REPORT

Preventable Tragedies

Findings from the #NotAnAccident Index

8.30.2021
Executive Summary

"It's affected our whole lives," said Haley Rinehart, whose four-year-old son found an unsecured, loaded gun at a relative's home and shot and wounded himself in the head in 2002. "Even almost 20 years later, we're still dealing with the aftermath of all of this. I don't know if there will ever be any full closure. It's like a wound that never heals.

—Haley Rinehart in conversation with Everytown for Gun Safety

Every year, hundreds of children in the United States gain access to unsecured, loaded guns in closets and nightstand drawers, in backpacks and purses, or just left out. With tragic regularity, children find these unsecured guns and unintentionally shoot themselves or someone else.

While unintentional shootings by children are a heartbreaking part of America's gun violence epidemic, there is no centralized database that tracks how many children gain access to unsecured guns and harm themselves or others. Everytown started such a database in 2015 by carefully tracking media reports to explore this crisis in depth.

According to our #NotAnAccident Index, there were at least 2,070 unintentional shootings by children under 18 years old between January 1, 2015, and December 31, 2020, resulting in 765 deaths and 1,366 injuries. In 2020, gun sales surged 64 percent, and this rise—coupled with school and childcare center closures as a result of the pandemic—has increased the risk for all household residents: the number of unintentional shooting deaths by children was 31 percent higher from March through December 2020 than during the same period in 2019. And 2021 is on target to exceed even that dispiriting high, with the highest number of January to June incidents of the past seven years.
Researchers recently estimated that the number of children living in households in the United States with at least one loaded, unlocked gun has gone up from 4.6 million in 2015 to 5.4 million in 2021.³ When a child gets their hands on a gun and unintentionally injures or kills themself or others, the physical and psychological trauma is long-lasting, affecting the victims and their families, the child who accessed the gun and their family, and the extended communities of both. And yet this type of entirely preventable tragedy occurs roughly once per day in the United States.

This report provides a deeper understanding of where, when, and how unintentional child shootings occur. And while the statistics are deeply distressing, the report also outlines the clear, effective steps we can take to save children and teen lives. This includes secure gun storage practices, public awareness campaigns, and laws proven to reduce unintentional injuries and deaths. To learn more about secure storage, visit BeSmartForKids.org.

Key Findings

Analysis of the over 2,000 incidents in the #NotAnAccident Index in which a child unintentionally shot themself or others in the period 2015 through 2020 reveals the following:

— Shootings by children are most often also shootings of children. Ninety-one percent of those injured or killed in unintentional shootings by children were also under 18.⁴

— Seven in ten of the unintentional child shootings occurred in homes, whether in the home of the shooter, the victim, a relative’s house, or another home. Unintentional shootings occurred most frequently when...
children were likely to be home: over the weekend, in the summer, and during school holidays.

The two age groups most likely to be both shooters and victims were teenagers 14 to 17 first, and then preschoolers five and younger.

The 10 states with the highest rates of injury and death as a result of unintentional child shootings had rates more than 12 times higher than the 10 states with the lowest rates.

States with secure storage or child access prevention laws had the lowest rates of injury or death from unintentional child shootings. Rates of death or injury from these shootings in states with no secure storage laws were double to triple the rates in states with laws that hold gun owners accountable when children can or do access an unsecured gun.

Introduction

Firearms are the second leading cause of death for children under age 18 in the United States. While the vast majority of these gun deaths are homicides and suicides, unintentional shootings—which make up 5 percent of annual gun deaths among children 18 and younger—are a persistent and heartbreaking aspect of this public health crisis. They are also preventable when families take the steps to reduce children's access to firearms in their own homes and the homes of anyone children are visiting.

The age range of victims from these unintentional child shootings from 2015 through 2020 range from a one-month-old baby to a 77-year-old man. Many of those killed in these incidents were shot by another child, often leaving two families and their extended communities facing grief, regret, and years of physical, emotional, and sometimes legal consequences.
It’s not just the child who’s injured or killed who is affected by these incidents. It’s their siblings and their cousins and their parents and their entire community. Staff at local schools come to us to help work through the trauma in the entire school when one of these incidents occurs. And it affects the medical personnel who treat them as well. I can’t tell you the number of pediatric residents who have come to me after being in the trauma bay when one of these children rolls in. It’s just so tragic for everybody involved.

