February 2026

Understanding What Drives Firearm Violence – and What Helps Prevent It: A Public Health Approach to Prevention

Firearm violence, along with other forms of violence such as suicide, domestic violence, and child maltreatment, is primarily driven by conditions like unsafe school communities, economic instability, and harmful social norms. These conditions are preventable, and understanding their root causes helps communities focus on solutions that stop harm before it starts. This resource was created for partners and decision-makers interested in learning how public health strategies - especially "upstream" prevention – can prevent firearm violence by addressing these root causes early.

The summaries below were informed by the *California Public Health Roadmap for Firearm Violence Prevention: Local Strategies to Reduce and Prevent Firearm Violence (Roadmap)** and aim to help California communities understand why firearm violence often happens and how public health approaches can prevent harm before it starts.

Addressing Racism

In the United States, communities of color have experienced centuries of historic trauma and racism, which still affects their lives today - making it harder to receive access to good healthcare, education, jobs, and housing. This systemic and structural racism is reflected in intergenerational inequities such as historical housing discrimination, current racial neighborhood segregation, concentrated neighborhood poverty, and unequal application of policing practices. Additionally, racism is a root cause of many other forms of violence, which means it is critical to address in a public health approach to violence prevention and integrated into all violence prevention strategies.

Elevating Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs) and Reducing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Elevating PCEs and reducing ACEs can be a crucial strategy for reducing firearm violence. ACEs are "potentially traumatic events" that occur in childhood and adolescence and can increase the risk of experiencing violence later in life, including firearm violence. PCEs, such as supportive relationships with caregivers, feeling safe and connected at school, and having stable, nurturing environments, can help protect against the harmful effects of ACEs.

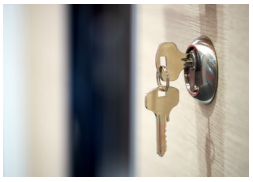
Changing Social Norms

Social norms are shared beliefs and expectations shaped by cultural values, media, family, and lived experiences. Norms that normalize violence, perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes, or encourage unsafe firearm practices are key contributors to increased risk of firearm violence. Changing social norms aims to reduce the risk of firearm injury or death by promoting safer behaviors, such as secure firearm storage,

healthy relationships, and nonviolent ways of resolving conflict.

Strengthening Household Financial Security

Household financial insecurity – including poverty, unemployment, housing instability, and food insecurity – is strongly linked to higher risks of violence, including firearm violence. Economic stress can increase exposure to violence by creating instability and limiting access to basic needs. These conditions disproportionately affect communities of color due to long-standing inequities in wages, employment opportunities, housing and access to resources. Public health approaches that strengthen household financial security can reduce multiple forms of violence, including firearm violence, ACEs, intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and suicide.



Strengthening Social Supports

Supportive relationships, such as with family, friends, schools, and community members, are protective factors against violence, including firearm violence. People who are isolated face higher risks of violence, suicide and poor mental health outcomes, while neighborhoods with strong social cohesion tend to experience lower levels of firearm violence- even when facing economic or environmental challenges. Strengthening social supports can reduce risk of firearm violence, along with other forms of violence, by increasing connection, belonging, and access to help during times of stress or crisis.

Improving Neighborhood Conditions

Neighborhood conditions – such as housing quality, green space, street lighting, neglected properties, transportation options, and public space upkeep – play a key role in shaping safety and well-being. Neighborhoods facing long-standing disinvestments and poor environmental conditions experience higher levels of violence, including firearm violence. Improving these conditions can reduce violence by increasing conditions for safety, strengthening community pride, and reducing environmental stressors that contribute to violence.

Improving Firearm Safety Practices

The presence of firearms – especially when they are not securely stored – increases the risk of injury and death from suicide, unintentional injury (e.g. children), intimate partner violence, and community violence. Access to firearms during short periods of crisis, such as acute stress or suicidal thoughts, greatly increases the likelihood of fatal outcomes. Improving firearm safety practices focuses on promoting secure storage, increasing access to locking devices, and supporting options for temporary storage outside the home when risk is elevated.

* Please visit the CDPH California Public Health Roadmap for Firearm Violence Prevention: Local Strategies to Reduce and Prevent Firearm Violence report webpage for linkage to the evidence, research, and data sources that informed the drivers of firearm violence described in this resource.