Preventing Gun Violence by Changing Social Norms

From a public health perspective, some social norms are beneficial (eg, washing your hands), while others are less so (eg, shaking hands, which may spread germs). Social norms can encourage or discourage violence. For example, traditional norms that men have a right to control women and that sexual violence is a private affair increase the likelihood of intimate partner violence. Social norms that encourage violence can be changed.

Keeping Children Away From Unsecured Firearms
About one-third of homes with children have guns, with many guns stored unsafely. Some 1500 to 3000 children 17 years or younger are treated in hospital emergency departments for unintentional firearm injuries each year, and more than 100 die. When a child is killed, most often the mishap is at the hands of a brother or friend. To reduce the problem, The Center to Prevent Youth Violence, in collaboration with the American Academy of Pediatrics, created the ASK (Asking Saves Kids) campaign.1

Just as parents may ask the parents of the children their children visit about seat belts or pool safety, they can also ask about firearms and their accessibility. Asking can help keep one’s own children and their friends safe and also help to promote the social norm of safe gun storage in the community. An evaluation in which I participated found that the ASK campaign was somewhat successful in changing attitudes and that few parents minded being asked.2

Physicians help change social norms. The American Academy of Pediatrics has determined that a gun in the home is a danger to children, and those families that have a gun should store it properly. Unfortunately, Florida has enacted a law making it difficult for physicians to determine the firearm status in the home, prohibiting them from asking patients whether they own guns and, if so, how the firearms are stored. Other states are considering similar legislation.

Reducing Gun Trafficking
Reducing gun trafficking involves increasing awareness of where guns come from and preventing the purchase of guns by people who cannot legally do so. When the media report on deadly motor vehicle crashes, they often describe seat belt use and whether alcohol was involved. Such reporting provides a continual reminder of social norms—norms that were quite different 25 years ago. Now seat belt use is expected, and drinking and driving is verboten.

A Boston nonprofit organization, Citizens for Safety (I am on the board of directors), is encouraging reporters (and the general public) to ask, whenever there is a street shooting, “Where did the gun come from?”3 In most street shootings, there are 2 crimes: the shooting itself and an earlier (usually) criminal transaction that armed the shooter. Boston gang members are not born with guns; their parents rarely own guns; and they cannot easily obtain guns through burglary, since few Bostonians own guns. Often an adult has made money bringing guns into the inner city.

The Where Did the Gun Come From? campaign is designed to expand awareness beyond the shooter and victim to the system of gun trafficking, where additional programs and policies can make a difference. This expanded focus has given the community a meaningful way to try to reduce firearm violence.

There are many ways to reduce “straw purchasing”—the buying of a firearm for someone who cannot legally obtain one. Similar to the purchase of alcohol and cigarettes for people who are underage, it can be the social norm, as well as the legal requirement, that retailers use effective practices and procedures to reduce straw purchasing (eg, employee training, transaction videotaping).

Campaigns can focus on the straw buyer (eg, “Don’t Lie for the Other Guy”). Although most straw purchasers are men, emerging research finds that women are disproportionately buying and holding guns for felons who cannot obtain guns legally. A new initiative tries to reduce the willingness of women to engage in straw purchasing using peer-to-peer education and leadership development. As women have helped reduce drunk and reckless driving by men, women can mobilize to help reduce firearm violence.3

Reducing Suicide
Although few people attempt suicide with a gun, more than half of all suicide deaths in the United States are gun suicides. Some 2 dozen US studies have found that access to a firearm is a strong risk factor for suicide. Firearm owners are not more suicidal than other people; rather, their suicide attempts are more likely to be completed.4

Suicide attempts often occur with little planning during a period of short-term crisis. If highly lethal means are made less available to people who attempt suicide impulsively, their odds of surviving an attempt increase. Over 90% of people who survive a suicide attempt do not go on to die by suicide. Studies show that when access to a highly lethal and leading suicide method is reduced, the overall suicide rate drops—driven by a drop in the restricted method.

The Harvard Injury Control Research Center, which I direct, created a Means Matter campaign to help mental health providers discuss guns with suicidal patients.5 Since most people who die do so on their first suicide
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REFERENCES

Conclusions
Many successes in preventing violence involve changing social norms. For example, Sweden changed parental attitudes and practices concerning the corporal punishment of children; child abuse decreased, apparently without an increase in parental permissiveness. And a multifaceted US Air Force program lessened the stigma in seeking professional help for mental health problems, reducing suicides, family violence, and homicides.

To reduce gun violence in the United States, we need many groups (eg, physicians, clergy, women’s groups, gun owners) working to create not only sensible laws and effective enforcement of these laws but also better social norms. Under these improved social norms, all gun owners will be expected to secure their guns responsibly, and gun trafficking, gun suicides, and interpersonal firearm violence will be reduced. The first steps toward achieving change are recognizing the norms that need to be improved and realizing that change is indeed possible.