—Dr. Annie Andrews in conversation with Everytown for Gun Safety

Yet unlike other causes of childhood injuries and deaths, there isn’t a ready source of data to understand how many children gain access to unsecured firearms and harm themselves or others each year. That’s why Everytown in 2015 started tracking unintentional shootings by children, collecting information through media reports about all incidents in which a child under 18 years old unintentionally shoots themself or someone else. Analysis of six years of these incidents can help steer us towards the most effective solutions.

#NotAnAccident Index
In 2015, Everytown for Gun Safety started tracking unintentional shootings by children, collecting information through media reports about incidents in which a child under 18 years old unintentionally shoots themself or someone else. The data referenced in this report can be found in this data tracker.

View the data tracker.

Uncovering Solutions Through the Data

Shooter and victim demographics

From January 1, 2015, to December 31, 2020, there were at least 2,070 unintentional shootings by children resulting in 765 deaths and 1,366 nonfatal gun injuries.
Injuries and Deaths as a Result of Unintentional Child Shootings Surged in 2017 and 2020

Over the six years that Everytown has been tracking unintentional shootings, 2017 saw the highest number of incidents (383), deaths (156), and total victims (390). But the number of unintentional deaths resulting from shootings by children from the start of the COVID-19 pandemic—March through December 2020—was a staggering 31 percent higher than that same period in 2019. In 2020 alone, at least 125 toddlers and pre-kindergarteners ages five and under shot themself or someone else.
Boys made up the overwhelming majority of those both involved in and impacted by unintentional shootings: 83 percent of shooters were boys, and 76 percent of victims were boys and men. There is not a notable difference between the gender makeup of the younger children who unintentionally shot themself or someone else compared to the older group. Among incidents where the shooter was 9 or younger, 84 percent were boys, for the group ages 10 to 17, 89 percent were.

Over this six-year period, children who unintentionally fired the gun in these incidents ranged from toddlers and preschoolers to teenagers under 18. In fact, while teenagers 14 to 17 made up the largest group, children five and younger were the second-largest age group impacted. During the period under consideration, at least 610 preschoolers and toddlers ages five and under managed to find a gun and unintentionally shoot themself or someone else, often a sibling or a friend visiting for a playdate. More than one in every four of these shootings were by preschoolers ages five and younger. And given the circumstances of children coming upon loaded firearms during a playdate, more than one in every four of the victims were also children five and younger.

TWO AGE GROUPS ACCOUNT FOR THE LARGEST SHARE OF BOTH SHOOTERS AND VICTIMS: HIGH SCHOOLERS AND CHILDREN FIVE AND YOUNGER
While the race and ethnicity of both the shooters and victims are key demographic aspects of these incidents, this information is not systematically documented. The dataset is derived from media tracking, and Everytown was unable to determine the race or ethnicity of 88 percent of the shooters and 83 percent of the victims. Deeper research using court records also did not yield much information on race and ethnicity, largely because all of the shooters and most of the victims are children, and as such, they benefit from laws and practices related to protecting the privacy of minors.

Finally, unintentional shooting deaths and injuries are as likely to be self-inflicted as inflicted by someone else. But since stages of brain development vary widely from infants to adolescents and teenagers, we also examined the
proportion of incidents in which a child shot themself or someone else broken into two age groupings: children ages 0 to 9 and 10 to 17. We found that among the younger group, roughly two-thirds of the incidents involved the child shooting themself with one-third having shot someone else. For the adolescent and teenage group, the proportion was inverted. Roughly 40 percent were self-inflicted incidents and 58 percent involved the young person shooting someone else. In both cases, between 1-2 percent of incidents involved a shooting of both themself and someone else.

