

# Kids with easy access to firearms are more likely to be depressed

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Easy access to a gun at home is bad for a child's mental health, particularly for girls —bad enough, according to a new examination of a study of American schoolchildren from the 1990s, to suggest parents think carefully before making the decision to bring a gun into the home, especially one that may be accessible by the children in the household.

University of Wisconsin–Madison sociology graduate student Jinho Kim found that teenagers who participated in a national study were more likely—about 3 percentage points more likely—to experience severe depressive symptoms if they said they had easy access to a firearm in their home. The effects were even greater for girls.

"There's a physical and social cost to having a gun that's well studied. We know it increases your likelihood of suicide and homicide, and your children's likelihood of suicide," says Kim, whose results were published recently by the journal *Social Science & Medicine*. "But the physical consequences are clearer than the psychological consequences. This is the first study of the psychological effect on adolescents."

In an effort to explore the impact of firearms on children's [mental health](#), Kim spent months trying to identify useful data. Eventually, he found the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health, for short), which repeatedly surveyed a group of about 20,000 seventh- through 12th-graders in 1994 and '95.

Alongside standard assessments of mental health and questions about the

perceptions of school and neighborhood safety, Add Health included a simple yes/no query: Is a gun easily available to you in your home?

About 20 percent of respondents reported easy access to a gun at home in Add Health surveys. That figure ballooned to 40 percent in a study published in 2015—though the rate of household gun ownership in the United States had fallen during that time, according to the National Opinion Research Center.

Studies from 2004 and 2006 found that one-fifth of gun owners with minor children in the home store their firearms loaded, and 10 percent store them both loaded and unlocked. Kim believes those sort of habits hint at the mechanisms connecting gun access to fear and depression.

"One mechanism may be the worry or fear of firearm-related accidents and injuries at home," Kim says. "The other is the perception of safety in public, in the neighborhood and school. Adolescents can extrapolate their own firearm access to their peers. They might have easy access at home, too, and you can imagine what your peers might do with that access."

The female Add Health respondents with easy gun access at home were less likely than peers to feel safe at school—about 3 percentage points less likely—though Kim's study didn't find a statistically significant change in feelings of safety for boys. The gender difference isn't unexpected.

"Men are more likely to be the gun owners and users, but women have stronger feelings about guns—and those are generally adverse feelings," Kim says. "Females don't feel safe when they have [access](#) to guns at home or the prevalence of gun ownership in their community increases. In contrast, males tend to feel safe when they have more guns in their community."

And the Add Health results were set before a watershed moment—the 1999 murders at Columbine High School in Colorado—changed the way many Americans feel about school safety.

"Considering how frequently people are now exposed to news about guns at schools, I feel like these findings are probably a minimum effect," Kim says. "We may be looking at the lower bound."

While the effects may not seem steep, the changes in depression and perception of safety are enough to meet general recommendations for employing cognitive therapy to help. Using research equating various consequences of depression to adult earning power, the gun effects are equivalent to being hampered by a low birth weight or losing nearly a year of college education.

It's more than enough, especially from a public health perspective or in cases where kids are saddled with other factors making depression a concern, Kim says, to look for ways to counteract the harm.

"When you identify those who have a risk of higher depression, whether they have big issues in the family like divorce or maltreatment, we don't look at whether they also have guns at home," Kim says. "I think we should."

School programs could target unease about safety there, but the largest impact would probably come at [home](#).

"We all know that reduced household gun ownership levels should improve physical health by reducing the numbers of suicides, homicides, and accidental gun deaths. My findings suggest it might also improve the mental health of girls in the household.," Kim says. "It seems possible that if parents make more informed decisions about gun ownership and storage, we could reduce national gun-related public [health](#) problems,

even without major changes in legal regulations."

Provided by University of Wisconsin-Madison

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