

Rates of handgun carriage rise among US adolescents, particularly White, rural, and higher income teens, new study finds

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Handgun carrying increased significantly among rural, White and higher-income adolescents from 2002 to 2019, ominously escalating the risk of

firearm-related death or injury for both these youths and others in their social sphere, researchers from Boston College's Lynch School of Education and Human Development report in the latest edition of the journal *Pediatrics*.

The researchers found a 41 percent increase in rates of handgun carriage among youth overall, with White and higher income youth now most likely to report carriage.

Carriage rates among Black, American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN), and lower-income adolescents decreased over the same timeframe. The report drew its data from the National Survey on Drug Use & Health, a cross-sectional, countrywide survey of adolescents ages 12-17, conducted annually from 2002-19.

Federal estimates based on the survey indicate that in 2019-20 there were an additional 200,000 adolescents reporting they have carried a firearm compared to 2002-03.

"While earlier handgun carriage research primarily focused on individual level risk factors, more recent inquiries on bearing and exposure to firearm violence have drawn attention to the importance of socio-demographic differences in carriage patterns, particularly those linked to differences in neighborhood or historical contexts, and place-based norms around bearing firearms," report the study's authors. "For example, U.S. southern and midwestern demographic groups tend to embrace more positive norms around gun carriage, and firearm bearing by adolescents is linked to peer and family customs around carriage."

Titled "Prevalence of Adolescent Handgun Carriage: 2002-2019," the investigation was conducted by Naoka E. Carey, J.D., a Ph.D. candidate in Applied Developmental and Educational Psychology, and Rebekah Levine Coley, Ph.D., a professor in the Lynch School's Department of

Counseling, Developmental and Educational Psychology. The study points to socio-demographic variables such as gender, education, ethnicity, [religious affiliation](#) and [household income](#), as well as [geographical location](#) and related norms and customs as likely influencers.

Firearm injuries are the second-leading cause of death among children and adolescents, and the rates of adolescent firearm-related injuries or deaths have been on the rise, note the authors. Furthermore, exposure to firearm injuries has long-term developmental implications for youth, and has been attributed to increased future injury rates and the likelihood of engagement in firearm crime. Handguns, in contrast to other firearms, are more likely to be employed in homicides, and handgun ownership is associated with an elevated suicide risk.

"Adolescent handgun carriage is increasing among particular adolescent subgroups, indicating a remarkable change over the past 17 years," said Coley. "Understanding such variations is critical to an understanding of fluctuating violence patterns, including rising rates of adolescent and rural suicide, and identifying which adolescents are at an increased risk of injury. Lastly, lessons learned regarding adolescent behavior from the 1990s or early 2000s may be less relevant to a more socio-demographically diverse youth population today."

The findings call for the development of intervention programs and policy solutions specific to the different [adolescent](#) subgroups, and which address the underlying structural and sociocultural—as well as the family and individual—factors of [firearm](#) bearing.

"Gun violence is now the leading cause of death for children in the U.S. and it is absolutely critical that we address it," said Carey, a member of the Massachusetts Juvenile Justice and Policy Board and the former executive director of Massachusetts-based Citizens for Juvenile Justice.

"To do that, policy needs to be informed by what teenagers are reporting they do today, not what they were doing 20 years ago or class- or race-based assumptions about which kids carry. We hope that our study can help inform future research, and help policymakers better address the root causes of violence and childhood [injury](#), which may look different for different communities."

More information: Prevalence of adolescent handgun carriage: 2002-2019, *Pediatrics* (2022). [DOI: 10.1542/peds.2021-054472](https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2021-054472)

Provided by Boston College

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