

137425

Child's Play:

A Study of 266 Unintentional Handgun Shootings of Children



NCJRS

JUL 10 1992

ACQUISITIONS

Center To Prevent Handgun Violence

1225 Eye Street, N.W., Suite 1100
Washington, D.C. 20005
(202) 289-7319

137425

**U.S. Department of Justice
National Institute of Justice**

This document has been reproduced exactly as received from the person or organization originating it. Points of view or opinions stated in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the National Institute of Justice.

Permission to reproduce this copyrighted material has been granted by

Center to Prevent Handgun
Violence

to the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS).

Further reproduction outside of the NCJRS system requires permission of the copyright owner.

CHILD'S PLAY:

A STUDY OF 266 UNINTENTIONAL HANDGUN SHOOTINGS OF CHILDREN

Abstract

Firearms are the fifth-leading cause of unintentional death among children, ages 14 and under, in the United States, according to the National Safety Council.

In an effort to gather information about how these tragedies occur and what can be done to prevent them, the Center to Prevent Handgun Violence examined 266 unintentional handgun shootings of children -- 140 deaths and 126 injuries -- from January 1986 to May 1988 . These shootings were either self-inflicted or inflicted by other children, ages 0-16.

The Center found that while the victim's home was the most common place where these tragedies occurred, many children suffered unintentional handgun death and injury in the homes of friends and relatives.

The Center also gathered other vital information. Nearly half of the handguns used in the shootings were found by children in bedrooms. Most of the incidents occurred when adults were not on the premises. Males were far more frequently the victims and the shooters in unintentional shootings. Children, ages 9-16, were more often involved than younger children. Four of five victims were shot by children whose age was within two years of their own. Nearly half of all shootings in the victims' homes and in those of relatives were self-inflicted, while three of every four shootings at friends' homes were committed by friends.

Method

The Center studied 266 unintentional handgun shootings from January 1986 to May 1988. The data were compiled from news media reports, and in 42 cases through follow-up conversations with police departments and hospitals. These incidents represent all unintentional shootings reported to the Center through newspaper clipping services (198) and volunteer media monitors (68) where the following information could be obtained:

- * Age and sex of the victim;
- * Age and sex of the child shooter;
- * Relationship between the victim and the shooter;
- * The location where the shooting occurred; and
- * Two of the following three criteria -- the owner of the handgun; the location where the children found the handgun; and whether adults were present at the shooting location during the incident.

No incident meeting these criteria was excluded, but the incidents in this report represent only a portion of the unintentional handgun shootings involving children during

CHILD'S PLAY

Page 2

this period -- 143 other incidents were reported to the Center, but details about these incidents did not meet the criteria set forth above.

It must be noted that the findings of this study almost exclusively rely on the accuracy and number of accounts published in our nation's newspapers. However, a comparison between excluded and included cases revealed no important difference as to age and sex of the victims, age and sex of the shooters, relationships between the shooters and victims, or location of shooting. In 81 percent of the excluded cases, at least two of the following three criteria could not be determined: the location where the handgun was found by children, the owner of the handgun, or whether adults were present at the shooting location during the incident. In 12 percent of the excluded cases, the age and/or sex of the shooter could not be determined, while the relationship between victim and shooter could not be ascertained in 13 percent of the excluded cases. In nine percent of the excluded cases, either the age or the sex of the victim could not be determined.

Locations of Shootings

Half of the unintentional handgun shootings studied occurred in the victim's home. The next most common places were the homes of friends and relatives. Shootings that took place outdoors, in cars, and at the relatives' workplaces together represented only 12 percent of the total.

Victim's Home	133	(50%)
Friend's Home	80	(30%)
Relative's Home	21	(8%)
Outdoors	17	(6%)
Car	14	(5%)
<u>Relative's Workplace</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>(1%)</u>
TOTAL	266	(100%)

Of the shootings at the victims' homes, 84 percent were either self-inflicted or committed by a sibling, while 76 percent of the shootings at friends' homes were committed by the victims' friends. About 43 percent of all shootings that occurred in the victims' homes or in relatives' homes were self-inflicted, while only 19 percent of the shootings at friends' homes were self-inflicted.

