

# Stray-bullet shootings often harm women, kids

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(Medical Xpress) -- Most people killed or wounded in stray-bullet shootings were unaware of events leading to the gunfire that caused their injuries, and nearly one-third of the victims were children and nearly half were female, according to a new nationwide study examining an often-overlooked form of gun violence.

The study by Garen Wintemute, professor of [emergency medicine](#) and director of the Violence Prevention Research Program at UC Davis School of Medicine and Medical Center, examines [mortality rates](#) and other epidemiological aspects of stray-bullet shootings over a one-year period. It is published in the July issue of the [Journal of Trauma and Acute Care Surgery](#).

"Stray-bullet shootings alter the nature of life in many American neighborhoods, creating fear and anxiety and prompting parents to keep children indoors and take other precautions," Wintemute said. "When we think about [gun violence](#), we think about high-profile and tragic events like Virginia Tech or the shooting of Congresswoman [Gabrielle Giffords](#). But stray-bullet shootings affect entire communities every day, and there has been almost no research exploring them."

Unlike the risk pattern for violence in general, which typically affects young males, most victims of stray bullets were outside the 15-34 age range, and nearly half (44.8 percent) were females, the study found. Many of the people shot (40.7 percent) were at home at the time of the incident, and of these, most (68.2 percent) were indoors.

In one case that typifies the random nature of these events, a toddler in New York was standing in her grandparents' house, where her family had gathered to watch a [football game](#), when a bullet fired by a hunter 378 feet away came through the home's wall and struck the child in the torso. She died soon after at a local hospital.

In another case, a 51-year-old Ohio woman was paralyzed and later died when a bullet fired by a teenager shooting at two other fleeing teens struck her in the neck as she crossed the street near her home. Four days later, another woman driving on the same street was wounded by a stray bullet as two groups of teenagers fired at each other.

"Victims of stray bullets are essentially 'collateral damage' and are usually disconnected from the events that lead to their injury or death," Wintemute said. "They are innocent bystanders who typically have no opportunity to flee or take any other preventive measures."

To gather data for the study, Wintemute and his colleagues used Google and Yahoo news alerting services and the news archives of GunPolicy.org to track stories published between March 2008 and February 2009 that contained the phrase "stray bullet." He defined stray-bullet shootings as episodes involving a bullet that escaped an intended sociogeographic space and injured at least one person, either from the gunshot itself or a secondary mechanism, such as an injury from glass sent flying by a bullet.

Within that framework, the study team identified 284 stray-bullet shootings events, in which 317 people were killed or injured. Most of the people shot (81 percent) were unaware of the events leading to the gunfire that caused their injuries. Of the 65 people who died during the monitoring period, most died on the day they were shot, and many died at the shooting scene.

The shootings were concentrated in big cities, and included scenarios involving violent conflicts (59.2 percent), hunting and other shooting sports (7.4 percent), and unknown activities (22.9 percent). Despite its frequent occurrence, celebratory gunfire related to holidays such as July Fourth caused relatively few stray bullet injuries, accounting for less than 5 percent of the cases.

One limitation of the current study, Wintemute said, is its reliance on media reports to quantify stray-bullet shootings, which may have resulted in an underestimation of their frequency.

Wintemute said he hopes the findings will raise awareness of stray-bullet shooting and help lead to the expansion of preventive measures, such as "hot-spot policing," which involves increasing enforcement of firearm laws in areas with high levels of gun violence.

"Wearing body armor or taking other extreme protective measures is just not practical on a widespread scale, so we need to look at other ways to help communities feel safe from such events," Wintemute said. "Given that these stray-bullet shootings are a byproduct of gun violence in general, it's plausible that if you prevent the violence, you'll prevent the stray-bullet [shootings](#)."

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