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## Covid-19: Gun violence in US increased 30% during pandemic

Janice Hopkins Tanne

Gun violence in the United States increased by 30% during 2020-21 from pre-pandemic levels, researchers have reported in *Scientific Reports*,<sup>1</sup> describing the situation as a public health emergency.

The study found that gun related homicides, suicides, and injuries all increased during the period from 1 March 2020 to 31 March 2021 when compared with the same period in 2019-20. The authors compared gun related violence nationally, at the state level, and at different times during the pandemic. They used data compiled by the Gun Violence Archive, an independent non-profit organisation, covering all 50 US states and the District of Columbia.

During the pandemic period studied the US recorded 51 063 gun related incidents, including 21 504 deaths and 43 288 injuries. This compares with 38 919 such incidents before the pandemic, including 16 687 deaths and 32 348 injuries.

The lead study author, Paddy Ssentongo, told *The BMJ*, “There were 5000 extra deaths and 10 000 extra injuries nationally. This is a public health emergency.” Just as there is a vaccine to prevent covid-19, he suggested that a vaccine against gun violence was needed.

Ssentongo works at the Department of Public Health Sciences at Penn State College and the Milton S Hershey Medical Center in Hershey, Pennsylvania. Several of his coauthors are trauma surgeons, who told him they were worried that there could be competition for scarce personal protective equipment, blood products, and intensive care beds when caring for gunshot victims and covid-19 patients.

### Disruption

Access to guns rose by 42% during the pandemic, on the basis of an increase in criminal background checks for gun purchases made to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Ssentongo told *The BMJ*, “The presence of a gun or access to a gun in the house is known as a risk factor for gun violence. People buy guns because of fears during the pandemic, and that leads to an increase in gun violence.”

During the pandemic, lockdowns and stay-at-home orders to curb the spread of the virus have affected almost the entire US population. Unintended consequences have been disruption of social support networks, unemployment, and financial strain, along with an increase in unscheduled time, substance misuse, and depression.

The study found a consistently higher risk of gun violence nationally. Considerably higher risks of gun violence were seen in the District of Columbia and in 27 states: Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, North

Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and Wisconsin.

Gun ownership in the US relies on the second amendment to the US Constitution, which ambiguously states, “A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.”

Individual states regulate gun ownership: for example, New York makes it difficult to get a gun, while it is easier in Texas. In 2008 the Supreme Court ruled that the second amendment gave individuals the right to own a gun for lawful purposes, such as defence of their homes, regardless of militia service.

This autumn the Supreme Court will hear a case challenging a New York state law that requires someone who wants to carry a concealed weapon outside the home to show a good reason for doing so. The court is expected to issue a ruling next year. If the court rules in favour of the challenge gun ownership could become more widely accessible.<sup>2</sup>

1 Ssentongo P, Fronterre C, Ssentongo AE, et al. Gun violence incidence during the covid-19 pandemic is higher than before the pandemic in the United States. *Sci Rep* 2021. <https://nature.com/articles/s41598-021-98813-z>

2 Turley J. Locked and loaded: Supreme Court is ready for a showdown on the Second Amendment. *Hill* 2021 Oct 17. <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/politics/locked-and-loaded-supreme-court-is-ready-for-a-showdown-on-the-second-amendment/ar-AAPBmxR>

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