

ACTION FOR CHILDREN HEALTH BRIEF GUN SAFETY

GUN SAFETY BEGINS AT HOME

A TROUBLING BACKGROUND

The issue of guns is perhaps one of the most polarizing issues facing Americans today. Americans have long been forced into just two seemingly available categories: you are either a “gun lover” or a “gun hater.” The level of emotion engendered by this issue can impede a rational discussion.

It is an important discussion to have, for the level of gun-related deaths and injuries is uniquely American. While most developed countries report only handfuls of gun-related deaths each year, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that more than 30,000 gun-related deaths occurred in the United States in 2003. (This makes it the second leading cause of injury mortality, surpassed only by motor vehicle-related deaths.) Furthermore, more than 1,300 of these gun deaths were among children younger than 18 years of age. Finally, the Consumer Products Safety Commission reports that for every gun-related death, there are more than four non-fatal injuries, leading to enormous medical costs, about half of which are paid by the U.S. government, using taxpayers’ money.

THE CHALLENGE

The highly emotional debate over the availability and accessibility of guns in America is likely to continue unabated for the foreseeable future. The challenge for child advocates is to determine if there are ways—even without affecting the overall debate—to increase the protection of children, who are the all-too-often inadvertent victims of gun violence. The best hope appears to be in the area of gun safety—more specifically, with regard to safe storage of guns. *It is noteworthy that those on both sides of the gun debate agree on the critical importance of safe storage.* Thus, this consensus offers a platform on which to construct an overall campaign to increase safe storage and a likely reduction in gun deaths and injuries, particularly among children.

“It is noteworthy that those on both sides of the gun debate agree on the critical importance of safe storage.”



THE PICTURE IN NORTH CAROLINA

Before recommendations can be considered, it is important to review the available data to give a general picture of North Carolina’s status with regard to gun-related deaths in children.

Figure 1 on Page 2 shows some encouraging, though sad data. In the past decade for which data are available (1995-2004), the sad news is that 486 children and youth age 0-17 died from gun-related injuries in our state. The encouraging news is that there has been a general decline in such deaths annually.

However, this number has moved upward in the past two years, renewing concerns.

It is worth noting that in 1995 the N.C. General Assembly passed a statute requiring the safe storage of guns in homes where children reside. Though the law is somewhat vague, it clearly sent an educational message, and certainly should receive some of the credit for the decline in gun-related child deaths since its passage.

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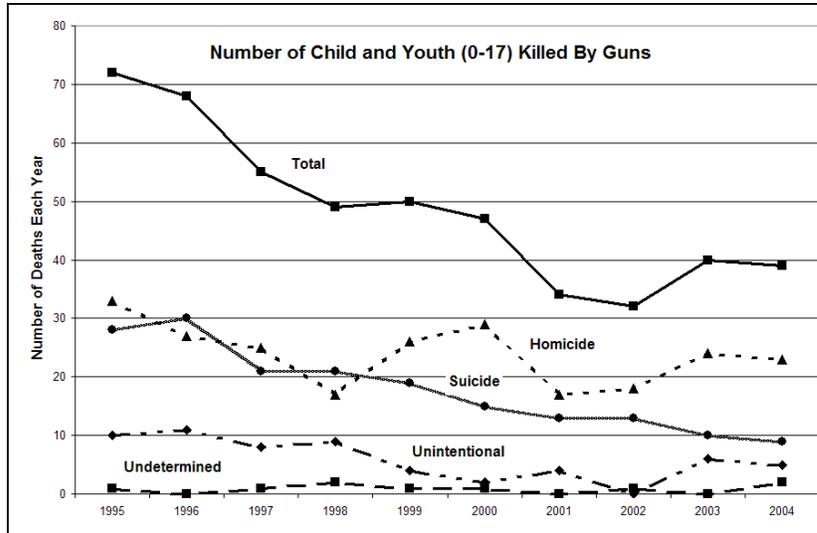


Figure 1
Source: N.C. State Center for Health Statistics

Figure 1 also shows that there has been a general decline in the three major categories of gun-related deaths: homicide, suicide and unintentional death. Homicide consistently has the highest numbers. Disturbingly, the percentage decrease over the decade has been the lowest of the three categories, and there has been an increase in the past two years. Suicide has experienced the most dra-

matic and consistent decrease, though gun-related suicides remain 39% of all youth suicides. Unintentional deaths also declined consistently, with no occurrences in 2002. However, unintentional gun-related deaths jumped to 6 in 2003 and 5 in 2004.

