

Science AMA Series: I'm David Hemenway, Director of the Harvard Injury Control Research Center. I study gun violence and injury prevention and I'm here to answer your questions!

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April 17, 2023

### **Abstract**

Hello, reddit! My name is David Hemenway. I'm professor of health policy at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and director of the Harvard Injury Control Research Center. You can read more about our research on firearms here. Throughout my career I have written and done research widely on injury prevention, including research on the role of firearms, violence, and suicide. My 2006 book, *Private Guns, Public Health* describes the public health approach to reducing firearm violence, and summarized the scientific studies on the firearms and health. You can watch two recent videos where I discuss why gun violence is a public health issue, and how a public health approach can decrease deaths and injuries from guns without violating the Constitution. I'll be here from 5:30-7:30 p.m. ET to answer your questions; Ask Me Anything! EDIT: It's 7:55 p.m. and I do have to go now. Thank you all for your questions! Sorry I didn't have time to answer many of these questions.

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DAVID\_HEMENWAY [R/SCIENCE](#)

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CORRESPONDENCE:

DATE RECEIVED:  
January 08, 2016

DOI:  
10.15200/winn.145219.97781

ARCHIVED:  
January 07, 2016

CITATION:  
David\_Hemenway , r/Science ,  
Science AMA Series: I'm David  
Hemenway, Director of the  
Harvard Injury Control  
Research Center. I study gun  
violence and injury prevention  
and I'm here to answer your  
questions!, *The Winnower*  
3:e145219.97781 , 2016 , DOI:  
[10.15200/winn.145219.97781](#)

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Professor Hemmingway,

The gun debate is highly polarized and it seems that communities arguing for more, and less, gun control are operating using very different sets of information and empirical data (PNAS [published an article about the polarization of online communities on Monday](#)).

This seems particularly relevant in the case of defensive gun use ([wikipedia](#)), a subject that you have written about in "[The Myth of Millions of Annual. Self-Defense Gun Uses](#)"

Presenting empirical information to the public in cases of public health has become an area of greater focus in recent years (for those interested in data presentation see [/r/dataisbeautiful/](#) and the work of [Edward Tufte](#)).

**How do you think data related to gun use, safety, and violence can be better presented to the public, in order to better inform the public, and bring transparency to the debate.**

Thanks and good luck with your AMA,

Claire

[ClaireAtMeta](#)

This is a difficult question which requires a long answer for which I don't have the time (or probably the knowledge). How information is presented matters a lot. So, for example, most people when queried are for "stronger" gun laws but against "stricter" gun laws, and it's not clear what is the difference. Our injury center has been working with gun owners and advocates to try to reduce suicide, and we always run what we write by them, because ways of saying things that seem identical to us are received very differently by them. So I guess my first piece of advice is to work with the type of people you are trying to inform to determine which ways of presenting information will be best



As someone who owns guns and watches a lot of movies, I find Hollywood's representation of guns frustrating: Heroes running around with their fingers on the triggers, randomly pointing weapons at each other, and of course the depiction of guns as "magic wands" that make enemies fall down and disappear from view.

Do you think the entertainment industry bears some of the blame for this country's strange relationship with guns?

[alejo699](#)

Yes But in public health we do not think that "blaming" is usually a very effective way of preventing the problem. Instead we want everyone to work together to address the issue We have met with some of the creative community in Hollywood discussing ideas for Hollywood to help reduce the violence problem, as they were effective in helping to promote the notion of the "designated driver."

Last month [Dr. Nancy Krieger did an AMA here](#) during which she argued for the need for gun violence data to be reported to the CDC as a "notifiable condition". Currently, the data we have about gun violence seems to be piecemeal and incomplete. She argued that from a public health perspective we need real time reliable data so that we can make sound policy decisions.

Do you agree with the idea of making gun violence a notifiable condition?

And how has the lack of reliable statistics about gun violence in the US impacted your own work?

[firedrops](#)

I am not an expert on the cost and benefits of making things "notifiable conditions." But I can answer your second question with examples about reliable statistics making it harder to perform useful research.

(1) The National Violent Death Reporting System is missing data from 18 states which means that all the important analyses from that system may not be fully representative of what is happening in the entire USA

(2) The fact that the CDC stopped asking any gun questions on the large annual Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (n = over 200,000) means that estimates of state household gun ownership levels are only proxies rather than good estimates.

