

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 28, 2018—19:11

## No barrier to CDC research on gun violence—except funding

Susan Jaffe

Questions about CDC's ability to investigate gun violence—as it would other public health threats—have persisted ever since Congress passed the 1996 Dickey Amendment prohibiting the use of research funds to advocate or promote gun control.

"We don't believe that it gets in the way of our ability to do violence research or firearms violence research at any part of HHS," Azar told another congressional panel a month later. "I think we've now made it quite publicly—and within the administration—clear that we don't see any barriers around violence or firearm violence research. We're in the evidence and science-gathering business."

His assurances were also included in the instructions that accompanied the budget agreement Congress approved and President Donald Trump signed into law last week.

While some observers believe this means CDC has permission from Congress to proceed, some leading experts in firearms research are skeptical. There may be no barriers, but they say there's no funding either.

"What's needed is an appropriation so that not just CDC but the National Institutes of Health and the National Institute of Justice can conduct and support research on firearm violence and its prevention," said Garen Wintemute, a professor of emergency medicine and director of the [Violence Prevention Research Program](#) established last year at the University of California in Sacramento with a \$5 million state grant.

"Research in this area is important just as research on motor vehicle injuries, opioid and other controlled substance abuse, or for that matter, on cancer and heart disease is important," Wintemute continued. "If we want to lessen the adverse impact of these problems on the quality of life in the United States, we need to understand them and measure the effectiveness of the interventions we put in place."

CDC works around the clock to protect "people from diseases, injuries, and disabilities, as well as other health problems associated with natural disasters and bioterrorism attacks," [its website](#) explains. But for at least two decades, the agency's work on gun violence has focused primarily on collecting data about injuries in the US. The RAND Corporation's [Gun Policy in America](#) initiative unveiled earlier this month is the latest comprehensive study to conclude that gun violence research is lacking.



WASHINGTON, DC—MARCH 24, 2018: Hundreds of thousands of people rallied in Washington, DC to protest gun violence and urge Congress to pass stricter gun control laws. More than 800 protests were also held across the US.

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"Research in this area is generally far behind where it is for most other causes of death that claim similar numbers of lives in the US each year," said project leader Andrew Morral.

The Dickey Amendment, which is still in effect, has had an intimidating effect on CDC's gun violence research, said [David Hemenway](#), a professor of health policy at the Harvard TH Chan School of Public Health and director of the Harvard Injury Control Research Center. In 2012, CDC recognized him as one of the "twenty most influential injury and violence professionals over the past twenty years," according to his biography posted on the school's website. "The CDC basically stopped doing research 20 some years ago on firearms and is afraid to say the word 'firearms' at meetings," he said, because they fear Congress may retaliate by cutting funding for other CDC programs.

Hemenway said there is still a great deal about gun violence that is not understood. He mentioned some broad questions, including who brings guns into schools and why, does carrying a concealed gun make the owner and the community safer, are penalties for illegal guns effective, how do guns get into the wrong hands, how police decide to use their guns, and why does the strong regulation of machine guns seem to be effective.

Congress could be using information about these and other issues to enact effective deterrents to gun violence, said Hemenway.

"Laws are much better if you have some knowledge of what you're doing," he said. They should be "based on science rather than hunches."

Although Azar told Congress members the Trump Administration's interpretation of the Dickey Amendment is clear, questions remain about what happens next.

"CDC awaits further guidance and direction from Congress and the Department of Health and Human Services," a CDC spokesperson said Friday. Until then, "CDC has and will continue to support data collection activities and analyses to document the public health burden of fire-arm injuries in the US"

But this week, an HHS spokesman said, "As to future actions or research to be done, that will be determined by the scientific processes at the CDC and NIH."

The Parkland shooting survivors who organized the March 24th massive "**March for Our Lives**" protest rally in Washington, DC demand stricter gun control laws and have little patience for ambiguities. On a stage with the US Capitol looming in the background, they were joined

by friends and relatives of children killed on the streets of Chicago, Los Angeles and New York City. One of the youngest speakers was the nine-year-old granddaughter of Dr Martin Luther King, Jr, Yolanda. Hundreds of local rallies were held across the US, in nearly every congressional district.

Jaclyn Corin, a Parkland student who addressed the DC rally, describes herself to her 135 000 Twitter followers as "just a high school student trying to save the world with her friends." She told the crowd there is an epidemic of gun violence "that affects communities of all classes—an epidemic that the Centers for Disease Control does not have the funds to research." She urged protesters to visit their congressional representatives when they are home in their districts this month. "Have them hear you out because they work for us!"