

Children have more access to guns than their parents may believe

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New research by Carmel Salhi, a Northeastern professor, shows that 70 percent of parents believe their children cannot access the guns they keep in their homes. The children tell a different story.

More than one-third of adolescents (ages 13 to 17) say they could gain

access in less than five minutes to a loaded [firearm](#) kept in the [home](#), and half could gain access in 60 minutes or less.

"It was really shocking to see that half of the [children](#) in homes with guns reported being able to get to a loaded gun in under an hour," says Salhi, an assistant professor of health sciences, in reference to another key finding.

Salhi says the nationally representative survey—which included 280 families with children who keep firearms in the home—serves as a warning to parents that a home with guns isn't as safe as they may have thought.

He says the focus should be on adolescents' access to firearms, because 30 percent of parents admitted that their children had access to guns in the home. Also, he adds, locking away the guns doesn't necessarily cut off access.

"Most of the messaging around reducing firearms access for adolescents has been around locking the guns," Salhi says. "The number of adolescents who have ready access to a gun in the home is really startling to see, and that points to this being a public health issue."

Previous research by Northeastern's Matt Miller, a co-author of the study, has shown that people who own a handgun are almost four times more likely to die by suicide than those who don't have guns. Suicide is the second-leading cause of death among people under 35 in the United States.

Salhi's work pairs with earlier research by Miller revealing that health-care workers rarely discuss firearm safety with their patients. These studies help reveal the need for a public health approach to gun safety, says Miller, a professor of health sciences and epidemiology who has

been researching injury and [violence prevention](#) for two decades.

"These conversations in a medical setting rarely occur with gun owners even when there are children in the home," says Miller, who was joined on the Salhi study by Deborah Azrael of the Harvard Injury Control Research Center. "Access to loaded firearms, which Dr. Salhi's work indicates is all too common, means that impulsive suicidal behavior is more likely to result in death than if guns were less accessible to adolescents in this country."

The American Public Health Association, a century-old organization of public-health professionals with more than 25,000 members worldwide, cites gun violence as "a leading cause of premature death in the U.S." A national record of more than 43,000 people were killed by gun violence in 2020, according to the Gun Violence Archive, including more than 24,000 people who died by suicide.

Research released by Miller in 2020 showed that access to a gun makes it four times more likely that a suicide will result in death than if there were no gun involved.

"Suicide is impulsive," says Salhi. "Prevention is much more likely to be effective than trying to predict it."

Salhi says the next step is to conduct research that shows how adolescents gain access to guns in their household, regardless of whether they are locked. In addition to the primary focus on [suicide](#), there also is reason to fear the potential for accidents when children gain access to firearms.

"This is also a message about unintentional firearm death and injury," Salhi says. "When children have guns in an unsupervised environment, they face a higher risk of injury."

More information: Carmel Salhi et al. Parent and Adolescent Reports of Adolescent Access to Household Firearms in the United States, *JAMA Network Open* (2021). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.0989](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.0989)

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