(3) The law that makes it unlawful for ATF to easily share information on gun traces with researchers makes it harder to fully understand how crime guns move in the US and how to prevent guns from getting into clearly wrong hands

(4) The lack of gun licenses and a gun registration system makes it impossible to undertake many useful studies of the effects of gun laws (Garen Wintemute has been able to do many informative studies with California data because they have better gun data than other states or the US)

How does one fall into this sort of field? Like what is your actual degree in? And how is this research funded; donations, research grants, or just plain Harvard salary?

[Sesspool](#)

I have a PhD in economics. I typically study areas which I believe are under-researched. I teach at a public health school and in public health, injury (including violence) is such an area. I worked for Ralph Nader in the 1960s and subsequently conducted research on motor vehicle crashes and fires and child abuse and stairway falls and other injury areas. In the early 1990s I wrote my first article on firearms. Many people responding to it made what I considered wild claims, but i found there was no research on most of them, so I decided to spend some effort researching firearm issues. HSPH is a soft-money school, meaning that faculty members have to raise most of our salary from grants--typically from the government or foundations. There is extremely little money available for firearms research, which is

why we as a society don't know nearly enough as we should about this issue

Hi Dr. Hemenway.

You are quoted as saying:

Instead of it being the mark of a real man that you can shoot somebody at 50 feet and kill them with a gun, the mark of a real man is that you would never do anything like that. You'd show that you were stronger than they were and smarter and not just that you had some weapon. The gun is a great equalizer because it makes wimps as dangerous as people who really have skill and bravery and so I'd like to have this notion that anyone using a gun is a wuss. They aren't anybody to be looked up to. They're somebody to look down at because they couldn't defend themselves or couldn't protect others without using a gun.

Considering this is your stated position, doesn't that suggest a strong bias/personal filter that could lead to skewing the results of your studies? Is your survey data publicly available for people to look over?

[Freeman001](#)

A question was asked about changing social norms. I was talking about how it was important to change social norms in the inner city, and one norm that might be changed was that shooting someone was not seen as the mark of being tough but being weak. A major problem is in some communities shooters are overly respected. Similarly, the USA was able to change the social norm that in the 1800s when an upper class white male was disrespected (disrespected) by another upper class white male, that the manly thing to do was to duel. Dueling was always illegal, but fortunately the norm about what was manly and what was not changed.

We archive our survey data at the University of Michigan where many surveys are archived, and the data are available.

Professor Hemenway,

from one grinder of piles of paper\* to another:

1. What is more important: *How* people get killed, or *why* people get killed?
2. What would be more effective in reducing violence: Removing the tools, or removing the reasons?
3. Would effective enforcement of current US firearm law have a significant effect on illegal violence performed with guns?
4. What are the major confounding factors in your analysis?
5. Why are suicides by firearm a problem? And no, moral opposition to suicide does not count :p

Finally, if any of those questions are answered in your book, sorry for that. Amazon won't deliver in time. You have a good one.

\*of the microbiological persuasion

EDIT/FYI: Sadly, you will probably be gone by the time I can respond to your answer. Your 6PM is my 12PM. I'd gladly discuss the topic in some other way though.

[Klaus\\_Goldfish](#)

1. Both how and why people get killed is important. What matters most is what is the most cost-effective way to prevent the killings. It turns out that in Injury Prevention, focusing on the former is usually the better approach. For example, the major reduction in motor vehicle deaths was not caused by making drivers better but by making the cars and roads safer. Generally, too many people focus too much on the why and pay too short shrift to the how.

Are there any statistics on crimes prevented by legal guns? Excluding law enforcement.

What percentage of gun injuries (accidental and purposeful) are caused by legal firearms? Also excluding law enforcement.

[monkeydave](#)

No these data are not collected, nor are there statistics on crimes being prevented by guard dogs or alarms systems or mace. We in the prevention world want more data on problems prevented to be collected, but it is not easy to do

We will be trying to research your question about legal guns. A first issue to tackle is the definition of a legal gun. What if the person could pass a NICS background check but obtained the gun illegally? Or if the person did pass a NICS background check but shouldn't have (a whole lot of people shouldn't if the criterion about not having taken illegal drugs was enforced). Limited data suggest that the overwhelming majority of suicides are with legal guns and that most accidental gun deaths are probably with legal guns. As for homicides, two studies have shown that the majority of shooters were not convicted felons, so that they probably could have passed the actual (versus the ideal) NICS background check.

