

Mental Illness not to blame for Gun Violence, study finds

Counter to a lot of public opinion, having a mental illness does not necessarily make a person more likely to commit gun violence. According to a new study, a better indicator of gun violence was access to firearms.

A study by researchers at The University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston looked into the association between gun violence and mental health in a group of 663 young adults in Texas. Their results were published in the journal *Preventive Medicine*.

"Counter to public beliefs, the majority of mental health symptoms examined were not related to gun violence," said Dr. Yu Lu, a postdoctoral research fellow at UTMB and the lead author of the study.

What researchers found instead was that individuals who had gun access were approximately 18 times more likely to have threatened someone with a gun. Individuals with high hostility were about 3.5 times more likely to threaten someone.

"These findings have important implications for gun control policy efforts," Lu said.

Each year, an estimated 75,000 to 100,000 Americans are injured by firearms and 30,000 to 40,000 die from firearms, according to the Centers for Disease Control.

"Much of the limited research on gun violence and mental illness has focused on violence among individuals with severe mental illnesses or rates of mental illness among individuals arrested for violent crimes," Lu said. "What we found is that the link between mental illness and gun violence is not there."

Lu and Dr. Jeff Temple, another author of the study and a professor at UTMB, surveyed participants in a long-term study about their firearm possession and use as well as about anxiety, depression, stress, posttraumatic stress disorder, hostility, impulsivity, borderline personality disorder, mental health treatment and other demographic details.

The researchers found that individuals who had access to guns, compared to those with no such access, were over 18 times more likely to have threatened someone with a gun, even after controlling for a number of demographic and mental health variables. Meanwhile, most mental health symptoms were unrelated to gun violence.

"Taking all this information together, limiting access to guns, regardless of any other mental health status, demographics or prior mental health treatments, is the key to reducing gun violence," Temple said.

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Materials provided by University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston

Gun ownership linked to greater incidence of domestic homicides

A recent study in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, published by Elsevier, reveals a unique and strong association between firearm ownership and the risk of domestic homicides. For each 10 percent increase in household gun ownership rates, the findings show a significant 13 percent increased incidence of domestic

firearm homicide. The homicide risk differed across victim-offender relationships, with nondomestic firearm homicide rising only 2 percent among firearm owners.

"While personal protection is a commonly cited reason for owning a gun, our research shows that firearm ownership also confers significant risks to loved ones, as they are more likely to be killed if there is a gun in the household," said lead investigator Aaron J. Kivisto, PhD, School of Psychological Sciences, University of Indianapolis, Indianapolis, IN, USA. "Our findings highlight the importance of firearm removal in protecting victims of domestic violence, the majority of whom are women."

The investigators looked at annual homicide rates in all 50 US states from 1990 through 2016, across a variety of victim-offender relationships, including homicides of intimate partners, other family members, acquaintances, and strangers. Data were drawn from the US Census, Bureau of Labor Statistics, National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, and Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Report. They examined whether state-level household gun ownership rates were uniquely associated with homicide rates within specific victim-offender relationships.

Researchers noted significant variations across states in the rate of gun-owning households in the US, ranging from 10.4 percent to 68.8 percent. Differences were observed by regions; for example, higher rates were found in states in the south and west, whereas lower firearm ownership was observed in the Northeast region. The study demonstrated that the incidence of domestic firearm homicide was significantly higher in states at the top end of the spectrum. Nearly one in three homicides was classified as domestic with higher domestic firearm homicide rates observed in southern states and lower rates occurring in the northeast. Approximately half of all homicide victims were classified as friends/acquaintances.

"In states at the top quartile of household firearm ownership, there was a 64.6 percent increased incidence rate of domestic firearm homicide, relative to states in the lowest quartile of gun ownership. By contrast, these comparisons did not reveal significant differences for nondomestic firearm homicide rates," explained Professor Kivisto.

The results point to the need to more fully understand the role of firearms across the diverse social and relational dynamics implicated in acts of fatal gun violence. As the number of deaths caused by firearm violence continues to rise in the US, researchers have started to examine potential causal factors, one of which is the number of households with firearms. Past research has consistently pointed to an association between state-level gun ownership and rates of firearm mortality, including suicides and homicides. The results of this study suggest that the risks of gun ownership on homicide rates are relatively specific to domestic homicides, which the study defined as the homicide of an intimate partner or other family member.

The findings should help guide suggested avenues for future policy, practice, and research initiatives. Professor Kivisto noted, "While some federal laws are in place that are aimed at reducing domestic firearm violence, not enough has been done to enforce them at the federal level. States that have enacted legislation to prohibit individuals at high risk of intimate partner violence from possessing firearms and requiring them to relinquish any they currently own, have a lower incidence of domestic firearm homicide."

Materials provided by Elsevier

Is gun violence contagious?

According to new findings from the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Oxford, the answer is mostly no. Rather, this violence is a chronic issue for particular neighborhoods and requires place-specific solutions.

"It's been known for some time that gun violence, like many other forms of crime and other social problems, can be clustered within certain neighborhoods," says Charles Loeffler, the Jerry Lee Assistant Professor of

Criminology in the University of Pennsylvania's School of Arts & Sciences. "So when we observe that a particular part of the city has an elevated risk, how do we understand what that phenomenon actually is?"

Loeffler and Oxford statistician Seth Flaxman, who published their findings in the Journal of Quantitative Criminology, turned to data from Washington, D.C., firearm-related 9-1-1 calls and acoustical sensors around the city that listen for and record the latitude and longitude of every shot fired.

Starting from the baseline that gun violence doesn't occur randomly, the researchers ran the numbers for two hypotheses. First, they asked whether such behavior could be an epidemic, something that spreads quickly and diffuses into the surrounding environment. One incident begets the next, such as a victim retaliating against a former perpetrator.

"The alternative hypothesis," Loeffler says, "is that you have clustering of gun violence in certain neighborhoods at certain times, but it may not actually be spreading in any real sense." The researchers call this an endemic pattern.

As an example, consider an encounter in a bar: Two individuals bump into each other. One takes offense at being accidentally shoved and pulls out or quickly gains access to a gun. The same scenario might happen during a drug deal, where one party feels slighted by another. In either case, the resulting action is not retaliation, but rather an aggressive response to a commonly reoccurring stimulus.

"It may not last more than a couple minutes and may not lead to further acts of violence," Loeffler says. "It could be self-extinguishing." For Washington, D.C., the data were compelling.

"We found that a substantial fraction of the gun violence was better characterized as this endemic, non-random clustering rather than as an epidemic, contagious, diffusing process," he says.

Effective use of this information requires implementing problem-solving tactics with a better chance for success, place-based interventions that target features of a neighborhood rather than those aimed at individuals or groups, the researchers say. For instance, the greening of vacant lots or hotspot policing that puts resources toward watching crime clusters rather than toward a generic patrol.

Right now, the researchers don't know whether the results hold up for other locales, but say they plan to find out.

"It's possible to use the statistical test that we demonstrated here to understand the nature of these two hypotheses in different cities," Loeffler says. "The reality of D.C. may be different than the nature of gun-violence problems in Chicago or Los Angeles or Philadelphia."

Materials provided by University of Pennsylvania

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