

## Firearms and Public Health: From Punishment to Prevention

*David Hemenway, Ph.D.*

**F**irearms are the second leading cause of injury-related death in the United States. In 1998, more than 31,000 people died of firearm-related injury. That same year, some 64,500 nonfatal gunshot wounds were treated in hospital emergency departments across the country.

In America, firearms policy is an explosive issue. But if David Hemenway has his way, far less heat and a great deal more light will be cast on the nation's use and abuse of firearms.

Hemenway, director of the Harvard Injury Control Research Center and the Harvard Youth Violence Prevention Center, aims to redirect the thrust of the debate on guns and violence away from the polarized political stage and into the less contentious realm of public health. To do that, he is rolling out groundbreaking research into the causes and effects of gun misuse. With support from a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation Investigator Award in Health Policy Research, his work will culminate soon in the publication of a book on the links between firearms and public health.

Among Hemenway's recommendations for reshaping U.S. firearms policy:

- Encourage firearms manufacturers to take simple steps to make guns safer when they fall into the hands of children.
- Bring health professionals onto the front lines as proponents of prevention and education strategies.
- Build a national firearms injury database to give researchers, communities, advocacy groups, policymakers, and individuals the hard data they need to make truly informed decisions.

### *From Punishment to Prevention*

America's approach to guns and violence has focused blame almost exclusively on firearms users, Hemenway notes. In doing so, it has coupled firearms misuse with crime. As a result, the preferred solution to firearms violence is the same as the popular solution to crime: punishment.

The effectiveness of punishment as a policy solution is limited, however, because it is administered after the damage has been done. Hemenway believes that a public health approach rooted in prevention and pragmatism would provide a better framework for firearms policy and could help modify the behaviors, products, and environments that affect firearms use.

"You have to realize that all people occasionally behave inappropriately and make mistakes — that's what humans do," Hemenway says. "So you want to make it hard to behave inappropriately, and when people do, you want to make it less likely that there will be serious injury."

A National Program of  
 The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation

National Program Office:  
 Rutgers, The State University  
 of New Jersey  
 Institute for Health, Health Care Policy,  
 and Aging Research  
 317 George Street, Suite 400  
 New Brunswick, NJ 08901-2008

phone: 732.932.3817 ext.256  
 fax: 732.932.3819  
 email: [depdir@ihhpcpar.rutgers.edu](mailto:depdir@ihhpcpar.rutgers.edu)  
[www.ihhpcpar.rutgers.edu/rwjf](http://www.ihhpcpar.rutgers.edu/rwjf)

---

*A public health approach rooted in prevention and pragmatism would provide a better framework for firearms policy and could help modify the behaviors, products, and environments that affect firearms use.*

---



---

### ***Unsafe Drivers, Safer Environment***

How could a public health perspective and injury prevention campaign change the firearms violence debate? Consider the example offered by another mechanical object of Americans' affection: the automobile.

Until the 1950s, most data produced by automobile crash researchers focused squarely on the failures of drivers. Driver error led to the vast majority of accidents and injuries, research orthodoxy declared. Boost driver education and law enforcement, the reasoning went, and injury rates would fall. Better individual drivers would mean fewer individual injuries.

By mid-century, however, researchers and consumer safety advocates campaigned to bring a public health focus to the issue. That approach to automobile safety put the emphasis not on who caused the accident, but on what caused the injuries. The results were transportation safety innovations ranging from collapsible steering columns and safer roadside lampposts to improved emergency medical services.

Nobody thinks drivers are any better than they were 50 years ago, Hemenway says, but automobile fatalities per mile driven have plummeted by 75 percent.

---

### ***Cutting Through the Numbers Fog***

Public health initiatives work best when policymakers base their decisions on timely, comprehensive data. Automobile safety policy benefits from a robust data collection system that captures consistent, comparative injury information across states. But data on firearms are difficult to find. Did the Clinton administration's assault weapons ban have its intended impact, bringing down the number of assaults and deaths from these particular firearms? Are Saturday night specials a particular problem? Where do teen suicide victims get their guns?

