages between \$7,000 and more than \$15,000 per case.

PREVENTION TIPS

- Children should not have access to firearms. A gun in the home can be a danger to children. Parents should seriously weigh the risks of keeping a gun in the home.
- Gun owners should always store firearms (including BB or pellet guns) unloaded and locked up, out of reach of children. Ammunition should be locked in a separate location, also out of reach of children. Quality safety devices such as gun locks lock boxes or gun safes should be used for every gun kept in the home. Keep gun storage keys and lock combinations hidden in a separate location.
- Parents should talk to children about the dangers of guns, teach children never to touch or play with guns, and teach them to tell an adult if they find a gun.
- Parents should check with neighbors, friends or relatives — or adults in any other homes where children may visit — to ensure they follow safe storage practices if firearms are in their homes.

Suggested Citation: National SAFE KIDS Campaign (NSKC). Unintentional Firearm Injury Fact Sheet. Washington (DC): NSKC, 2004.