While suicide with a firearm is a devastating, and growing, problem among American youth, the self-inflicted injuries and deaths included in this dataset are not the result of a suicide or attempt at self-harm. Rather they are situations in which the child accessed and fired a gun that they did not realize was loaded. The stories of these shootings are harrowing—and completely avoidable. Four-year-old Eli’s story outlines the innocence of a tragedy in the Rinehart family.

Haley’s Story

“The hardest thing I’ve ever had to do in my life.”

Haley Rinehart’s four-year-old son, Eli, found an unsecured, loaded gun at his paternal grandmother’s house on Friday, April 5, 2002, and shot and wounded himself in the head. “When he saw it, he thought it was a toy and he was curious about it,” she said. “He wanted to see what he called “missiles,” which were bullets. When he picked it up, the weight caused it to slip in his fingers. His finger hit the trigger and it went off,” Rinehart said.

The fact that the shooting occurred at a relative’s home added to Rinehart’s devastation. As a 21-year-old mother of two, Rinehart “had never thought to question an adult being responsible because I had always been taught to
respect my elders and trust them. It was hard for me to process that adults would be so careless.”

Eli suffered major injuries. He had to have his right eye completely removed, and lost his temporal bone and part of the temporal lobe of his brain. He spent months in the hospital. “It impacted me emotionally, mentally, even physically,” Rinehart said. “I literally went from a happy-go-lucky parent to a helicopter mom overnight.”

The shooting affected every part of Eli’s life, transforming him from a bubbly toddler to a withdrawn child and teenager. “Watching him go through that was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do in my life. He had to learn how to talk again, he had to learn how to walk again, he had to be re-potty trained,” Rinehart said. “And he had nightmares. . . . He would wake up screaming and cry for the rest of the night.”

Both Eli and Haley have struggled with posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). “We live in the country, and when he would hear a gunshot, he would run in the house and cower,” Rinehart said. “But it’s easier to deal with that when they’re little and I can hold and console. But when I’ve got an 18-year-old in the fetal position on the floor in tears, it’s hard for a parent to process and to try to calm him down.”

Eli is now a 19-year-old college student. He still has free-floating bone fragments in his brain, and Rinehart worries they could cause further damage in the future. “The doctors will tell you it’s a miracle he survived. But we’re not lucky, per se, because he’s had to deal with so much because of it,” she said. “But what we can do is we can show people this is what can happen, and we don’t want it to happen to you.”


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**Location, month, and day of the week**
Analysis of these incidents points clearly to the far greater likelihood of these shootings occurring when children are home from school and to the importance of secure gun storage in gun-owning homes:

— The average number of shooting incidents by children per day was highest in summer. July’s average of 1.1 unintentional child shootings per day was 45 percent higher than the April average.

— Child shooting incidents were higher in the holiday periods of November and December. In 2020 alone, three incidents occurred on Christmas Day. 13

— Unintentional child shootings were more likely to happen on Fridays through Sundays, with Saturday being the most common day.

— Seven of every 10 unintentional shootings by children in 2015 through 2020 occurred in a home—either that of the shooter, the victim, a friend or relative, or someone else.

**UNINTENTIONAL CHILD SHOOTINGS OCCUR MOST FREQUENTLY IN MONTHS WHEN CHILDREN ARE HOME MORE AND ON WEEKENDS**
By month

Source: Everytown, #NotAnAccident Index, 2015 to 2020.
By day of the week

Source: Everytown, #NotAnAccident Index, 2015 to 2020.
Seven in Ten Unintentional Shootings by Children Occur in a Home

Source: Everytown, #NotAnAccident Index, 2015 to 2020.

ASHLYN’S STORY
“He was sleeping at his friend’s house for the holiday. He never came home.”

Ashlyn Carraway’s 13-year-old son, Noah Daigle, was spending a night at his 15-year-old friend’s house during the Christmas holiday break. Growing up in a gun-owning family in Louisiana, Carraway said, “Noah was experienced with guns. He had been hunting since he was probably three or four years old, and he was taught safety. I honestly never thought to ask anyone else about guns.”

