

Concerns about violence increase in California amid COVID-19 pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic has been linked to an estimated 110,000 firearm purchases in California and increases in individuals' worries about violence, according to a new study by the UC Davis Violence

Prevention Program (VPRP). The study looked at the intersection of the coronavirus pandemic and violence-related harms in the state.

"We believe this is the first study using a representative sample of state residents to assess the near-term effects of the pandemic on individual perceptions, motivations and behaviors related to violence and firearm ownership," said Nicole Kravitz-Wirtz, an assistant professor with VPRP who led the study. "We wanted to capture individuals' lived experiences of violence in the context of the pandemic, along with information on pandemic-induced firearm acquisition and changes in firearm storage practices."

The coronavirus pandemic worsened many of the underlying conditions contributing to violence and its consequences, including poverty, unemployment, lack of resources, isolation, hopelessness and loss. These risks are compounded by a recently documented surge in firearm purchasing in the U.S., a risk factor for firearm-related injury and death.

Violence during the COVID-19 pandemic

The researchers used data from the 2020 California Safety and Wellbeing Survey (CSaWS). CSaWS is an ongoing statewide survey on firearm ownership and exposure to violence and its consequences in California. In July 2020, the researchers collected data from 2,870 adult California residents. The responses were weighted to establish estimates that are statistically representative of the adult population of the state.

They found that respondents' worry about violence happening to them significantly increased during the pandemic compared with before. This worry included multiple types of violence (such as robbery, assault, homicide, police violence, suicide and unintentional firearm injury) but did not extend to mass shootings.

The study also showed that more than one in 10 respondents—representing an estimated four million California adults—were concerned that someone they know might physically harm themselves on purpose. For some, this concern was because the other person had suffered a major loss due to the pandemic, such as losing a loved one, job or housing.

The researchers also estimated that 110,000 California adults had acquired a firearm in response to the pandemic, including 47,000 new firearm owners. Previous spikes in firearm purchasing have been associated with increases in firearm violence, and recent evidence suggests a similar relationship exists during the pandemic. The respondents who bought firearms mainly did so for [self-protection](#), citing worries about lawlessness (76%), prisoner releases (56%) and the government going too far (49%).

The researchers indicated that approximately 55,000 California firearm owners who currently store at least one firearm loaded and not locked up had adopted this unsecure storage practice in response to the pandemic. Of those, approximately half lived in households with children or teens.

"Our findings add support to [public health](#)-oriented strategies designed to address the enduring psychological trauma associated with direct and indirect exposure to violence, as well as the underlying social and structural factors that contribute to violence-related harms," Kravitz-Wirtz said.

The researchers pointed to the potential value of short-term crisis interventions for reducing violence-related harm during the [pandemic](#) and following other acute societal shocks. These include temporary [firearm](#) storage outside the home, extreme risk protection orders and efforts involving community-based [violence](#) intervention workers.

More information: Nicole Kravitz-Wirtz et al, Violence, firearms, and the coronavirus pandemic: Findings from the 2020 California Safety and Wellbeing Survey, *medRxiv* (2020). [DOI: 10.1101/2020.10.03.20206367](https://doi.org/10.1101/2020.10.03.20206367)

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