Gun Safety and Public Health

The tragedies in Newtown, Connecticut and Aurora, Colorado refocused attention on improving gun safety in the United States. However, the fact is that forty-seven percent of Americans report they own a gun in their home or elsewhere on their property, according to a 2011 Gallup poll. While most Americans who own firearms use them safely and responsibly, each year approximately 31,000 Americans die from injuries related to firearms, including more than 11,000 homicides and 19,000 suicides, and more than 78,600 Americans suffer non-fatal injuries related to firearms, with 73 percent of those related to interpersonal violence. Firearm injuries are responsible for $1.2 billion in lifetime medical costs, as well as $35.2 billion in productivity losses.

Among children and teens:

- More than 15,500 children and teens under the age of 20 were injured by a firearm in 2010. More than 3,000 of these injuries were unintentional.
- Nearly 3,000 children and teens under the age of 20 were killed by firearms in 2009. Around 400 of these were under the age of 15. In addition, more than 13,700 children and teens were injured by firearms in 2009 and more than 20,500 were injured by firearms in 2008;
- The firearm-related death rate for U.S. children under 15 is nearly 12 times higher than that for children in 25 other industrialized nations. The firearm-related suicide rate for American children between the ages of five and 14 is nearly 11 times higher than that for 25 other developed countries; and
- Of suicides, suicide attempts and unintentional deaths and injuries with firearms involving children and teens under the age of 20, studies have found in almost three-quarters of these incidents the firearm was stored in the home of the victim, a relative, or a friend. In addition, in the estimated 40 percent of homes where children are living and guns are stored, there is at least one unlocked firearm; in 13 percent the unlocked firearm was kept loaded, or was stored with ammunition. According to a number of studies, including a 2005 article in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA), keeping a gun locked, unloaded and storing ammunition in a locked and separate location can lower the risk of unintentional injuries and suicide among youth.

Firearm death rates in the United States vary by state. The five states with the highest firearm death rates are Louisiana, Alaska, Nevada, Mississippi and Arizona. The states with the lowest rates include Hawaii, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York and Connecticut. For most states, firearm suicide rates exceed those of firearm homicide.
Public Health Approaches to Improving Gun Safety and Reducing Violence

A number of public health approaches have been shown to improve safety and help reduce accidental gun-related injuries and suicides, particularly among children, as well as violence in schools, communities and homes, according to a review of literature and studies in The Facts Hurt: A State-By-State Injury Prevention Policy Report from the Trust for America’s Health in 2012.

Public health experts have developed evidence-based strategies targeted to both individuals and communities which are effective in preventing violence before it occurs. Many of these strategies are focused on particular areas of concern, such as intimate partner violence, youth and gang violence, school-based violence, bullying and child abuse and neglect. Prevention approaches have helped reduce a range of other types of injuries also. For example, researchers found that seat belt use saved approximately 69,000 lives from 2006 to 2010.

Firearm-related injuries are multi-faceted problems and require multi-faceted solutions. Health, media, business, criminal justice, behavioral science, epidemiology, social science, faith, advocacy and education sectors all have a role to play.
To help reduce homicides, injuries and suicides related to firearms, recommendations from *The Facts Hurt* report and other public health experts include:

- Educate the public about safe storage of guns, including the use of lock boxes and gun locks and storing guns and ammunition separately;
- Require private gun sales to be subject to the same background check provisions as sales by licensed dealers, and closing the gun show loophole. In states where those laws exist, they must be enforced;
- Ensure existing laws are enforced to keep guns from prohibited persons, such as individuals subject to domestic violence restraining orders; and
- Repeal laws that restrict the ability of physicians and other health care providers to talk to families about firearms and firearm safety;
- Enact suicide prevention plans and programs and support school-based education programs, including anti-bullying efforts. For example, the Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative, which has provided grants to more than 275 school districts since 1999, helps schools take a comprehensive approach to reducing school violence. School-based programs to prevent violence have been shown to cut violent behavior among high school students by 29 percent;¹²
- Provide $20 million to expand the National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS) so every state is represented. Currently, only 18 states are part of the system. Data collection and research related to all violence and violent crime deaths will help us better understand the causes of violence so we can develop appropriation solutions; and
- Expand access to mental health services to ensure that state, local and community-based behavioral health systems have the resources they need to provide care. Federal support to states for mental health services has declined in the past several years.

**Endnotes**