But a phone call in the middle of that night changed Carraway’s life forever. She was told the boys had been video chatting with some of the girls from their class when Noah’s friend held a hunting rifle to Noah’s head as a joke. The boy pulled the trigger not realizing the safety was not engaged, and Noah was killed instantly.

Carraway said that while teenagers are older than small children who find unsecured guns, they still don’t always have the judgment to make safe decisions around them—which is why it is always the adult’s responsibility to securely store guns. “We shouldn’t just say, ‘Well, my kids are going to know better.’ Your kid may know better, but what about another one?” Carraway said. “In Noah’s case, his DNA wasn’t on any of the weapons, so he did know better. But how does that serve him? It didn’t save him that day.”

Carraway wants her fellow gun owners to understand that “when it comes down to safety, there’s no other answer than it should be okay if I ask you about your guns and where you store them,” she explained. “I don’t need serial numbers. We’re not asking for a rundown of what you own. We’re just asking how free are your children with your weapons in your home?”

Carraway has struggled with anxiety as well as grief after Noah’s death. Some days she looks at Noah’s picture “a thousand times and I’m fine, and some days you just break down because it wasn’t fair. I didn’t get to see him grow up or I didn’t hear his voice change. Then you try to recall their voice because you don’t want to forget it.”
Type of gun

While information on these incidents does not always include details about the type of gun used, information obtained for 65 percent of unintentional child shootings shows that handguns accounted for the great majority (85 percent) of incidents. Rifles and shotguns each accounted for 7 percent and assault-style rifles made up less than 1 percent of the unintentional shootings by children.14

Looking again at the data broken into two age groupings, we found that a somewhat higher proportion of incidents in children in the younger group through age 9 involved a handgun than with the older group ages 10 to 17. Handguns were used in 93 percent of incidents in the younger group and 78 percent in the older group.
Variation by state

State-by-state analysis of the 2,070 shootings since 2015 reveals tremendous range among states. While in Louisiana, there were 98 such incidents over the six-year period of this report, Hawaii, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island each reported none. Further findings include:

Source: Everytown, #NotAnAccident Index, 2015 to 2020.
The 10 states with the highest rates of incidents were Louisiana, Alaska, Mississippi, Tennessee, Missouri, Alabama, Kentucky, South Carolina, Indiana, and Georgia.

The 10 states where unintentional shootings by children were rare or never happened during this time period were Hawaii, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, California, New Jersey, Wyoming, New York, Connecticut, and Washington State.

Turning to rates of harm, in the 10 states with the highest rates of injury and death, the rates were on average more than 12 times higher than in the 10 states with the lowest rates (2.52 injuries/deaths per million people compared to 0.20 injuries/deaths per million people).
Rates of Injury and Death from Unintentional Child Shootings by State Vary Enormously
These vast differences in unintentional shootings by state are in part attributable to rates of gun ownership: it stands to reason that the likelihood of a child accessing a gun is linked to rates of gun ownership in that home and community. Using our dataset of all incidents from 2015 through 2020, there is a clear association between gun ownership and deaths and injuries as a result of unintentional shootings by children. States with the highest household gun
ownership rates (where 50 percent or more households in that state are gun-owning households) have quadruple the number of victims from unintentional shootings by children compared to states with the lowest gun ownership (where under 30 percent of households own guns).  

**But this is not the end of the story. Policy also matters.**

**Impact of gun storage policies**

Can storage policies related to children's access to firearms prevent unintentional shootings? As the following tables show, the 10 states where injuries and deaths from unintentional child shootings were lowest (with the exception of Wyoming) all have one important thing in common: they have some form of child-access law that provides protection against these shootings, commonly known as secure storage laws or child access prevention laws. In sharp contrast, the 10 states with the highest rates of injuries and deaths from unintentional child shootings do not have such a law, or have a law that only applies in extremely limited circumstances.