"We just don't know," Hemenway concedes.

Answers require a far more complete view of the nation's firearms and injury rates. To find them, Hemenway has delved into more than a half-dozen aspects of the firearms issue, including gun-carrying by adolescents, hostile gun displays, guns on college campuses, gun use in the home, guns and suicide, and unintentional firearm injuries.

■ **Gun-carrying:** Hemenway's exploration of the risk factors for adolescent gun carrying reveals that a simple measure — whether students are old for their school grade — may be a powerful predictor of gun-carrying by adolescents.

■ **Hostile gun displays:** While criminal use of firearms is socially undesirable, many instances of self-professed self-defense may be just as inappropriate. Hemenway's findings suggest that people use firearms far more often to intimidate or frighten family, friends, and neighbors than in legitimate self-defense. Many people surveyed by Hemenway's research team said they had been intimidated by someone with a gun — at a stop light, at a party — and a few claimed to have used a firearm in self-defense to frighten someone. But a group of criminal court justices who reviewed the verbatim accounts from this research judged the majority of "self-defense" gun uses to actually be illegal. In most cases, they came down to the use of firearms in an escalating argument.

■ **Guns on college campuses:** In a survey of undergraduates, Hemenway and others found that 3.5 percent of students have a firearm at college. Those with guns are more likely than their classmates to engage in alcohol-related behaviors that increase the risk of injury for themselves and others.

■ **Gun use in the home:** Firearms in homes are more likely to be used to threaten other family members or acquaintances than to fend off criminals. In fact, homeowners use weapons other than guns far more frequently against intruders.

■ **Guns and suicide:** Hemenway's work suggests that the presence of firearms in the home is a significant risk factor for youth suicide. Gun ownership levels correlate highly with suicide rates across states and geographic regions.

■ **Unintentional firearm injuries:** Across 19 years of data from 50 states, the results are clear: For every age group, areas with higher rates of gun ownership have more accidental firearm deaths. In the four states with the most guns (Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi), the mortality rate has been seven times higher than in the four states with the fewest guns (Hawaii, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Rhode Island).

Additional Hemenway research indicates that an armed society doesn't always feel more protected. More than 75 percent of those surveyed say they would feel less safe if others in their communities owned guns. And five of every six Americans say they would feel less safe if their fellow citizens carried guns.

These studies, and others like them, could foster the development of firearms policies that focus more closely on protecting the American public's health.

---

### **Public Health Challenge, Pragmatic Solutions**

Giving the debate over firearms policy a more distinct public health flavor need not trigger yet another political firestorm.

"You can probably reduce the problems a lot without making substantial changes in the ability of people to own rifles to go hunting or target shooting," Hemenway insists. As with public health concerns such as tobacco, alcohol, or motor vehicles, the goal isn't to eliminate the product, but to make the environment and the product itself safer.

Plenty of feasible interventions make sense, Hemenway says, but no single intervention will solve the problems of firearms violence and injury. The aim of public health research is to foster reasonable interventions that generate benefits without imposing large social and economic costs.

Government agencies need not drive every solution. Within society, community groups and advocates can take steps — on both the political left and the right — to reduce firearms injuries.

Hemenway suggests several public health-oriented solutions to gun-related injuries:

- 1) **Make guns safer:** Like aspirin bottles and cars, steps can be taken to make guns more childproof. Technically feasible measures include making guns that won't fire if dropped, childproofing firing mechanisms, and developing semiautomatics that won't fire without an ammunition clip.
- 2) **Make the environment safer:** Boosting regulatory oversight for firearm products that don't work or pose particular safety hazards — much like the steps taken to improve the safety of everything from meat to minivans — could help cut the public costs of firearm accidents.
- 3) **Build a nationwide database of gun injury information:** By systematically capturing standardized information on guns, violence, and injury, people can make better choices about whether high-

---

*"You can probably reduce the problems a lot without making substantial changes in the ability of people to own rifles to go hunting or target shooting," Hemenway insists. As with public health concerns such as tobacco, alcohol, or motor vehicles, the goal isn't to eliminate the product, but to make the environment and the product itself safer.*

---

## About the Investigator

David Hemenway, Ph.D., is a professor of health policy at the Harvard School of Public Health and the director of the Harvard Injury Control Research Center and the Harvard Youth Violence Prevention Center.