<u>Victim's Home</u>		<u>Friend's Home</u>	
Self-Inflicted	56 (42%)	Self-Inflicted	15 (19%)
Sibling	55 (42%)	Sibling	3 (4%)
Friend	15 (11%)	Friend	61 (76%)
<u>Other Relative</u>	<u>7 (5%)</u>	<u>Other Relative</u>	<u>1 (1%)</u>
TOTAL	133 (100%)	TOTAL	80 (100%)
<u>Relative's Home</u>		<u>Outdoors</u>	
Self-Inflicted	10 (48%)	Self-Inflicted	5 (29%)
Sibling	3 (14%)	Sibling	1 (6%)
Friend	1 (5%)	Friend	10 (59%)
<u>Other Relative</u>	<u>7 (33%)</u>	<u>Other Relative</u>	<u>1 (6%)</u>
TOTAL	21 (100%)	TOTAL	17 (100%)

Thus, it is not only important for parents to take precautions at home (i.e., not keeping handguns, or at the very minimum making sure that handguns are kept unloaded and locked

CHILD'S PLAY

Page 3

up), but it is also important for parents to check with parents of their children's friends and relatives to make sure they are following the same guidelines.

Locations of Handguns When Found by Children

In 200 (75%) cases, the locations where the handguns were found by the children could be determined. The handguns used in these unintentional shootings among children were in fact found in the sites where the shootings took place -- the children involved were not carrying handguns. These handguns were found in easily accessible places where children often played. Most common among these were bedrooms, where children found handguns in dressers, on closet shelves, in nightstands, between mattresses, under beds, and under pillows. The next most common place was in living rooms where handguns were discovered on coffee tables, on or between couch cushions, and in end tables.

Handguns found in cars also represented a sizable portion of the weapons used -- they were found most often under or on seats. However in one situation, a boy actually got his mother's car keys and went into a locked glove compartment to find a handgun that was eventually used in a self-inflicted shooting.

Location of Handgun When Found by Child

Bedroom	90	(45%)
Undetermined Place		
in the Home	47	(24%)
Living Room	18	(9%)
Car	16	(8%)
Kitchen	8	(4%)
Outdoors	7	(3%)
Den	4	(2%)
Bathroom	3	(1.5%)
Basement	3	(1.5%)
Gun Cabinet	3	(1.5%)
Relative's Workplace	1	(0.5%)
TOTAL	200	(100%)

The Owners

The victim's parents most often owned the handguns used in the shootings. Yet, there were a significant number of handguns that were owned by friends' parents and relatives other than the victims' parents. In 213 cases (80%), the owner of the handgun could be determined.

<u>The Owner</u>		
Victim's Parents	101	(47%)
Friend's Parents	61	(28%)
Other Relative	27	(13%)
Victim's Friend	11	(5%)
Parent's Friend	10	(5%)
Victim	2	(1%)
Relative's Employer	1	(1%)
TOTAL	213	(100%)

CHILD'S PLAY

Page 4

The Victims

Four of every five victims of these unintentional shootings were male, while 60 percent of the children were in the 9-16 age range.

<u>Sex</u>		<u>Ages</u>	
Male	213 (80%)	0-4	58 (22%)
Female	53 (20%)	5-8	49 (18%)
TOTAL	266 (100%)	9-12	73 (28%)
		13-16	86 (32%)
		TOTAL	266 (100%)

The Children Shooting the Handguns

The children who unintentionally fired these handguns were almost exclusively male. Older children, aged 9-16, were far more likely to be the shooters.

<u>Sex</u>		<u>Ages</u>	
Male	244 (92%)	0-4	49 (18%)
Female	22 (8%)	5-8	39 (15%)
TOTAL	266 (100%)	9-12	72 (27%)
		13-16	106 (40%)
		TOTAL	266 (100%)

Relationships Between Shooters and Victims

There were distinct relationship patterns between the shooters and victims in three of four victim age groups: more than half of the youngest victims, ages 0-4, were involved in self-inflicted shootings; victims in the 5-8 age group were most often shot by siblings; and 62 percent of the victims, ages 13-16, were shot by friends. These patterns appear to follow closely developmental stages of children as they pertain to the children's playmates and abilities to adventure out of their own homes.

