

# Youth and Guns

## A Deadly Combination

**In 1996, there were 15 deaths caused by handguns in Japan, 30 in Great Britain, 106 in Canada—and 9,390 in the United States.**

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un violence is all too customary in the lives of children and teens. According to a recent study by the Children’s Defense Fund, one child or teen is killed by gunfire every two hours—nearly 12 deaths a day. Beyond the loss of young people, children and teens suffer in other ways such as the death of family members or friends to gun violence. And gun violence in schools has made teens afraid to go to school.

Incidents across the country have proven that gun violence plagues all communities. Young people are often the victims as well as perpetrators of gun-related violent crime. Researchers attribute gun violence to a number of interrelated factors, including increased access to and use of guns, violence in society, and the connection of guns to the illicit drug trade.

- Increased availability of guns makes youth violence more lethal.<sup>1</sup>
- Research indicates that residents of homes where a gun is present are more likely to experience a suicide or a homicide than residents of homes without guns.
- According to a poll by The Joyce Foundation, only 43 percent of parents with children under 18 years of age that own a gun keep that gun safely locked.
- An estimated 1.2 million elementary-aged children come home after school to unsupervised houses where there is a firearm.

Young people killing each other with guns, whether it is in schools, on the streets, or at home, raises huge concerns. Guns in

the hands of young people can engender fear that young people are less likely to exercise the necessary restraint in handling dangerous weapons, especially rapid-fire assault weapons.<sup>2</sup> Young people often have an underdeveloped sense of the value of life, their own as well as others. They may not have the ability to understand how one seemingly isolated act can in turn impact an entire community.

The costs of gun violence are enormous—the loss of young lives, the futures of those who are injured or inflict violence on others, the pain caused to families, and the damages incurred by the community cannot be overestimated.

- Acute medical care for patients with firearm-related injuries has been estimated to cost nearly \$32,000 per hospital admission.
- Eighty percent of the medical cost for treatment of firearm-related injuries is paid for by taxpayers.

This paper will provide ideas for comprehensive strategies on ways to reduce youth gun violence and provide examples of what other communities are doing across the country to deal with this issue. No single strategy will work by itself. Because gun violence has many causes, several programs and approaches are needed to address the issue productively. Combining these effective strategies can be the base for comprehensive, coordinated local action. If adults are willing to invest time, resources, and support in building a network of programs that work, both youth and adults will reap the benefits of a safer, more caring community.

## What Can Be Done?

According to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, any comprehensive strategy to reduce youth gun violence should include

- getting guns out of hands of juveniles. Community-wide efforts need to be made to approach the frequent gun carrier and purveyors of guns. This can be achieved by increased police attention, community support, and youth involvement in planning and implementing the effort
- focusing on gang prevention, intervention, and suppression strategies. This effort must be done in concert with the juvenile justice system and must focus on youth entering or leaving a gang and the development stage of the gang problem in the community
- working with witnesses to violence to provide them with adequate psychological health services
- teaching anger management and conflict resolution skills in schools
- reducing fear through public education programs
- creating initiatives to make guns safer against unauthorized use
- enforcing laws
- providing drug treatment and prevention
- improving opportunities for economic and social progress.

*In Boston, MA, a comprehensive community-wide effort resulted in several initiatives, including counseling of gun violence victims in hospital emergency rooms, targeted enforcement efforts against gang firearms violence, and community-based justice centers that help mediate disputes.*

Although this list can seem overwhelming, *everyone* can help prevent gun tragedies in three ways:

- starting or supporting violence prevention (not reaction) programs in every community
- teaching young people how to manage anger and handle conflicts peaceably
- keeping guns out of the hands of unsupervised kids.