The great majority of gun-related child deaths occur in the 15-17 age group,

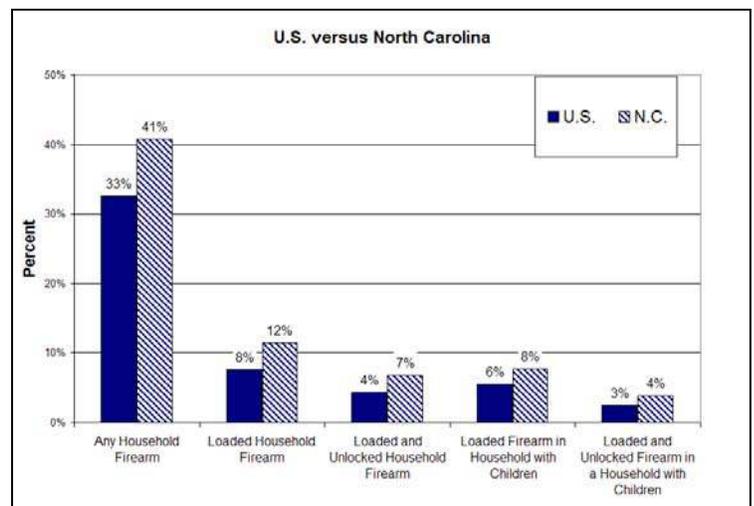
followed by the 10-14 age group. These age groups include most of the homicides and all of the suicides.

The 1-4 age group and the 5-9 age group experience fewer gun-related deaths. Interestingly, though, even in these younger age groups, gun-related homicides occur almost twice as frequently as unintentional deaths.

“Virtually all child deaths in the unintentional category are the result of guns that were not stored safely.”

THE CASE FOR SAFE STORAGE

The general consensus definition of “safe storage” is that the gun is stored unloaded and locked, and stored separately from ammunition. The inherent dangers of loaded, unlocked and easily accessible guns are obvious. Indeed, virtually all child deaths in the unintentional category are the result of guns that were not stored safely. In addition, a majority of gun suicides in youths are committed with a gun from the youths’ households, where safe storage would have impeded access to the death weapon. While the relationship between safe storage and homicides is



less certain, there are numerous documented instances of the perpetrator stealing the weapon that had not been stored safely.

Figure 2
Source: Pediatrics 2005; 116; 370-376

THE NEED FOR SAFE STORAGE

A recent study published in the December 2005 issue of *Pediatrics* has raised an alarm regarding the status of safe storage nationally and among the states. Figure 2 on Page 2 features survey results highlighting North Carolina's status in comparison to the nation:

- Nationally, 32.6% of adults reported that firearms were kept in or around their home. This compares with 40.8% for North Carolina.
- The national prevalence of adults with loaded household firearms was 7.6%. The North Carolina percentage was 11.5%.
- The national prevalence of adults with loaded and unlocked household firearms was 4.3%. The North Carolina percentage was 6.8%.
- If children less than age 18 are in the household, these percentages are somewhat better, although North Carolina is still worse than the na-

tional average. Nationally, 5.5% of adults reported having loaded household firearms, and 2.5% had loaded and unlocked firearms. In North Carolina, those percentages were 7.7% and 3.8%, respectively.

- An estimated 1,692,000 children and youth were living in households with loaded and unlocked firearms. In North Carolina, this figure was an estimated 82,000 children and youth. **This was the fifth largest number in the country.** (North Carolina has the 11th largest child population.)

Since this was a one-time study, we do not know whether these percentages are increasing or decreasing. Regardless, the size of the percentages—and particularly the 82,000 children and youth potentially exposed to unsafely stored firearms—should raise concerns among all people in North Carolina.

THE CURRENT RESPONSE

These concerns are already being addressed, albeit in an uncoordinated way among policymakers.

Listed in the “Prominent Gun Safe Storage Efforts” box are some of the more prominent efforts underway. Some are focused on children, and others on parents.

While they are part of national movements, implementation in North Carolina must rely on local initiative. Therefore, none of these efforts could be portrayed as truly statewide. Thus, while the value of each of these individual efforts is noteworthy, their success on a statewide basis is muted.

PROMINENT GUN SAFE STORAGE EFFORTS

Designed for Children

Eddie Eagle GunSafe Program www.nrahq.org/safety/eddie/index.asp

Created and distributed by the National Rifle Association, this gun safety program for children includes a wide variety of printed materials, a video and community education. Schools, law enforcement agencies, hospitals, child care centers, libraries and others may be eligible to receive grant funding to defray the cost of curriculum materials.

