

Is gun violence a public health issue?

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Glock 17 with a cable lock. Credit: Wikimedia Commons/Kencf0618

The national debate surrounding firearms violence is a fiercely contentious political topic that pits policymakers against one another and rarely sees compromise. Hala Madanat wants to change that. The San Diego State University director of the Graduate School of Public Health

and professor of health promotion is part of a coalition of public health researchers across the country that is trying to reframe discourse around gun violence as a public health issue. The group, led by Boston University epidemiologist Sandro Galea, published an editorial in the March issue of the *American Journal of Public Health* calling for public health researchers to lead the way by generating more research on gun violence, seeking funding from private foundations, building relationships with industry and policymakers on both sides of the aisle and strengthening state-level initiatives.

"Gun violence is a safety issue," Madanat said. "It's about preventing deaths, and that concept of prevention is the purview of public health."

By delving deep into the statistics of [gun violence](#), she said, researchers hope to uncover patterns and generate policy suggestions, such as mandatory background checks, that could enhance [gun safety](#) and reduce shooting deaths.

But collecting these statistics and analyzing them has not been easy. In the early 1990s, public health researchers funded by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) released data suggesting that owning a firearm was a risk factor contributing to likelihood of homicide. The gun lobby accused the CDC of advocating for [gun control](#) and convinced Congress to encode language in appropriation bills essentially preventing federal money from being spent on firearm violence research.

"This interpretation has resulted in a dearth of federally funded firearm research and has limited the engagement of a generation of researchers in the field," the study's authors wrote in the editorial.

Madanat argues that while the lack of federal funding is a substantial setback, it shouldn't be a death knell to the idea that public health

research can reduce deaths from gun violence in this country. Funding from private foundations can help researchers collect and analyze data, she said. And by working locally with community leaders and state-level policymakers, researchers can effect change without running afoul of federal opposition.

Ultimately, the goal is to build a coalition of bipartisan politicians, industry leaders and community advocates to develop policies that would reduce gun violence deaths without infringing upon Second Amendment rights.

She likens the issue to the controversy over mandatory seatbelt laws. That, too, pitted public health research against individual-rights advocates. She said safety advocates were eventually able to get auto manufacturers on board with their calls to make driving safer and in 1968, seatbelts became mandatory equipment for U.S. vehicles.

Madanat and her colleagues want to similarly convince gun manufacturers to adopt safety mechanisms and manufacturing practices that would reduce deaths. These practices could include mandatory safety locks and fingerprinting technology.

The researchers also want to convince gun-rights advocates that they are not calling for gun removal.

"There's a vocal minority of gun owners who oppose reasonable measures to reduce [gun deaths](#)," Madanat said. "They're afraid without really understanding that researchers aren't trying to take away their guns."

To that end, it's the responsibility of public health researchers to clearly articulate their goals to the public and avoid politically loaded terms like "gun control."

"What [public health](#) really wants to do is increase safety around firearms and prevent deaths injuries related to them, especially for children," Madanat said.

More information: Charles C. Branas et al. Academic Public Health and the Firearm Crisis: An Agenda for Action, *American Journal of Public Health* (2017). [DOI: 10.2105/AJPH.2016.303619](https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2016.303619)

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