### **Starting or supporting violence prevention (not reaction) programs in every community**

The first steps in preventing gun violence are to understand the causes of all violence, design programs that address the causes, and support their activities. The roots of violence are many and varied, but years of research on the subject have identified a number of traits, conditions, and situations that increase teen's likelihood of becoming violent. These include

- individual (low self-esteem, sense of hopelessness, emotional problems, lack of problem-solving and refusal skills)
- family (inadequate parenting skills and involvement, abuse and neglect, lack of values, lack of positive role models)

*Through periodic home visits, home medical services, and the teaching of parenting and parent-child interaction skills, Healthy Start in Hawaii helps at-risk parents of newborns to find positive ways of dealing with stressful situations. The program actually starts with visits to the new family in the hospital. Evaluations show that the program improved early identification of families less likely to have coping and decision-making skills and helped them to bring up thriving children, dramatically reducing child abuse and neglect cases and improving family functioning.*

- school and educational (early and persistent anti-social behavior, poor academic performance, dropping out)
- peer and other social interaction (rejection by peers, lack of social and communication skills, gang involvement)

*Young people in Oakland and Los Angeles, California, realized that they could be a powerful force to educate their peers about the costs of gun violence, ways to prevent it, and how to spread the word that gun violence is not cool. Teens on Target, all of whose members have been touched by firearms violence, train others their age and younger in preventing firearms violence, work on promoting positive alternatives and opportunities, and educate adults in the community about what they believe is required to reduce firearms deaths and injuries.*

- social conditions (easy availability of drugs and guns, high crime in neighborhoods)
- behaviors (early use of drugs, teenage pregnancy, use of tobacco)

*The Awareness and Development for Adolescent Males program in Chicago supplements discussions about long-term life goals and reasons to delay sexual activity with a focus on creating strong relationships between youth and adults through recreational activities and field trips related to career objectives. The program influenced many students to refrain from sexual activity and convinced others who were already active to use birth control. Before the program, eighth grade participants believed that 16 was the best age to become a parent; afterward, they felt that 22 was the best age.*

- community systems (employment problems, lack of positive recreational opportunities, inadequate health and social services).

*Police in Houston, Texas, collaborate with the local YMCA, Boys & Girls Clubs, Chicano Family Center, the Parks and Recreation Department, churches, universities, and other organizations to provide a wide range of interesting, nonviolent, drug-free recreational and cultural options for about 800 young Houstonians each year through the Police Activities League, a more wide-ranging version of the Police Athletic League found throughout the United States.*

### **Teaching young people how to manage anger and handle conflicts peaceably**

Does your school or community center teach kids ways to manage their anger and handle conflicts peaceably? No one is born knowing how to handle conflict. Children learn to handle conflict by observing other people—parents, brothers and sisters, teachers, friends, or television or movie heroes. (Many cartoons never really show a conflict fully resolved. Does Wyle E. Coyote ever catch the Road Runner?) Some role models for conflict resolution are healthy and others are not.

*The Resolving Conflict Creatively Program, co-sponsored by the New York public schools and Educators for Social Responsibility, is one of the oldest conflict resolution programs in the nation for adolescents and their teachers. This program has had a positive impact on student behavior, as indicated by less physical violence in the classroom, less name-calling, fewer verbal put-downs, more caring behavior, increased willingness to cooperate, and increased understanding of others' points of view.*

Many things can interfere with people's ability to effectively resolve their differences. Differences that are not resolved can turn into arguments, and arguments can escalate into violence. Some of the things that can get in the way of resolving differences peacefully include

- lack of understanding about the real nature of the conflict
- the method or style used to communicate thoughts and feelings
- inability to listen and understand
- level of investment in resolving the problem in the individual's favor
- level of emotions, especially anger.

*The Straight Talk About Risks Program (STAR) is a comprehensive school-based violence prevention curriculum for four grade groups (K-2, 3-5, 6-8)—available in English and Spanish—designed by the Center to Prevent Handgun Violence. Through STAR, students learn how to make better, safer decisions and resolve conflicts without violence through role-playing; how to resist peer pressure to play with or carry guns; how to distinguish between real life and TV violence; goal setting; and the development of leadership skills. Evaluations have found that the program was most effective in grades 3 to 5 in terms of improvement of knowledge, attitudes, and behavior.*

### **Keeping guns out of the hands of unsupervised kids**

Examine your community's current laws and regulations with regard to youth and firearms, particularly handguns. The less access unauthorized youth have to guns or the longer they have to wait to get a gun legally, the more time they have to curb violent impulses. Does your school have a "weapons-free" zone around it so that if a young person is caught with a weapon on school grounds he or she will receive a stiffer penalty? Also look at the policies and procedures that schools, youth groups, youth serving organizations, and other community groups have about firearms of various types.

