

Gun Control for Health: A Public Health of Consequence, December 2022

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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🔗 See also Post and Mason, p. 1707 and Rowhani-Rahbar et al., p. 1783.

On June 23, 2022, the US Supreme Court ruled in *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association (NYSRPA) v. Bruen* that the New York State law requiring individuals to show proper cause to obtain a license to carry a concealed firearm in public places for purposes of self-defense was unconstitutional (<https://bit.ly/3DBV4vF>). The significance of this ruling from political and public health perspectives cannot be underestimated. Against the backdrop of growing political partisanship among US legislators and in the US Supreme Court, the persistent lobbying by gun rights groups and the gun industry to loosen gun regulations and promote gun sales, as evidenced by the *NYSRPA* ruling, exemplifies how commercial determinants undermine health and well-being. The commercial interests of the gun lobby and the gun industry that limit research and drive laws and practices to sustain the availability and presence of guns in the United States cause immediate and horrific public health harms—mass shootings, mass murders, homicides, suicides, and unintentional gun-related injuries and deaths. The physical and emotional costs of gun-related injuries and deaths

to survivors, their friends, and families are staggering. An evaluation funded by Everytown for Gun Safety concluded that gun violence costs Americans \$557 billion annually—the bulk of which is attributed to quality-of-life costs for victims and their families (\$489.1 billion) and medical costs (\$2.8 billion) (<https://bit.ly/3UBhw4N>).

PUBLIC HEALTH, NOT CORPORATE HEALTH

In their 2018 commentary, McKee and Stuckler¹ presented a summary of key manifestations of corporate power that influence health. Two of these manifestations—setting the narrative and setting the rules—are clearly part of the playbook of the gun lobby as they seek to dismantle gun control legislation. By focusing on a narrative of gun “rights” in legislative and judicial decisions and pouring money to back politicians who will not support gun control prevention or research efforts, the gun industry has ensured that corporate power supersedes public health (<https://bit.ly/2CnxRdo>).

The Supreme Court ruling in the *NYSRPA* case is the latest key decision

limiting gun control since the decision in *District of Columbia v. Heller* (2008; <https://bit.ly/3sqCnnP>) and in *McDonald v. City of Chicago* (2010, <https://bit.ly/3Fcajfv>). The culmination of these decisions demonstrates the steady chipping away at federal gun regulations in the name of upholding the Second Amendment, but, in reality, to sustain the corporate and financial interests of the gun industry in the United States. Quite simply, the gun lobby in the United States is unlike that of any other special interest group. Although others, namely tobacco,² alcohol,³ food,⁴ and the sugar-sweetened beverages⁵ industries, have been subjected to widespread and growing regulation for marketing products that cause health-related harm, the gun lobby has remained largely unregulated, despite the pervasiveness of gun violence in the United States.

Although many are aware of the Dickey Amendment, few are likely to know that a major impetus for this amendment was a 1993 study by Kellerman et al.⁶ showing that the presence of a gun in a home increased the odds of homicide. In an effort to stall robust research on gun violence, the National Rifle Association (NRA) lobbied for the Dickey Amendment to the 1996 US spending bill, an amendment that effectively banned federal funding to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) for research that could be used to advocate or promote gun control.⁷ In 2009, Branas et al.⁸ reported findings from a National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism–funded study showing that individuals in possession of a gun were four times more likely to be shot in an assault than those not in possession of a gun. In 2012, once again with backing by the NRA, the US omnibus spending bill expanded its ban on federally funded gun control research to

include the National Institutes of Health (NIH) as well as the CDC. The presence of this ban for more than 20 years is one of the most prominent examples of lobbying and corporate manifestation of power and of setting rules that eliminate funding for gun control research. Although a small number of researchers were able to continue carrying out gun-related research, the Dickey Amendment essentially eliminated the possibility of creating a robust evidence base on gun violence prevention.

GROWING THE GUN CONTROL EVIDENCE BASE

Recently, the language of the Dickey Amendment has been clarified to allow the CDC and NIH to conduct gun violence-related research, and a \$25 million allocation, distributed evenly between the CDC and NIH, was earmarked for gun violence prevention research. These funds provide what amounts to seed funding to conduct research on the impact of federal and state gun legislation compared with funding for other health issues. Despite this slow and small start, more funding and research are critically necessary to establish an evidence base that, it is hoped, can inform the myriad of laws, policies, and practices that will be required to comprehensively limit the availability of and access to guns.

In this issue of *AJPH*, Post and Mason (p. 1707) reflect on the significance of the study by Klarevas et al.⁹ conducted during the era of the Dickey Amendment. As Post writes, the contribution of the Klarevas et al. study is significant for providing additional empirical evidence on the effect of state and federal large-capacity magazine (LCM) bans on the frequency and lethality of mass shootings. The study included 69 mass

shooting events between 1990 and 2017, when state (enacted in New Jersey in 1990 and still in place in nine states and the District of Columbia) and federal (enacted in 1994, expired in 2004) legislation was in place.⁹ Klarevas et al. found that mass shootings where LCMs were used were more likely to have higher fatalities than those where an LCM was not used and that, in states lacking LCM bans, the incidence of high-fatality mass shootings was more than twice that in states with LCM bans.

In the wake of the *NYSPPRA* ruling, which opens the door to loosening restrictions on handgun carrying, the study by Rowhani-Rahbar et al. (p. 1783) provides much-needed baseline evidence on trends in handgun carrying in the United States. Based on a nationally representative sample of gun owners, the study found that the number of handgun owners who carried their guns on a monthly basis increased dramatically from 9 million in 2015 to 16 million in 2019 and that daily handgun carrying doubled during this period. Future studies will be needed to understand the links between handgun carrying and involvement in gun violence, whether guns carried are concealed or open, and in what types of public spaces guns are carried. Additionally, studies building on prior work examining how and where guns are safely stored will provide information to inform interventions to prevent suicides as well as unintentional injuries.¹⁰ All of these important questions require careful investigation, and it is hoped they will be supported by future funding.

CONCLUSION

Caught between our national struggle between democratic freedoms and

corporate interests are the individual and societal harms inflicted by gun violence. Between January 1 and October 1, 2022, there were 515 mass shootings (shootings of more than four people) and 21 mass murders (murder of four or more people in a mass shooting; <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org>). During this same period, 15 547 persons were murdered (intentional and unintentional homicide, defensive gun use) and 18 348 persons committed suicide with a gun. In addition to more research on those who already own a gun or will become new gun owners,¹¹ as well as how they will carry and use guns, parallel efforts to examine the toll of gun violence exposure on individuals and communities, as well as effective prevention, are also necessary. *AJPH*

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

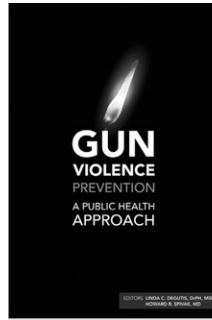
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Gun Violence Prevention: A Public Health Approach

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Gun Violence Prevention: A Public Health Approach acknowledges that guns are a part of the environment and culture. This book focuses on how to make society safer, not how to eliminate guns. Using the conceptual model for injury prevention, the book explores the factors contributing to gun violence and considers risk and protective factors in developing strategies to prevent gun violence and decrease its toll. It guides you with science and policy that make communities safer.

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