

Gun violence research in the USA: the CDC's impasse

Months after the Trump Administration said that there is no ban on gun violence studies, the CDC still lacks the funding to proceed. Susan Jaffe, *The Lancet's* Washington correspondent, reports.



A 19-year-old gunman wielding a semiautomatic AR-15 assault rifle needed only 6 minutes to rampage through all three floors of a Florida high school and murder 17 students and faculty and injure 14 others in February. The military-style weapon produced so much smoke that automatic alarms summoned firefighters, according to state investigators.

A week later, traumatised survivors of that mass shooting, at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, FL, met with President Donald Trump at the White House. The group also included relatives of children and teachers killed in other school shootings.

"I don't understand why I can still go in a store and buy a weapon of war, an [automatic rifle]", Samuel Zeif, a Parkland student told Trump. "How is it that easy to buy this type of weapon? How do we not stop this after Columbine, after Sandy Hook?" He wiped away tears as he pleaded with Trump to "never let this happen again".

But appeals for immediate federal action to make schools and communities safer have so far largely gone unanswered. And legislative efforts languish in Congress, as the chairman of a key congressional committee that oversees federal health programmes has so far resisted requests by its Democratic members to hold hearings on preventing gun violence, usually the first step in developing legislation.

Trump has suggested that teachers should be allowed to carry guns in schools and receive a pay rise to do so "if they really have that aptitude." In March, the Department of Justice proposed—at Trump's request—a ban on so-called bump stocks, devices that can transform a semiautomatic firearm into an illegal rapid-fire machine gun. They were added to the semiautomatic

rifles used in a shooting during a Las Vegas concert last year, when 59 people were killed and 527 were wounded.

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Although Democrats have called for tighter gun control laws, many Republicans blame gun violence on a failure of the mental health system, a view also shared by the National Rifle Association (NRA). After the Las Vegas rampage, the NRA urged caution. "Unfortunately, the first response from some politicians has been to call for more gun control", the group said in a statement. "Banning guns from law-abiding Americans based on the criminal act of a madman will do nothing to prevent future attacks." But last year, the Trump administration eliminated a regulation issued by his predecessor, Barack Obama, that prohibited seriously mentally ill people from owning guns.

Public health crisis

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 36 252 Americans died because of gun violence in 2015—11.3 deaths per 100 000 people—an average of about 100 gun deaths every day.

"No other developed country has anything close to that", 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.

People living in the USA are 25 times more likely to die in a gun homicide than if they lived in another wealthy country, according to a 2016 study he

coauthored that was cited in the RAND Corporation's *Gun Policy in America* report released earlier this year. The risk of gun violence is so pervasive that "even the mass shootings that occur so regularly, and that capture so much attention, account for just one half of 1% of all US gun fatalities annually", the RAND report said. It also found that there is far less research on gun violence compared with other causes of death that claim a similar number of lives.

2 years ago, the American Medical Association (AMA) also adopted a policy declaring gun violence "a public health crisis" and vowed to lobby Congress to repeal a law that restricts the CDC from researching the causes and possible solutions to gun violence.

Although the CDC focuses on preventing disease and injuries, its work on gun violence primarily involves collecting and analysing data on gun-related injuries. The agency had a programme of research and firearms violence prevention until a federal law, known as the Dickey amendment, took effect in 1996, said Andrew Morral, manager for RAND's Gun Policy in America project. The law states that "...none of the funds made available

For RAND's report see <https://www.rand.org/research/gun-policy.html>



"March for Our Lives" march and rally in Washington, DC, organised by high school students from Parkland, Florida, March 24

For the **Everytown** report see <https://everytown.org/press/2018-a-year-of-gun-safety-in-the-states/>

for injury prevention and control at the [CDC] may be used to advocate or promote gun control...". Congress passed the law after a 1993 CDC-funded study that concluded that "rather than confer protection, guns kept in the home are associated with an increase in the risk of homicide by a family member or intimate acquaintance".

"This violates the most basic principle of science, in which objective research should be the goal, rather than a biased policy position against individual firearm ownership", wrote Chris Cox, executive director of the NRA Institute for Legislative Action, earlier this year.

With the passage of the Dickey amendment, Morral said, Congress cut the CDC's budget for firearms research. "The message came through loud and clear—if you do gun violence research, we will interpret that as advocacy of some sort and that violates the Dickey amendment."

But the day after the February Parkland shooting, Health and Human Services Secretary (HHS) Alex Azar, appearing before a congressional committee to discuss the department's proposed 2019 budget, said that the Dickey amendment does not limit the CDC's ability to conduct research into the causes of gun violence.

"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 a 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."

Congress included Azar's response to instructions accompanying the budget agreement Trump signed into law in March.

Despite Azar's assertion, the CDC has not yet initiated gun violence studies. "We are not aware at the present time of any action yet by the CDC to begin meaningful research on gun violence", including its causes and evidence-based

solutions, said David Barbe, a physician in Missouri and past president of the AMA. "We will continue our advocacy until we in fact do see meaningful resources being devoted to research on this topic."

"[The CDC] said it would welcome the needed dedicated funding from Congress to move forward on these projects."

Last week, physicians attending the AMA House of Delegates annual meeting passed what Barbe called an unprecedented number—more than a dozen—of new or updated policy resolutions to address the proliferation of gun violence. "The fact that this problem continues to worsen has spurred a new sense of urgency in this house even while Congress fails to act", Barbe told the delegates.

Shortly after Azar's comment, Massachusetts Democrat Senator Ed Markey wrote to Azar asking how much funding was available to support CDC's gun violence research, especially since the CDC received a US\$1 billion increase in its budget this year.

Responding on behalf of Azar in April, HHS Assistant Secretary for Legislation Matthew Bassett assured Markey that "the CDC has and will continue to support surveillance activities and analysis of data to document the public health burden of firearm injuries in the USA". But he would not say how much funding would be set aside for gun violence research: "Given the resources made available to the CDC, the agency must make choices about what research it can pursue."

When *The Lancet* asked the CDC how much would be spent on gun violence, the agency declined to provide an amount but said it would welcome the needed dedicated funding from Congress to move forward on these projects.

Momentum for change

Although the CDC's gun violence work is still confined to gathering data,

Hemenway sees movement elsewhere. Hospitals in the Boston area have contacted him to discuss offering small research grants because, he says, they want to prevent gun violence, not only treat its victims. Some health insurance companies and private foundations have also come forward. Most notably, the Laura and John Arnold Foundation in Houston, Texas, has pledged \$20 million and expects to raise \$30 million more from other groups to provide gun violence research grants that will be administered by the RAND Corporation.

The National Institutes of Health also funds firearm violence research aimed at prevention and reducing risk factors for gun violence. Some examples include investigating parental roles in preventing injury in the home, how alcohol abuse and gun violence may be linked, and why military veterans face a higher risk for suicide with guns.

And while gun control legislation is stalled in Congress, numerous states have passed their own measures. According to a report released last week by Everytown for Gun Safety, an advocacy group, 20 states require a criminal background check before purchasing a gun, ten states have passed "red flag" legislation to keep guns away from people who might be a risk to themselves or others, and bump stocks are now illegal in eight states. Following the Parkland shooting, Florida lawmakers approved all those changes and raised the age to purchase firearms to 21.

Earlier this month, Parkland students announced a series of events across the country to register young people to vote and elect politicians who support their agenda. Parkland student Cameron Kasky, said that 4 million Americans turn 18 this year and will be eligible to vote. "If every single one of those people votes and encourages their friends to vote and make sure their family is getting to the polls, we can make real change in this country."

Susan Jaffe