

Unlocked and loaded: How most gun-owning households with teens store firearms

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More than a third of U.S. households with teens own firearms and more than two-thirds of these gun owners store at least one firearm unlocked and/or loaded, according to a new University of Michigan study. The study is published in the journal *Injury Prevention*.

Surprisingly, the findings also show that prior exposure to [violence](#) is not

associated with gun owners' current [storage](#) practices.

"These findings are consistent with prior work that has found that owning a [firearm](#) for protection (vs. nonprotection motivations) is associated with storing firearms in an easy-to-access manner, that is, unlocked and/or loaded," said Rebecca Sokol, U-M assistant professor of social work and the study's lead author.

Sokol and colleagues collected data about [violence exposure](#), motivations for firearm ownership and firearm storage among U.S. caregivers of teens. The study puts a spotlight on responsible gun ownership, which includes owners taking steps to ensure the weapons are stored securely.

The proactive behavior of storing firearms locked and unloaded lessens the risk of someone gaining access to guns who might harm themselves or others—either intentionally or unintentionally, Sokol said.

"We need a shared understanding that responsible firearm ownership involves storing firearms locked and unloaded; there are large benefits for public and [personal safety](#) in practicing this type of storage," said Sokol, a behavioral scientist who is also affiliated with U-M's Institute for Firearm Injury Prevention.

"We also need more research to understand why individuals differ in their firearm storage practices and the strategies that effectively promote locked and unloaded firearm storage among all firearm owners."

The study involved a nationally representative dataset collected in June/July 2020 of nearly 3,000 caregivers—1,095 of whom were firearm owners. Researchers evaluated the associations between the exposures of community violence, interpersonal violence, firearm ownership motivations (protection vs. nonprotection), and the outcome of firearm storage patterns (locked and unloaded vs. unlocked and/or loaded).

The results showed no associations between community or interpersonal violence exposure and gun storage behaviors. In addition, the associations between violence exposures and firearm storage did not vary according to firearm ownership motivations.

Owning a gun for protection was associated with increased odds of storing at least one firearm unlocked and/or loaded, and this association persisted across all strata of violence exposures.

Sokol said the results suggest the associations between violence exposure and firearm storage are more complicated than anticipated. For example, it may be that actual violence exposure is not associated with firearm storage behavior. Rather, [individuals](#) might experience vicarious violence and fear through social or [news media](#) that leads to feeling the need for [self-protection](#), despite living in places or with people where violence is unlikely.

The study's other authors include Daniel Lee, Marc Zimmerman and Patrick Carter of the U-M Institute for Firearm Injury Protection; Ali Rowhani-Rahbar of the University of Washington; and Karissa Pelletier of Temple University.

More information: Rebeccah Lyn Sokol et al, Associations between experiencing violence, owning a firearm for protection and firearm storage: a nationally representative analysis of US caregivers of teens, *Injury Prevention* (2023). [DOI: 10.1136/ip-2023-044901](https://doi.org/10.1136/ip-2023-044901)

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