**STATES WITH THE LOWEST INJURY AND DEATH RATES HAVE STRONG FIREARM STORAGE LAWS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank (lowest injury/death rate = 51)</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Number of gun injuries and deaths from unintentional child shootings</th>
<th>Rate per million</th>
<th>Child access law?</th>
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<td>Yes (if child likely to access)</td>
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<td>California</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>Yes (if child likely to access)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rank</td>
<td>State</td>
<td>Number of gun injuries and deaths from unintentional child shootings</td>
<td>Rate per million</td>
<td>Child access law?</td>
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</tr>
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**STATES WITH THE HIGHEST INJURY AND DEATH RATES HAVE WEAK OR NO FIREARM STORAGE LAWS**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Number of gun injuries and deaths from unintentional child shootings</th>
<th>Rate per million</th>
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<td>Rate per million</td>
<td>Child access law?</td>
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Twenty-three states and Washington, DC, have some form of gun storage law that holds gun owners accountable when children can or do access an unsecured gun. These laws fall along a spectrum from most protective to least. The most protective and comprehensive laws require the gun owner to secure their firearms whenever they are not in their immediate possession or control (Massachusetts and Oregon). The next level is laws that apply if a child is likely to access an unsecuredly stored gun (six states and Washington, DC). Less comprehensive are laws that apply if a child does access an unsecuredly stored gun (15 states).

Ten states have another category of laws related to child access that only apply when a gun owner intentionally or recklessly provides a firearm to a child. But these laws apply in such limited circumstances that they are not considered “secure storage” laws. Finally, 17 states have no child-access-related laws at all.

While the focus of this research is on laws to prevent unintentional firearm injuries and deaths at the hands of children, secure gun storage laws can prevent youth suicides, gun theft, and youth and adult violent crimes as well.
Law requiring secure storage when gun is not in owner’s presence
Law if child is likely to access an unsecurely stored gun
Law if child does access an unsecurely stored gun
Law if owner intentionally or recklessly gives gun access


Recommendations
As is clear from the preceding discussion, secure gun storage is the indispensable ingredient to avert these incidents, tragedies that happen with painful regularity at times and in places where children are simply being children. Recommendations include secure gun storage practices, public education campaigns, and laws.

**Secure gun storage practices**

Talking with children about guns is a good precaution, and the conversation should evolve as children grow older. But it does not guarantee their safety. Children are endlessly curious, and exploration is one of the hallmarks of childhood. One study found that young children who go through a weeklong gun safety training program are just as likely as children with no training to approach or play with a handgun when they find one.\(^{16}\) That is why it is always an adult's responsibility to prevent unauthorized access to guns, not a child's responsibility to avoid them.

An important part of that responsibility is to ask about guns in any home your child is visiting. We routinely take precautions in other areas by asking relatives or parents of our children's friends about pets in their homes, allergens, car seats, and more. Asking about whether they own guns and whether they are securely stored should be part of these safety discussions. Some people may find this initially to be an awkward conversation. Be SMART provides helpful tips on how to conduct this conversation.

The next step is the actual device used for storage. US gun-owning households have an average of eight guns,\(^{17}\) often a variety of types of equipment used for a variety of purposes. These uses can include sport and recreation, gun collecting, and protection. Responsible gun owners know to practice gun safety at all times in order to prevent firearms access by any unauthorized user.

The approach and kind of devices used to store firearms vary depending on important considerations such as how many children and what ages are in the household or likely to be visiting and the presence of anyone who may be a danger to themself or others. Practicing gun safety means storing firearms...
unloaded, locked, and separate from ammunition and secured to a structure in the house (such as a wall or heavy piece of furniture) in order to prevent theft. One study found that households that locked both firearms and ammunition were associated with an 85 percent lower risk of unintentional firearm injuries among children and teens, compared to those that locked neither.18

Assume children and teens can find guns. Store firearms unloaded, locked, and separate from ammunition.

The more challenging storage arrangement is related to a gun kept in a home for protection. Secure gun storage practices, however, do not prevent a gun from being accessed quickly in a self-defense scenario. In fact, there are affordable options for gun storage that provide owners with access to a gun in a matter of seconds while still keeping them out of the hands of children and people who are at risk of harming themselves or others.