For more than two decades, Hemenway has been a powerful voice in public health policy and the field of injury prevention, as both a prominent public speaker and as the author of numerous books and research articles. His work has appeared in the *New England Journal of Medicine*; *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*; *Policy Studies Journal*; *American Journal of Public Health*; *Accident Analysis and Prevention*; *American Journal of Epidemiology*; *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*; *Journal of Public Health Policy*; and *Law and Policy*. Beyond the published word, Hemenway's skills as a premier educator and instructor have earned him numerous honors, including the award as the top teacher at the Harvard School of Public Health.

Hemenway's push to transform U.S. firearms policy debate springs from a professional life spent exploring injury prevention. Hemenway worked early in his career with consumer safety pioneer Ralph Nader and Consumers Union. As a prize-winning economist and a respected authority in the field of injury prevention, he has influenced prevention strategies in fields ranging from automobiles and cigarettes to pollution control and alcohol.

A short survey of firearms injury research left Hemenway shocked by the lack of quantitative information in the field and intrigued by the challenge of filling the research vacuum. Hemenway's works on firearm policy include the book *Guns and the Constitution*, as well as research articles and editorial pieces in the *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, *Injury Prevention*, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, *Journal of Trauma*, and *The Washington Post*. Hemenway is also a frequent speaker and contributor at academic, governmental, and health association conferences.

profile programs are more flash than substance, and where community resources can best be focused to prevent gun violence. Hemenway and others are working on blueprints to build a data collection system for firearms injuries similar to that in place for motor vehicle injuries.

**4) Raise public awareness of firearm safety:** In any public health solution, the medical community can play a larger role. Physicians should spend more time talking with parents about guns and the potential for accidents and injury, and behavioral health providers should spend more time discussing firearms with patients. Faith-based and community organizations also can help promote public awareness and help change the social milieu.

"With a public health approach to firearms and injury, we can take steps that are really cost-effective and save people's lives," Hemenway concludes. "Why shouldn't we do that?"

By injecting hard data and a reasoned public health perspective into the combustible debate over firearms, Hemenway's research could help demonstrate that an ounce of public health prevention may be worth a pound of divisive political cure.

### Publications

Through his 1997 RWJF Investigator Award in Health Policy Research, Dr. Hemenway has produced six scientific articles designed to inject a greater public health emphasis into the firearms policy debate. His work will culminate soon in the publication of a groundbreaking book on the links between firearms and public health.

- Hemenway, D, Miller, M, Azrael, D. Gun use in the United States: results from two national surveys. *Injury Prevention*, 2000; 6: 263-7.
- Hemenway, D, Miller, M. Firearm availability and homicide rates across 26 high income countries. *Journal of Trauma*, 2000; 49: 985-8.
- Hemenway, D, Kennedy, B, Kawachi, I, Putnam, RD. Firearm prevalence and social capital: a research note. *Social Science and Medicine*, in press.
- Hemenway, D, Azrael, D, Miller, M. U.S. national attitudes concerning gun carrying. *Injury Prevention*, in press.
- Hemenway, D. The public health approach to reduce the problems of motor vehicles, tobacco, and alcohol, with applications to firearms policy. *Journal of Public Health Policy*, in press.

Dr. Hemenway may be reached by phone at 617.432.4493, or by email at [hemenway@hsph.harvard.edu](mailto:hemenway@hsph.harvard.edu).

To order additional copies of *Firearms and Public Health: From Punishment to Prevention*, contact the National Program Office of the RWJF Investigator Awards in Health Policy Research at 732.932.3817, ext. 256, or [depdir@ihhpar.rutgers.edu](mailto:depdir@ihhpar.rutgers.edu).