

The following episode contains information about firearm violence and some audiences may find it triggering or traumatizing.

Hi, my name is Mighty Fine, I'm an expert with the American Public Health Association, and today we're going to talk about gun violence.

The overarching goal of public health is to keep our communities healthy. Sometimes, that means preventing epidemics or fighting infectious diseases. But it also means addressing unnatural threats to our health, like gun violence.

Gun violence comes in many forms, including homicides, unintentional shootings, assaults, suicides and mass shootings. Together, gun violence accounts for over 39,000 deaths a year, making it one of the leading causes of premature death in the U.S.

As with any issue that affects people's health so significantly, public health experts begin by examining the data and looking for trends. They've found that as of 2021, the majority of gun-deaths — around 60% — are suicides.

9 out of 10 of people who attempt and survive suicide do not attempt again. So restricting access to lethal means, like firearms, could save thousands of lives.

Gun-related homicides are also a major problem. Each year in the U.S., more than 600 women are killed by intimate partners using guns.

And we can't ignore the impact of non-fatal firearm injuries either. One 2020 study estimated that there are about 329 of these injuries a day in the U.S., causing long-term consequences like physical disabilities and emotional trauma.

There's also a financial impact. A 2015 study put the combined cost of medical care and lost wages for gunshot victims at around 44 billion dollars.

Through ongoing research, we've learned that these deaths and injuries are preventable, and that's what makes gun violence an especially pressing public health issue. And like with any other health issue, after public health experts identify a problem, they start planning interventions.

Take Connecticut, in 1995, the Connecticut government made potential gun owners apply for a permit with their local police department, which included a background check and required a minimum of 8 hours of safety training. They also raised the minimum age to buy a gun from 18 to 21.

There were many factors involved here, but it seems likely these measures helped. Because over the next 10 years, homicides in Connecticut decreased by 40%.

Connecticut implemented a few options, but there are other tactics to try and prevent gun violence. Waiting periods give buyers a chance to "cool off" and change their minds before they can purchase a gun, which can prevent harm to themselves or to others.

Education could prevent suicides by firearms, too. Initiatives like the Gun Shop Project are trying to teach firearm salespeople how to spot the warning signs of a potentially suicidal gun buyer and provide them with guidelines on how to refuse sales and recommend help.

There are also extreme risk protection order laws, which allow family members, police officers, or medical professionals to ask for a temporary court order that would remove firearms from someone who seems like they might hurt themselves or others.

Finally, public health experts are looking to address root causes to try and prevent gun violence in the first place and change community conditions that lead to violence.

Initiatives like Group Violence Intervention work with young people at the highest risk of committing or becoming victims of gun violence, and provides them with the support they need. That could be mental health support, GED tutoring and help with finding gainful employment. In 2016, the National Network for Safe Communities reported that neighborhoods using Group Violence Intervention saw a 35 to 60 percent reduction in homicides.

But there's a lot of work left for public health experts to do. People are still dying, and across communities in the U.S., our physical and mental health is still being affected. But with strategic public health measures, robust research, policies and community interventions, we could lower these numbers, improving safety and quality of life across the country.

If you or someone you know is contemplating suicide, please call the free and confidential National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255.

Thank you for watching. This video is part of a series created by Complexly and the American Public Health Association to shed a little light on the important work that public health does. To learn more, visit apha.org.

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