

Too often, unlocked, loaded guns are fatal playthings for America's children

December 15 2023, by Ernie Mundell



A loaded revolver left out on a nightstand, a curious child—and

unimaginable tragedy. Moments like this have occurred in American homes hundreds of times over the past two decades, killing 1,262 children, according to a sobering new report from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"Overall, firearms used in [these] [unintentional injury deaths](#) were often stored loaded (74%) and unlocked (76%) and were most commonly accessed from nightstands and other sleeping areas," said a team led by Rebecca Wilson, of the CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control.

Already, unintentional injury is the fourth leading cause of [death](#) among children under the age of one and the leading cause of death among kids and teens. Firearms are a leading cause of these tragedies.

Too often, what starts out as curious play ends in senseless tragedy.

Looking at a 2003–2021 national database on [violent deaths](#), Wilson's team noted that a third of kids killed in this way were between the ages of 11 and 15, 24% were between 16 and 17, and 29% were among the very young—months-old babies to kids younger than six. The work is [published](#) in the journal *MMWR. Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*.

Most [victims](#)—83%—were [boys](#), and more than half are killed in their own homes, the report found. Just over half of unintended gun deaths among kids were inflicted by others (often another child).

In cases where a child was killed by another person and the relationship of the shooter was known, in nearly a third (31.8%) of cases the shooter was a brother or sister. In 7.3% of cases, the shooter was a parent, the CDC data showed.

In most of the incidents reported, tragedy began with innocent play.

"The most common precipitating circumstances were the shooter playing with or showing the firearm to another," which happened in two-thirds of cases. Roughly a fifth of cases involved the shooter unintentionally pulling the trigger, thinking the [firearm](#) wasn't loaded and believing the safety was engaged or the magazine was disengaged, Wilson's team wrote.

In about 11% of cases, children mistook a real gun for a toy.

Common places guns were accessed: A nightstand, under a pillow or mattress, inside a closet or inside a vehicle, according to the study. Three-quarters of gun deaths to kids involved handguns.

Beyond the senseless end to a young life, child bystanders were present during these shootings in about a third of cases, and Wilson's team noted the mental health consequences of witnessing such events are profound and can last a lifetime.

All of these incidents were preventable, they stressed. If firearms are allowed in a home, keeping them locked, unloaded and separate from their ammunition is crucial. They noted that some states have gone further, enacting laws that hold the owners of firearms liable whenever a [child](#) gains access to their gun.

There are tips on keeping kids safe from guns at the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#).

More information: Wilson RF, et al, Unintentional Firearm Injury Deaths Among Children and Adolescents Aged 0–17 Years—National Violent Death Reporting System, United States, 2003–2021. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. (2023) [DOI: 10.15585/mmwr.mm7250a1](https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm7250a1).

Citation: Too often, unlocked, loaded guns are fatal playthings for America's children (2023, December 15) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-12-guns-fatal-playthings-america-children.html>

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