

Teens more likely to carry guns if exposed to violence, study shows

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Teenagers who witness different types of violence are more likely to carry a firearm, according to a new study led by the University of

Michigan.

The study, conducted by researchers at U-M's Institute for Firearm Injury Prevention in collaboration with the Firearm Safety Among Children and Teens Consortium, shows that exposure to [violence](#)—regardless of whether that violence involves a gun—has a significant association with [firearm](#) carriage among youth ages 14–18.

Firearms are the leading cause of death among children and teens in the United States, according to federal data that shows more than 4,700 individuals ages 0–19 died as the result of guns in 2021.

Researchers examined data from a [national survey](#) that polled more than 2,100 U.S. teens and found that reducing exposure to violence may be one mechanism for disrupting cycles of violence among teen populations.

Fourteen percent of study participants reported having witnessed firearm-related violence, and 66% reported having witnessed nonfirearm-related violence over a 12-month period. Those who witnessed firearm-related violence, such as seeing someone use a gun to threaten another person, were 3.7 times more likely to carry a firearm than those who had not witnessed any gun violence, the research shows.

And those who witnessed nonfirearm-related violence, such as seeing someone physically harm another person, were 4.3 times more likely to carry a firearm than those who had not witnessed nonfirearm-related violence. Notably, there was no correlation between witnessing gun-related violence and witnessing nongun-related violence, suggesting that these are two unique exposures.

"This study highlights the importance of identifying the unique circumstances that link these two different types of violence exposures

to youth firearm carriage. In doing so, we can better understand why [young people](#) feel the need to carry a firearm, provide intervention support and strategies, and reduce youth firearm injury," said Rebecca Sokol, U-M assistant professor of social work and co-director of the training and education core at the Institute for Firearm Injury Prevention.

The findings, published in the latest issue of *Preventive Medicine*, note that in order to reduce firearm carriage among teens, it is critical to also reduce exposure to violence in all forms—especially direct exposure as a [witness](#) to a violent incident.

Sokol and colleagues suggest that effective intervention strategies should address both firearm-related violence and nonfirearm-related violence, and also consider the specific connection they each have to firearm carriage among teens. By examining the differences in types of violence, the study indicates, researchers can effectively identify commonalities or overlap between the occurrences and potentially determine motivation and perception among youth who carry guns.

"These findings are an example of why research on firearm-related behavior is essential to creating safer communities throughout the state and country," said Marc Zimmerman, co-director of the Institute for Firearm Injury Prevention, the Marshall H. Becker Collegiate Professor of Public Health and a professor of psychology.

"Studies like this can help researchers understand the pathways for interrupting the cycle of firearm violence and develop evidence-based strategies to address the leading cause of death among U.S. youth."

More information: Rebecca L. Sokol et al, The association between witnessing firearm violence and firearm carriage: Results from a national study of teens, *Preventive Medicine* (2023). [DOI:](#)

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