There are three key considerations for gun storage that is easily accessible for home defense but prevents access by minors, thieves, or other unauthorized users:

1. Locked boxes are far preferable to other types of gun locks such as cable and trigger locks because they fully contain the gun so that children cannot see what is inside and because they offer stronger protection.

2. Locked boxes that can be opened only by authorized individuals provide important safety. Some of the fastest locked boxes open using the owner’s
fingerprints in only half a second. Boxes that open with RFID “smart” tags using chip technology also allow very quick access. Boxes opened with keys or a combination are less desirable options due to the ease of others finding the key or figuring out the code.

 Owners should choose a device that can be secured so that the gun cannot be stolen. Companies manufacture gun storage devices that can be secured in every part of the house.

While the self-defense use for a gun may be a priority, it is also essential to be realistic about the safety and effectiveness of that use. A 2015 study by researchers at Harvard and the University of Vermont using data from 2007 to 2011 found that one's chances of being injured in a self-defense situation with a gun or from other self-protective measures (such as running away or screaming for help) are roughly the same. There is little evidence that using a gun for self-defense reduces the danger of either sustaining an injury or losing possessions during a crime. Finally, guns kept quickly accessible for home protection are twice as likely to be stolen as to be used to stop a crime. In this way, unsecured guns may actually increase the likelihood of crime and violence through an increased risk of theft.

There is little evidence that using a gun for self-defense reduces the danger of either sustaining an injury or losing possessions during a crime.

Secure gun storage public education

The number of unintentional child shootings detailed in this report tells us we must urgently do better to get the word out about the importance of secure firearm storage. Everyone in the community can play a role—from gun sellers
and law enforcement to schools and doctors to elected officials and community members—in shaping messages and developing options that are appropriate for local contexts. Some important initiatives include:

**General Education Campaigns:** Awareness campaigns to promote public health have been extremely effective in changing behaviors related to a variety of major issues, including smoking, wearing seat belts, and impaired driving. For secure gun storage and reducing unintentional child shootings, one such campaign is Be SMART, an effort launched by Everytown that emphasizes that it’s an adult responsibility to keep kids from accessing guns, and that every adult can play a role in keeping kids and communities safer. There are thousands of Be SMART volunteers across the country helping parents and adults normalize conversations about gun safety through online training, booths at county fairs and farmer’s markets, National Night Out campaigns, and many more events.

Other efforts include Brady’s End Family Fire campaign. In collaboration with the Ad Council, Brady has produced ads, social media graphics, public service announcements, training, and other initiatives to promote responsible gun ownership and secure storage.²¹

**Firearms and Sporting Goods Stores:** As a start, partnerships between gun shops and gun storage device sellers and hospitals or local governments to educate people on secure storage are yet another way to get the word out. Seattle and King County Public Health have a partnership with a number of online and in-store retailers to provide educational posters and brochures as well as discounts on storage devices. In addition, all gun safes and lock boxes are tax exempt in the state of Washington, as they are in other states as well.²²

**Schools:** Since 2019, school districts across the country have passed resolutions to require that information be sent home with students to educate parents about the importance of securely storing any firearms they own.²³ In some school districts, parents or guardians are required to sign and return a letter acknowledging that they have read the information. In the Los Angeles Unified School District, the second-largest school district in the country, with over
700,000 students, letters went out for signature in both English and Spanish. This is a simple yet effective action that others can take to protect America's students.

Too often, gun safety and secure storage practices aren’t part of the routine safety conversations pediatricians have with families. Prevention is really the cornerstone of our profession. We talk all the time about drowning prevention, chronic disease prevention, and motor vehicle crash injury prevention.

—Dr. Annie Andrews in conversation with Everytown for Gun Safety

Clinicians: The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that pediatricians address firearm safety along with other safety issues they routinely cover, such as use of car seats, seat belts, and bike helmets, swimming pool safety, and locking up medications and household poisons. This includes asking parents about the presence of guns in the home and reminders about secure storage practices in their own homes and in any homes their children may visit. Research on the impact of these conversations suggests that clinicians can influence secure storage practices among their patients, especially when they provide free storage devices.

