

A Public Health Approach to Firearm Violence Prevention

A Boulder County Public Health position paper on preventing firearm violence.

Introduction

Firearm violence is a significant public health issue. In 2020, firearm-related injuries were among the five leading causes of death for people ages 1-44 in the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Firearm violence affects individuals across all age groups and communities and significantly impacts American's overall safety and well-being. Boulder County Public Health (BCPH) recognizes the urgency of addressing this issue and supports a public health approach to firearm violence prevention. As such, the purpose of this position paper is to provide current data related to firearm violence and outline BCPH's approach to firearm violence prevention, which is rooted in monitoring the data related to firearm violence, supporting effective interventions and policies, and collaborating and advocating with community members and stakeholders to create a safer Boulder County.

The Burden of Firearm Violence

Increasing Rates in Colorado

The rate of firearm-related deaths in Colorado increased by 42% from 2012 to 2021, compared to a 39% increase nationwide (Everytown for Gun Safety, 2023).

Suicide and Firearms

In 2020, 53% of suicides in the United States involved a firearm (Kegler et al., 2022), and in Colorado, the rate of firearm-related suicides increased by 24% from 2012 to 2021, compared to a 19% increase nationwide (Everytown for Gun Safety, 2023).

Alcohol and Firearm Violence

Studies report that as many as 34% of firearm homicide perpetrators, 30% of firearm homicide victims, and 25% of firearm suicide victims were intoxicated prior to death (Center for Gun Violence Solutions, 2023).

Firearm Violence's Impact on Mental Health

Exposure to firearm violence can cause trauma, and the fear of firearm violence can result in toxic stress. Both trauma and toxic stress can result in significant, negative effects on the nervous systems of youth and adults and can contribute to reduced psychosocial engagement and increased likelihood of developing mental health

conditions (Mental Health America, 2023).

Firearm Violence's Impact on Youth

In 2020, firearm-related injuries were the leading cause of death for individuals aged 1 to 19 in the United States (Goldstick et al., 2022). In Colorado, suicide is a leading cause of death for youth aged 10-24, with more than half of these deaths resulting from firearm suicides (Mijer & Wong, 2019). Notably, nearly one-third (32%) of middle and high school students in Colorado reported access to a firearm, and of those, over 25% reported access in under 24 hours and 12% in under 10 minutes (McCarthy et al., 2023).

Youth Perspectives of Firearm Violence

Youth in Boulder County recently shared fears regarding school shootings and their perceived vulnerability. A youth participant in a Youth Advocating for Youth feedback session facilitated by Boulder County reported: "We are scared for our lives of school shootings, but it feels like there's nothing we can do, which makes it scarier" (Boulder County Community Services Department, 2023, p. 52).

BCPH's Approach to Firearm Violence Prevention

BCPH will adopt a public health approach to firearm violence prevention that encompasses identifying, monitoring, and promoting important data related to firearm violence, supporting effective interventions and policies and collaborating and advocating with community members and stakeholders.

Data

The first step in preventing firearm violence is monitoring and understanding the relevant data to inform action, and BCPH is committed to identifying and promoting the use of data related to firearm violence. BCPH will monitor and link community members and organizations to reliable data resources that track firearm-related injuries and deaths (e.g., the associated who, what, where, when, and how) as well as risk and protective factors related to firearm violence (e.g., what factors protect people or put them at risk for experiencing or perpetrating firearm violence).

Interventions and Policies

BCPH will promote effective interventions and policies that prevent firearm violence, such as education on responsible gun ownership, distribution of safe storage devices, and community-based violence prevention strategies. In homes with firearms, the likelihood of unintentional death, suicide, and homicide is three to four times higher than those without firearms, and the frequency of secure firearm storage, which reduces firearm-related injuries and deaths, can be increased by physician counseling and the provision of firearm locking devices (Dowd et al., 2012; Gastineau & McKay, 2023; Rowhani-Rahbar et al., 2016). Firearm violence prevention starts in early

childhood with programs to support healthy emotional development and includes interventions to lessen the harms of violence exposure and prevent problem behavior and further involvement in violence (American Psychological Association, 2013; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023), and as such, BCPH will promote the utilization of comprehensive, community-based violence prevention strategies and models.

Collaboration and Advocacy

BCPH will seek to collaborate with current firearm violence prevention efforts in Boulder County and advocate for the expansion of evidence-based interventions and policies that prevent firearm violence. Notably, the Boulder County Board of County Commissioners and the District Attorney's office are committed to reducing firearm violence through legislation and partnering with community groups and advocates. In addition to collaborating with these governmental efforts, BCPH will seek to collaborate with community-based organizations that support firearm violence prevention initiatives.

Support and Resources for BCPH Staff

BCPH is also committed to supporting our staff in addressing and managing the impacts of firearm violence. For BCPH staff, these efforts include establishing a formal position on firearm violence prevention to be shared with the Boulder County community, coordinating and offering staff training on responding to firearm violence and providing staff with resources for managing the well-being and safety impacts of firearm violence.

Local Resources and Stakeholders

- Be SMART: <https://besmartforkids.org/>
- Boulder County District Attorney's Office: <https://bouldercounty.gov/district-attorney/gun-safety/>
- Colorado Ceasefire: <https://coloradoceasefire.org/>
- Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment, Office of Gun Violence Prevention: <https://cdphe.colorado.gov/office-of-gun-violence-prevention>
- Colorado Extreme Risk Protection Order Hotline: <https://dhsem.colorado.gov/ERPO>
- Colorado School of Public Health, Injury & Violence Prevention Center: <https://coloradosph.cuanschutz.edu/research-and-practice/centers-programs/ivpc>
- Everytown for Gun Safety: <https://everytownsupportfund.org/>
- Gang Rescue and Support Project (GRASP): <https://graspyouth.org/>
- Guns to Gardens <https://www.gunstogardensdenver.org/>
- Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America:

- <https://momsdemandaction.org/>
- The Colorado Gun Shop Project: <https://cspv.colorado.edu/what-we-do/taking-stock-gun-shop-project/>
- University of Colorado Boulder, Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence: <https://outreach.colorado.edu/program/center-for-the-study-and-prevention-of-violence-2/>

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