Why do states with the strictest gun laws seem to be the places with the most gun issues? Are the laws really making a difference?

[o1ekingcole](#)

The evidence indicates that, all other things equal (e.g., controlling for poverty, alcohol consumption, urbanization, non-gun crime, mental health...) places in the US with higher levels of gun ownership and weaker gun laws have more gun problems, and more overall violent deaths. More guns and weaker gun laws tend to go together as do fewer guns and stronger laws. It is hard to tease out the separate effects of each on violent death, and it is hard to determine whether having fewer guns is a prime reason places can pass stronger gun laws, or whether strong gun laws lead to fewer gun owners.

The effect of strong gun laws is diluted somewhat, but only somewhat, because crime guns move from places with weak laws to places with strong laws.

Hello and thank you for doing this AMA. Please excuse my ignorance..I read somewhere (don't remember exactly) and I think Pres Obama alluded to this, that there are some barriers to obtaining the necessary data, but I don't understand what these barriers are. Is there some legal barrier to collecting gun-related data in hospitals, etc? If so, was this something enacted by the US Congress or is it at the state level? Or both? If true, then what needs to be done to remove these barriers? And what can we hope to learn from this data, once it's collected and analyzed?

Thank you very much for your time and efforts.

[nitegirl99](#)

Yes there are lots of barriers that have been put up to collecting and obtaining important data on firearms, barriers that need to be removed.

How do you reconcile the long-standing trends showing an increase in gun ownership, the proliferation of concealed carry, and lapse of the Assault Weapons ban of 1994 with falling gun homicide rates?

[senatorpjt](#)

After the Brady bill, gun homicide in the US plummeted. Does that mean anything? Lots of things affect homicide rates, and lots of things change over time one needs to do careful studies to try to determine what the real causes are. For example, all crime has fallen in the US since the early 1990s, not just gun crime--and crime has similarly fallen in virtually every developed nation.

There has not been an increase in gun ownership in the US since the 1994--there are more guns/capita, but the best measures indicate that levels of household gun ownership have fallen. The largest drop in gun homicide occurred in the US while the assault weapons ban was in effect, not after it was not reauthorized, but no one thing that ban had a large effect on gun homicide or overall

homicide.

Do you think having to complete a thorough Firearms Safety Course prior to being granted a permit would reduce accidental shootings? What about stricter laws regarding safe storage of firearms in the home, such as requiring trigger locks or gun safes?

[ZUUZUU](#)

We are examining firearm safety courses, and many are taught well, but many others are not. Studies cannot find an effect of firearms training on gun storage, but studies do find an effect of gun storage (e.g., keeping guns unloaded and locked up) on both suicides and accidental gun deaths.

Why would a ban in guns not just lead to knives being used in violent crimes? In the UK knife crimes are common and knife homicide is rising to the point they have started a 'Save a life, turn in your knife' campaign.

I have always thought that the way to reduce violent crime are not through restrictions in weapons but reducing the causes of violence in human behavior such as education, employment, opportunity, and medical care.

Is it possible to tell whether (measure) a political hot topics such as guns is being used to motivate a political base for political campaign vice a legitimate risk to change civil liberties granted by the US Constitution?

[2ndshot](#)

The UK has violent crime with knives, but because knives are not nearly as lethal as guns, their homicide rate is much lower than ours.

Good prevention policy focuses both on the perpetrator and the weapon.

Thank you for doing this AMA.

Can you give us some examples of successful vs failed examples of attempts to curb gun violence, the measures used, and potential obfuscating variables and circumstances in those examples?

[PM ME YOUR PM PHOTOS](#)

Very briefly, success stories would include the Australian gun policies after the mass shooting in Tasmania and the Boston miracle in reducing youth gun homicide in the 1990s (I've written about the latter in my book *While We Were Sleeping: Success Stories in Injury and Violence Prevention* <http://www.amazon.com/While-We-Were-Sleeping-Prevention/dp/0520258460> and the former on our Harvard injury Control Research Center website under Bullet-ins). [https://cdn1.sph.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1264/2013/01/bulletins\\_australia\\_spring\\_2011.pdf](https://cdn1.sph.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1264/2013/01/bulletins_australia_spring_2011.pdf). The assault weapons ban in the US would probably be considered a failure because of all the loopholes in the law.

Do you think that the focus on Assault Rifles hurts the case against Handguns?

I ask because we know that handguns account for 99% of firearm homicides, but no one seems to do anything about them.