*In Oklahoma, parents can be fined if their child brings a weapon to school. In North Carolina, failure to store firearms safely in homes where children are present can result in prosecution and fines. Twenty-one states have enacted laws mandating gun-free school zones and imposing sharply increased penalties for firearms possession or use in such areas. Florida and Maryland are among the states that have set up special statewide organizations to help address school-related violence, including gun use.*

Some communities are trying new ways to reduce the number of illegal guns in circulation. In Pennsylvania, Pittsburgh’s “gun task force” is examining a variety of approaches, including radio and television spots with a telephone number to use to anonymously report illegal guns. In Charleston, SC, a bounty is offered by the police department for reports leading to the seizure of an illegal gun.

## Involving Young People

Involving young people in gun violence prevention does not mean just putting a youth’s face on the cover of a brochure. Young people can and should be involved in planning and decision-making; they should have real responsibilities for concrete tasks. Sometimes they are the only ones to whom other youth will listen. They can be peer counselors and tutors. They can produce public service announcements. They can implement or help to implement programs. Involving young people helps them to develop skills they need to become productive adults—as workers and citizens. Whether or not the youth are at risk, they can play effective, important roles in the community.

*The Youth as Resources program enables youth to tackle problems of great concern to them and to make a real change in their communities. Young people identify needs, develop approaches, and calculate budgets. If their presentations to community boards are accepted, they get the funds to carry out the project.*

## Resources

**Bureau of Justice Assistance Clearinghouse**  
PO Box 6000  
Rockville, MD 20849-6000  
800-688-4252  
Web site: [ncjrs.org](http://ncjrs.org)

**Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence**  
Institute of Behavioral Science, University of Colorado  
Campus Box 439, Building #10  
Boulder, CO 80309-0439  
303-492-8465  
Web site: [colorado.edu/cspv](http://colorado.edu/cspv)

**Juvenile Justice Clearinghouse**  
PO Box 6000  
Rockville, MD 20849-6000  
800-638-8736  
Web site: [ncjrs.org](http://ncjrs.org)

**National Crime Prevention Council**  
1700 K Street, NW, Second Floor  
Washington, DC 20006-3817  
202-466-6272  
Web site: [ncpc.org](http://ncpc.org)

**National Center for Injury Prevention and Control**  
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention  
Office of Communication Resources  
Mailstop K65, 4770 Buford Highway  
Atlanta, GA 30341-3724  
770-488-1506  
Web site: [cdc.gov/ncipc](http://cdc.gov/ncipc)

**Education Development Center, Inc.**  
55 Chapel Street  
Newton, MA 02158-1060  
617-969-7100  
Web site: [edc.org](http://edc.org)

## YOUTH AND GUNS

**National School Safety Center**  
141 Duesenberg Drive, Suite 11  
Westlake Village, CA 91362  
805-373-9977  
Web site: [nssc1.org](http://nssc1.org)

**Pacific Center for Violence Prevention**  
San Francisco General Hospital  
1001 Potrero Avenue  
Building 1, Room 300  
San Francisco, CA 94110  
415-285-1793  
Web site: [pcvp.org](http://pcvp.org)

**Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program**  
Office of Elementary and Secondary Education  
U.S. Department of Education  
400 Maryland Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20202-6123  
202-260-3954  
Web site: [ed.gov/offices/OESE/SDFS](http://ed.gov/offices/OESE/SDFS)

**Teens, Crime, and the Community**  
1700 K Street, NW, Eighth Floor  
Washington, DC 20006-3817  
202-466-6272  
Web site: [nationaltcc.org](http://nationaltcc.org)

**Teens on Target**  
c/o Youth Alive  
3300 Elm Street  
Oakland, CA 94609  
510-594-2588

**Youth Crime Watch of America**  
9300 South Dadeland Boulevard, Suite 100  
Miami, FL 33156  
305-670-2409  
Web site: [ycwa.org](http://ycwa.org)

## References

1. American Psychological Association, 1993; Elliott, 1994; Jones and Krisberg, 1994; McDowall, 1991.
2. Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, *Reducing Youth Gun Violence* (Washington, DC: Author, 1996), 6.



National Crime Prevention Council  
1700 K Street, NW, Second Floor  
Washington, DC 20006-3817  
202-466-6272  
[www.weprevent.org](http://www.weprevent.org)  
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