Secure gun storage laws

Educating gun owners and changing storage practices are necessary to protect children's lives. However, given the scale of this challenge and the strength of the evidence in their favor, policies that hold adults accountable for failing to securely store their firearms are also a critical part of the solution.
There is currently no federal law requiring secure storage by gun owners. Federal law only requires gun dealers to provide a secure gun storage or gun safety device with the sale of every handgun. It does not require that gun owners actually use the device.

In the absence of federal policy, states have enacted a variety of gun storage-related laws, as outlined earlier.

The laws that research shows are most effective for preventing unintentional child shootings hold gun owners who fail to securely store firearms accountable if a child is likely to access an unsecured gun or stipulate that if a minor does access a firearm, the person who failed to adequately secure the firearm can be held liable.

Laws that punish only intentional or reckless provision of firearms to minors are not effective in protecting children; they should not be considered secure storage laws.

A 2020 study looking at the full range of child-access laws by state found a 59 percent reduction in unintentional firearm deaths among children ages 0 to 14 over the period 1991 to 2016 in the states with the most stringent child access prevention laws. The authors also found that laws with liability only in the case of recklessness were not associated with reduced firearm deaths among children 0 to 14. Another study focusing on children hospitalized for firearm injuries in 2006 and 2009 found a similar result: compared to states with no child-access laws, states with the strongest laws saw a 44 percent reduction in children hospitalized for firearm injuries related to unintentional shootings, most of them incidents at the hands of another child or of themself. Finally, a 2013 study of nonfatal gun injury data in 11 states found that secure storage laws were associated with a 26 percent reduction in self-inflicted gun injuries among
children under age 18. \(^{30}\) One concern with these laws is that they tend not to be widely enough publicized after they are passed. While greater awareness would be ideal, a recent RAND study has suggested that one need not have direct knowledge of specific storage laws to be impacted by them— influencers in the broader gun-owning community contribute to changing the conversation around gun storage and to impacting behaviors. \(^{31}\)

Our dataset on incidents over the past six years backs up what research has found: states with the strongest laws related to preventing access by children have the lowest rates of victimization (injuries or deaths) from child shootings. On average, rates of victimization from unintentional child shootings in the period 2015 through 2020 are double to triple in states with either intentional or reckless laws or no secure storage laws (1.8 injuries or deaths from child shootings per 1 million population for both) compared to states with laws that apply when a child actually accesses a gun (0.7 per 1 million) or laws when child access of a gun is likely (0.6 per 1 million).

**Conclusion**

Unintentional shootings by children under 18 are not an accident. They are a near-daily reality of life in America today. But they don’t have to be. They are almost always preventable with secure firearms storage practices, awareness, and policies.

Everytown has methodically tracked these incidents since January 1, 2015. We have learned that these shootings by children are most often also shootings of children, that more than one-fourth of the shootings are by preschoolers five or younger who gained access to a firearm and shot themself or someone else—too often another preschooler over for a playdate. We have also learned that nearly all of the over 2,000 incidents (97 percent) resulted only in a single injury or death, underscoring the fact that the child never meant to inflict casualties.

These realizations, plus our data on when and where the shootings took place, help point to the times and places where prevention efforts need to focus. These unintentional shootings by children happened mostly in someone’s home and
during times (weekends, summer, and holiday months) when children were most likely to be at home. But they also occurred in some states many times more than in others. The variation between states with the highest and lowest rates of injury and death align with the strength of the laws in these states to hold gun owners accountable for storing their firearms securely.

Preventing these avoidable tragedies, which cause physical and emotional suffering that persists far beyond the initial incident and scars that affect people far beyond the immediate families of those involved, will require efforts from every sector of society. Gun owners must store all of their guns securely at all times; parents need to ask about guns and gun storage at any home their children will be visiting; schools, the medical community, gun and gun storage sellers, and others play a vital role in educating the community about secure gun storage; and lawmakers and community members need to support laws that research shows are effective in holding adults accountable for failing to store their firearms securely.

Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund would like to gratefully acknowledge Monika Goyal of Children's National Hospital, Ali Rowhani-Rahbar of the University of Washington, and SGM (Ret.) P. Schoch, Veterans Advisory Council, Everytown for Gun Safety, for their insightful reviews of the report, and Kaelyn Forde for report drafting and survivor interviews.

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Everytown Research & Policy is a program of Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, an independent, non-partisan organization dedicated to understanding and reducing gun violence. Everytown Research & Policy works to do so by conducting methodologically rigorous research, supporting evidence-based policies, and communicating this knowledge to the American public.

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2 Of these 2,070 incidents, 39 percent involved a shooter 9 years old or younger, 52 percent involved a shooter ages 10 to 17 and the remainder involved a minor of unknown age. See Methodological Note for further details.

3 Personal communication from Deborah Azrael and Matthew Miller based on 2021 National Firearms Survey, August 11, 2021.

4 Of the 2,131 victims of unintentional child shootings (people shot and wounded or killed) in the six-year period, 1,932 were under age 18. Age was unknown for 2 percent of the victims. Of the total 2,070 incidents, 49 percent involved the child shooting themself, 48 percent involved the child shooting other people, 1 percent involved the child shooting themself and other people, and in 2 percent of the incidents, it was unknown whether the child shot themself or another child shot them. #NotAnAccidentIndex

5 Motor vehicle traffic-related accidents (including as pedestrians or on a bicycle) are the leading cause of death in this age range. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. WONDER Online Database, Underlying Cause of Death, Injury Mechanism & All Other Leading Causes, 2019. Comprises children and teens ages 1 to 17.

6 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. WONDER Online Database, Underlying Cause of Death. A yearly average was developed using five years of the most recent available data: 2015 to 2019. Ages 0 to 17.

7 Dr. Andrews, MD, MSCR, associate professor in the Department of Pediatrics at the Medical University of South Carolina in conversation with Kaelyn Forde, Everytown for Gun Safety, July 21, 2021.


9 Of the 2,070 shooters, 83 percent were male, 8 percent were female, and gender was unknown for 9 percent. Of the 2,131 people shot and wounded or
killed, 76 percent were male, 19 percent were female, and 5 percent were of unknown gender. #NotAnAccidentIndex

10 Of the 2,070 shooters, 610 (29 percent) of them were ages five or younger, and of 2,131 victims, 625 (29 percent) were ages five or younger. #NotAnAccidentIndex

11 Of the 2,070 incidents, 49 percent involved the child shooting themself, 48 percent involved the child shooting other people, 1 percent involved the child shooting themself and other people, and in 2 percent of cases, it was unknown whether the child shot themself or another child shot them. #NotAnAccidentIndex

12 The determination as to whether a self-inflicted gun injury or gun death was unintentional or was a suicide or suicide attempt is weighed carefully in this dataset. For older children and teenagers, a self-inflicted gun death that does not include a clear determination of intent (for example, by law enforcement) would not be included in this database of unintentional shootings. It might instead be categorized as a suicide. However, in the case of younger children when the intent is not clearly determined, researchers review available information and make a determination on whether the shooting circumstances indicate if it was unintentional or intentional self-harm. See Methodological Note for further details.


14 Firearm type was unknown for 732 incidents. #NotAnAccidentIndex

15 Household gun ownership data comes from RAND Corporation, “Gun Ownership in America,” accessed July 30, 2021, https://www.rand.org/research/gun-policy/gun-ownership.html. The rate of victimization from unintentional shootings by children is 2.18 per 1 million people in states with the highest rates of household gun ownership (50 to 65 percent): AK, AL, AR, ID, KY, LA, MO, MS, MT, ND, OK, SD, VT, WV, WY. The rate of
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20 Center for American Progress analysis of the National Crime Victimization Survey: “While guns were used for self-defense in 85,000 crimes per year from 2010 to 2015, roughly 162,000 guns are stolen each year.” Center for American Progress, “Myth vs. Fact: Debunking the Gun Lobby’s Favorite Talking Points,” October 5, 2017, https://ampr.gs/2Vn948w.

21 https://www.endfamilyfire.org


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