

Youths most at risk for violence, mental health issues have increased access to guns

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SAN FRANCISCO – New research being presented at the 2017 Pediatric Academic Societies Meeting found adolescents who reported greatest access to guns -- either in their own home or a friend's -- also were among those with higher risk for violent behavior. Researchers discovered additional factors linked with increased firearms access that included past suicide attempts and self-reported mental health disorder diagnoses.

Authors of the abstract, "Cause for Concern: The Presence of Mental Health Issues or Violence Involvement is Associated with an Increase in Youth Access to Firearms," will present their findings on Sunday, May 7, at the Moscone Convention Center in San Francisco.

Access to firearms poses serious health risks for teens, the abstract authors said, with guns causing 29% of all adolescent deaths in the United States. The study, funded by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, involved 1,100 youth between ages 10 and 17 and 647 parents living in two Colorado communities at high risk for violence. The researchers conducted confidential, face-to-face interviews in participants' homes. Among their findings:

- Although few of the youth participants overall (2%) reported owning a gun or having had one in their possession, 7% said it would be easy for them to get a gun. In addition, 9% said they would know where to get a gun and 15% said they had at least one friend with a gun.
- Participants at risk for future violent behavior based on screenings were five times more likely to know where to get a gun compared to those not at risk (25 percent versus 5%) and four times as likely to know a friend who has a gun (40%, compared to 10%).
- Those who had attempted suicide were more than twice as likely to have a friend with a handgun (38%) than youth who had not attempted suicide (16%).
- Adolescents and teens who self-reported a mental health diagnosis such as depression, anxiety, or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder were twice as likely to say getting a gun would be easy than peers without a mental health diagnosis.
- Participants whose parents owned a firearm were three times as likely to say it is easy to get a handgun if they wanted one (20%), compared to youth whose parents did not own a firearm.

"It's important for parents, health care providers, teachers, and anyone else working with higher risk youth to recognize they have easier access to firearms, in a variety of ways" said Eric Sigel M.D., a professor of pediatrics at the University of Colorado School of Medicine and adolescent medicine specialist at Children's Hospital Colorado, who led the study.

"Efforts should be made to counsel families of higher risk youth on the safest way to keep firearms away from their children, including either removing guns from the home or keeping them in lock boxes or safe storage devices that kids don't know how to get to," Dr. Sigel said. "This is particularly important when

considering that 68 percent of attackers in school shootings obtained the guns from their own home or that of a relative,” he said, and that 85% of youth who commit suicide used a gun from their home.

Dr. Sigel said the findings also highlight the importance of recognizing that access to firearms for higher risk youth often is through their friends. “Especially if a parent is concerned that their child is depressed, they should engage the parents of their child’s friends about whether the home their child is spending time at has guns stored in a safe manner,” Dr. Sigel said.

Dr. Sigel will present the abstract, “Cause for Concern: The Presence of Mental Health Issues or Violence Involvement is Associated with an Increase in Youth Access to Firearms,” at 1:05 p.m. The abstract is available at https://registration.pas-meeting.org/2017/reports/rptPAS17_Abstracts.asp.

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