Overall Relationships of Shooters to Victims

Self-Inflicted	94 (35%)
Friend	90 (34%)
Sibling	66 (25%)
Other Relative	16 (6%)
TOTAL	266 (100%)

0-4 Age Group

Self-Inflicted	31 (53%)
Friend	4 (7%)
Sibling	18 (31%)
Other Relative	5 (9%)
TOTAL	58 (100%)

5-8 Age Group

Self-Inflicted	17 (35%)
Friend	7 (14%)
Sibling	21 (43%)
Other Relative	4 (8%)
TOTAL	49 (100%)

9-12 Age Group

Self-Inflicted	25 (34%)
Friend	25 (34%)
Sibling	20 (28%)
Other Relative	3 (4%)
TOTAL	73 (100%)

13-16 Age Group

Self-Inflicted	21 (24%)
Friend	53 (62%)
Sibling	9 (10%)
Other Relative	3 (4%)
TOTAL	86 (100%)

CHILD'S PLAY

Page 5

In general, most victims (73%) were shot by children in their own age group.

Age Groups of Shooters	Age Groups of Victims				TOTAL
	0-4	5-8	9-12	13-16	
0-4	43	5	0	1	49
5-8	8	29	2	0	39
9-12	4	11	47	10	72
13-16	3	4	24	75	106
TOTAL	58	49	73	86	266

Adult Supervision

In 195 (73%) of the cases studied, information could be obtained concerning the whereabouts of adults. In all of these cases, the children were not being directly supervised by adults at the time of the shooting.

In more than 60 percent of the cases, no adults were on the premises when the shooting occurred. In all but three of the cases where adults were on the premises, these adults were in other rooms of the homes at the time of the shootings.

No adult at premises	118 (61%)
<u>Adults present, but not supervising</u>	<u>77 (39%)</u>
TOTAL	195 (100%)

Discussion

The findings of this study show that handguns used in unintentional death and injury among children are most often left where children can easily get to them -- i.e., nightstands, closets, dressers, and end tables. This confirms once again that parents must take proper precautions to protect their children from handguns in their own homes. Removing handguns from the homes of children is the best way to prevent unintentional shootings. However, parents who feel they must have handguns in the home should, at the very minimum, keep them unloaded and locked away from their children.

Yet, because so many unintentional shootings occur in the homes of friends and relatives, parents who take these precautions at home may still not prevent such tragedies from happening to their children. It is imperative that parents also talk to adults at other places where their children play to help make sure that their children do not have easy access to handguns outside the home.

In this study, we have not distinguished between the findings for unintentional death and injury, because results from the 140 unintentional handgun deaths among children closely resembled those of the 126 unintentional woundings.

It is also interesting to note that the findings of this report are in close correlation with those of other reports compiled during past years. Those reports include:

- * "When Children Shoot Children: 88 Unintentional Deaths in California," Garen J. Wintemute, Stephen P. Teret, Jess F. Kraus, Mona A. Wright, Gretchen Bradfield, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, June 12, 1987.

In this study, Dr. Wintemute and colleagues examined all unintentional firearm deaths in California between 1977-1983 in which both victim and shooter were children. They found that 58 percent of the cases involved handguns. The findings closely relate to the findings of the Center's study: boys were eight times as likely to be the victims, particularly older boys; boys, ages 10-14, represented 70 percent of the shooters; 40 percent of the shootings were self-inflicted, 24 percent of the victims were shot by siblings or other relatives, and 35 percent of the shooters were friends; and, 93 percent of the handguns used in the shootings were found at residences -- 40 percent were found in the room where the shooting occurred.

* "Gunshot Wounds in Children," Marilyn Heins, Roger Kahn, Judy Bjordnal, *American Journal of Public Health*, April 1974.

Dr. Heins and her co-workers studied all firearm injuries among children who were admitted to Detroit General Hospital from 1962 to 1971. Again, the findings were in close correlation with the findings of the Center's study: 62.5 percent of the victims were ages 11-16 and 68.8 percent were boys; 97 percent of the shooters were male; and, the gun owner was most likely to be a parent of the victim and the gun was most frequently kept in a parent's bedroom.

The main conclusion to be derived from these repeated findings is that unintentional shootings with handguns continue to threaten the safety and health of our nation's children and the reason is the easy availability of loaded guns, particularly handguns, in the home.

Secondly, if there are handguns easily available where children play, they can and in many cases will find the weapons. Parents must take steps to protect their children in their own homes, but this is simply not enough. The only way to significantly reduce the chance of their children being involved, either as victims or shooters, is to check with adults at other places where their children play.

Parents would certainly not allow their children to play at homes where illegal and dangerous drugs are easily available. They must establish the same rule when handguns are involved.

Dennis R. Smith, the Center's Director of Public Education, supervised all research and the writing of this study. Jack Cohen, the Center's Public Education Assistant, assisted in the compilation of this report. Barbara Lautman assisted with the writing and editing.