Youth Most at Risk for Violence or Mental Health Issues Have Increased Access to Guns

New research being presented at the 2017 Pediatric Academic Societies Meeting in San Francisco finds teens with a past suicide attempt or mental health disorder also have increased access to firearms – either in their own home or a friend’s.

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.

Access to firearms poses serious health risks for teens, the abstract authors said, with guns causing 29 percent 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 percent) reported owning a gun or having had one in their possession, 7 percent said it would be easy for them to get a gun. In addition, 9 percent said they would know where to get a gun and 15 percent said they had at least one friend with a gun.

- Participants at risk for future violent behavior based on screenings were 5 times more likely to know where to get a gun compared to those not at risk (25 percent versus 5
percent) and 4 times as likely to know a friend who has a gun (40 percent, compared to 10 percent).

- Those who had attempted suicide were more than twice as likely to have a friend with a handgun (38 percent) than youth who had not attempted suicide (16 percent).

- 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 percent), 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 MD, 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 percent 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. Reporters interested in an interview with Dr. Sigel may contact Children’s Hospital Colorado media relations officer Elizabeth Whitehead at 303-775-6601, 303-890-8314 (pager) or Elizabeth.Whitehead@childrenscolorado.org.

Please note: only the abstract is being presented at the meeting. In some cases, the researcher may have more data available to share with media, or may be preparing a longer article for submission to a journal. Contact the researcher for more information.

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The Pediatric Academic Societies (PAS) Meeting brings together thousands of individuals united by a common mission: to improve child health and wellbeing worldwide. This international gathering includes
pediatric researchers, leaders in academic pediatrics, experts in child health, and practitioners. The PAS Meeting is produced through a partnership of four organizations leading the advancement of pediatric research and child advocacy: Academic Pediatric Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Pediatric Society, and Society for Pediatric Research. For more information, visit the PAS Meeting online at www.pas-meeting.org, follow us on Twitter @PASMeeting and #pasm17, or like us on Facebook.

ABSTRACT

**TITLE:** Cause for Concern: The presence of mental health issues or violence involvement is associated with an increase in youth access to firearms

**Background:** Firearms cause 29% of all adolescent deaths. Health care providers infrequently address the issue of firearm access, including in high risk situations such as the presence of mental health disorders or violence involvement

**Objective:** Determine the type of access to firearms adolescents report in general, and what factors influence firearm access

**Design/Methods:** A cross sectional, community-wide survey evaluating a Communities that Care intervention to decrease youth violence measured violence characteristics, risk and protective factors, and several firearm measures in two communities at high-risk for violence in a large urban city. A full-census of households were screened for eligibility (youth ages 10-17 residing in the home) by study personnel going door-to-door. Once eligible, youth, and 1 parent, were invited to participate. Confidential face-to-face interviews were conducted in each house. The study was approved by the University of Colorado IRB. An incentive of $20 was provided to each participant.

**Results:** 1100 youth (78% of eligible) and 647 parents (75%) participated. Mean age = 13.3(sd 2.2); 47% male, 60% Hispanic, 29% Black, 18% White; 84% free/reduced lunch. Firearm access was assessed several ways. Only 1.9% had owned a gun or had one in their possession in the last year; However, 6.5% said it would be easy to get a gun; 9.3% knew where to get a gun, and 15.3% had at least 1 friend with a gun (handgun 13.3% /long gun-7.9%). Youth reporting having been diagnosed with a mental health disorder had statistically significant increased rates of firearm access, including 28% with at least 1 friend with a gun. Similarly, youth who screened positive on the SDQ for ADHD, Peer, or Conduct Problems had increased rates of firearm access in all firearm domains. Finally, youth who screened positive on a violence risk screen, report aggression or victimization have increased access to firearms compared to peers without risk. Regression analysis for each outcome varied- being male, parental gun ownership, violence risk, and conduct problems significantly predicted increased access to firearms.

**Conclusion(s):** Youth reporting mental health diagnoses and violent behaviors have increased access to firearms in a variety of ways, particularly through their peers and parents that have guns. Providers working with at risk youth should be aware of the variety of ways youth may access firearms and provide appropriate counseling.