

The role of research in addressing the public health problem of gun violence

While the USA does not have the highest rate of firearm deaths in the world, it does have the highest rate among Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development and high-income countries. The latest mass shooting in Newtown Connecticut stirred the country and the world in ways not seen before. Nevertheless, the hope for federal action on meaningful gun legislation has dimmed. How can this toll of gun deaths be reduced?

The answers are certainly complex and we need to know more. We believe that research on prevention of firearm violence is an important and necessary part of the solution. Yes, we do know that background checks have had an effect on inappropriate procurement of guns, although private gun sales currently require no background check. Laws mandating a minimum age for gun ownership reduce gun deaths. And we know that requiring the safe storage of guns can save lives. But there is much more we must learn to prevent unfathomable tragedies like those that the parents and families of children and other innocent victims in Connecticut are now experiencing, and indeed the families of all firearm victims are living through.

The *Society for Advancement of Violence and Injury Research* represents more than 135 scientists around the nation working to develop better ways of preventing injuries and reducing the toll of the most common cause of death and acquired disability across much of the human lifespan. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, over the last 20 years, the number of people in the USA dying in motor vehicle crashes has decreased by 31%; deaths from fires and drowning have been reduced even more by 38% and 52%, respectively. Much of these reductions have derived from translating research findings into effective intervention efforts. In contrast, from 1985 to 2010, the total number of gun deaths in the USA has gone up and down, but ultimately finished right where it started at

about 31 500 per year. One crucial difference has been a lack of research and innovation in addressing this problem.

Firearm violence research funded by the National Institutes of Health, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other agencies within the Department of Health and Human Services has effectively been shut down for the last 17 years and is virtually non-existent because of Congress. While Congressional appropriation language prohibits the use of HHS funds 'to advocate or promote gun control', the effect was to suppress any federally funded public health research on firearm violence. While President Obama specifically instructed the National Institutes of Health and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that no federal ban on gun research exists, Congress must still appropriate the funds to support such research.

Research is certainly not the whole answer to preventing gun violence in this country, but we often hear policy makers ask about the 'best' ways to use limited resources. We cannot know what is effective if we cannot study the effects of policy and programmes, develop new ones and test their impact. In the debate over gun control legislation, the lack of information on what will work has been very apparent. Policy makers need this information to develop appropriate steps to curb gun violence. Considering the over \$40 billion annual cost to the USA for injuries and deaths from gun violence, funding research will save money in the long run. Many nations, including the USA, have relied on science to inform public policy, and by doing so, have improved the safety, health and lives of all our citizens. We need to do the same for the problem of firearm violence. Otherwise, the collective pain that we as a nation are now experiencing will continue to be repeated again and again.

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Small airlines less safety conscious

The US Transportation Department's inspector general has criticised the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) for not insisting that large airlines '... consistently share safety information and best practices' with their regional airlines. In 2009, the FAA promised to ensure 'one level of safety' after a flight operated by a regional airline crashed near Buffalo, New York, killing 50 people. The Associated Press, *Buffalo News*



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