[brzcory](#)

It's true that in most gun crimes the criminal uses a handgun and assault rifles kill only a tiny percentage of gun victims. (handguns are also the weapon of choice in most suicides, though a substantial minority use long guns). Assault rifles are involved in a good number of mass shootings, which get much press, and assault rifles have much less utility for safety compared to handguns. I'm not sure whether discussions about limiting access to assault rifles either hurts or helps activities to try

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Do you think it is fair to compare countries when talking about gun violence in a particular country?

I've heard arguments/studies going either way comparing the US vs other countries where gun violence is supposedly less/more frequent without taking into account culture, (racial/social) tensions, etc. What's your view on these studies/statistics?

[Laloeka](#)

Studies make comparisons all the time. What you want to do is what a randomized control trial is attempting to do, make everything else the same except one thing. So you should typically want to compare the US to other advanced countries--rather than to less developed countries with weak governments--and try to control for (account) for what other differences there are other than the item (e.g., gun laws or gun prevalence) you are trying to understand the effects of.

If you could offer one piece of advice to a prospective gun owner, what would it be?

[nocowsever](#)

Carefully weigh the costs and benefits of bringing a lethal weapon into your home

Professor Hemenway,

Thank you for your AMA. I'm curious about the state of funding for gun violence research in the US.

Have the reductions in federal funding affected our ability to study firearm use and gun violence in the US?

What are the main sources of funding in your field, and who is conducting current studies?

[whoremongering](#)

There is little funding for gun violence research, and none for the much more interesting topic of gun violence. :)

Yes the lack of funding affects our ability to study gun issues.

There are a very few foundations that fund a little.

It is almost impossible for researchers who rely on grants to spend more than a small amount of their research effort on firearm issues.

If I have a gun in my home, statistically speaking who is the most likely person to get shot by that gun, whether accidentally or purposefully? Would it be a household intruder, one of my kids, myself, or something completely different?

Basically I'm wondering if the risks of having a gun in the home for self-defense outweigh the benefits, statistically speaking.

[bendymcbenders](#)

It is overwhelmingly more likely that a household member will be shot with a household gun than an intruder.

See the following link for a discussion of the risks and benefits for gun ownership from a health and safety perspective

<http://www.iansa.org/system/files/Risks%20and%20Benefits%20of%20a%20Gun%20in%20the%20Home%202011.pdf>

Hi, Professor Hemenway. Canadian here. I understand your focus is American public health and the relationship of firearms to health in the USA. I'm curious if your research has exposed you to Canadian approaches to public health and firearms and if you think we're doing anything better or worse up here. As you know, we have relatively socialized health care (for better or worse) and while we have plenty of guns, we can't hold them with Constitutional conviction (for better or worse). Also: sorry. :)

[RainbowNowOpen](#)

You in Canada are doing much better than we are in the US to reduce the public health problems related to firearms. You would do even better than you are now if you did not have a neighboring country to the south with many guns and weak gun laws--which is where many of your criminals obtain guns.

As interesting as I find your "take your buddies gun away" approach, which is an obvious help to the situation. In MA if caught with said "buddies gun" you run the risk of getting your license revoked. So as much as I agree with the approach, the law conflicts. How would you get around that? or be able to explain it to law enforcement in a way that you don't get in trouble for trying to do the right thing?

[DirtyRyandtheBoyz](#)

There are some places the law and policies need tweaking to allow for useful actions. One area where we are just beginning to work on is determining how to help make it easy for someone who wants to get rid of a gun without selling it to do so easily and legally any place in the US

If all guns magically disappeared tomorrow.

How do you think that would effect the rate and frequency of suicides?

[TheGrim1](#)

Guns are used in a little 50% of suicides in the US. I suspect that if there were no guns, the overall suicide rate would fall by 35%-40% but that is only a guess

If you could pass one law tomorrow to make the United States safer from gun violence, what would it be?

[YourARisAwful](#)

For gun homicide, probably strong universal background checks

How does gun control in the United States impact other countries around the globe?

[radatia15](#)

We are a terrible neighbor--our guns are used by criminals in Mexico, Canada and elsewhere. One of our interns from Jamaica found that over 80% of guns used in gun crime in Jamaica came from 3 counties in Florida.

Why is Chicago so plagued by gun violence with all the anti gun legislation in place there?

[Alienoftheearth](#)

It has lots of violence and ready access to guns from neighboring communities.