Results: The National Rifle Association (NRA) feels that gun accident prevention programs such as Eddie Eagle are a significant factor in the 91% national decline in fatal firearm accidents among children since 1975.

Speak Up www.paxusa.org

PAX/Real Solutions to Gun Violence developed the SPEAK UP campaign which encourages children to tell a trusted adult or call a toll-free number (1-866-SPEAKUP) to make an anonymous report if they know of or hear of another child carrying or talking about bringing a weapon to school. Materials are available at low or no cost.

Results: Since its launch in October 2002, the national SPEAK UP hotline has received more than 10,000 calls, almost certainly leading to the confiscation of countless weapons and prevention of numerous tragedies.

Designed for Parents

Asking Saves Kids (ASK) www.paxusa.org

PAX/Real Solutions to Gun Violence, in collaboration with the American Academy of Pediatrics, created and provides materials to parents and community organizations to encourage parents to ask other parents if there is a gun where their children are playing. The materials give parents suggestions about what and how to ask in a respectful manner. Materials are available at low or no cost.

Results: Since the national launch of the ASK campaign in August 2000, two million more households are asking about guns where their children play. The numbers of parents who say guns are a top concern when their children visit someone's home has risen from 5% to 19% since the program started in 2000.

Eddie Eagle Information for Parents

www.nrahq.org/safety/eddie/infoparents.asp

Created and distributed by the National Rifle Association, this guidebook provides information for parents about parental responsibility, talking to children about guns, basic gun safety rules and where to participate in gun safety training. Call 1-800-231-0752 to request a sample kit.

Project ChildSafe www.projectchildsafe.org

Project ChildSafe, in collaboration with the National Shooting Sports Foundation, is involved with the nationwide distribution of safety kits that include a cable-style gun-locking device and safety education materials. They remind gun owners to properly store firearms in the home to prevent a child from getting hold of a loaded firearm.

Results: More than 35 million Project ChildSafe safety kits will have been distributed to gun owners nationally by the end of 2006.

Action for Children North Carolina

1300 Saint Mary's Street
Suite 500
Raleigh, NC 27605-1276

Phone: (919) 834-6623
Fax: (919) 829-7299
E-mail:
admin@ncchild.org

We're on the Web!
www.ncchild.org

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VOICE 919-834-6623

ACTION FOR CHILDREN RECOMMENDATIONS

Action for Children North Carolina applauds the recent decision of the N.C. Child Fatality Task Force to implement an initiative to enhance the safe storage of firearms in our state. The challenge is to build on the apparent "safe storage consensus" in an inclusive and comprehensive manner. A steering committee should be formed, and include all parties interested in the issue.

A two-pronged implementation strategy should be considered. First, coordinated state-wide efforts should be developed. This does not discount the autonomy of each of the efforts noted in the "Prominent Gun Safe Storage Efforts" box—and others as identified. However, broader and more coordinated efforts will magnify the effects of each program. Second, since all of these efforts are focused on particular audiences, an overarching statewide awareness campaign on the benefits of safe storage should also be implemented. This campaign should use all forms of mass media aimed at raising the collective consciousness of all North Carolinians regarding this issue.

Our children deserve no less than basic protection within their and friends' homes. Now is the time to act to ensure their protection.

ACTION FOR CHILDREN HEALTH BRIEFS

Each year for the past decade, Action for Children, formerly the North Carolina Child Advocacy Institute (NCCA), and the N.C. Institute of Medicine have jointly released the N.C. Child Health Report Card. Sixteen leading child health indicators are summarized in the publication. (The 2005 version can be accessed at www.ncchild.org). Bringing the data together in a simple, yet comprehensive format precludes the possibility of in-depth presentations on individual indicators. Action for Children Health Briefs, issued periodically, are intended to highlight individual indicators in a more complete fashion.

ACTION FOR CHILDREN NORTH CAROLINA

Action for Children North Carolina is a statewide non-profit organization working with community leaders to improve the lives of children in North Carolina.

*The **Vision** of Action for Children North Carolina is that our state will be the best place to be a child and raise a child.*

*The **Mission** of Action for Children North Carolina is to advocate for child well-being by educating and engaging all people across the state to ensure that our children are healthy, safe, well-educated and have every opportunity for success.*