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Injury Prevention Press Release

School shootings less likely in states with background checks on gun purchases

...And in those with higher spends on mental health services and public education

School shootings are less likely in US states with mandatory background checks on gun and ammunition purchases, and with higher levels of spending on mental health services and public education, reveals research published online in the journal **Injury Prevention**.

Gun violence kills roughly 33,000 people and injures another 81,000 every year in the USA. The number of school shootings is particularly high, with 44 such incidents between 1996 and 2008—equivalent to around one episode a year.

The Sandy Hook Elementary school shooting in 2012, where 20 children and 6 staff were shot dead by a lone gunman, prompted a great deal of soul searching about the possible factors involved, but to date there has been little in the way of hard evidence to inform these discussions.

In a bid to address this, and in the absence of any official monitoring system, the researchers drew on a systematic analysis of media coverage of school shootings between 2013 and 2015, to see if the frequency of these incidents might be linked to particular state-level factors.

These included the presence or absence of mandatory background checks for all gun and ammunition purchases; the extent of gun ownership; mental health expenditure per head of the population; spending on public school education (K-12); and the proportion of people living in towns and cities.

On average, there was one school shooting every week over the course of the three years, and the number of these incidents rose year on year.

In total, there were 154 school shootings between 2013 and 2015, rising to 35 in 2013, to 55 in 2014, and to 64 in 2015.

Thirty nine states had at least one school shooting, while 11 had none: Alaska; Connecticut; Hawaii; New Hampshire; New Jersey; New York; North Dakota; Rhode Island; Vermont; West Virginia; and Wyoming.

Most states (34) in which school shootings occurred had fewer than 10 incidents, but not in Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee and Texas, where the numbers were 14, 15, 12, 10 and 14, respectively.

In all, 84 people, including 27 perpetrators died, and another 136 were injured. Most of the shootings were intentional and perpetrated by men. And more than half occurred in publicly funded schools.

The number of school shootings was lower in states with mandatory background checks for gun and ammunition purchases, higher spending on mental health and K-12 education, and in those with a larger proportion of the population living in towns and cities.

This is an observational study, so no firm conclusions can be drawn about cause and effect. Furthermore, media reports are not always the most reliable sources of consistent and comprehensive information, the researchers point out. Nor did they have any information on the state of the perpetrators' mental health.

But the rising incidence of school shootings emphasises the need for a national registry to monitor mass and school shootings to better inform the debate around the drivers and consequences of these traumatic events, they conclude.

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Notes for editors

Research: School shootings during 2013-2015 in the USA

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About the journal

Injury Prevention is one of 60 specialist journals published by BMJ. The title is the official journal of the Society for Advancement of Violence and Injury Research (SAVIR) and the International Society for Child and Adolescent Injury Prevention (ISCAIP). <http://ip.bmj.com>