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Health systems feel the strain of ongoing gun violence epidemic—and new policies could make it worse

Week of June 15 - June 21, 2025

| JUN 20, 2025

<https://www.chartis.com/insights/health-systems-feel-strain-ongoing-gun-violence-epidemic-and-new-policies-could-make-it>

The Buzz This Week

June is recognized as Gun Violence Awareness Month in the US. The designation honors the more than 40,000 people killed and 80,000 injured annually by gun violence in the US, and aims to develop solutions to reduce future violence.

Throughout this month and the immediate months preceding, policymakers have increasingly been targeted by violent threats. Through the first 4 months of 2025 alone, there were more than 170 threats to local officials across nearly 40 states. When assailants have access to guns, threats can quickly turn deadly. Minnesota State Representative Melissa Hortman and her husband Mark were murdered last weekend, and Minnesota State Senator John Hoffman and his wife Yvette were seriously injured when a gunman opened fire on the couples in their respective homes.

Outside of politics, and despite awareness and prevention efforts, gun violence persists as a public health epidemic. Firearm deaths increased by more than 40% from 2012 to 2022. While gun deaths have fallen slightly over the last 2 years, they remain among the highest annual totals on record. They have also been the leading cause of death among children ages 1–17 for the third straight year.

And with a new Trump Administration proposal that would change the process for gun rights restoration for those convicted of crimes, many gun violence and medical experts worry gun deaths and injuries will rise again. The interim final rule removes the restoration process from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms and Explosives (ATF) and places authority with the Office of the Attorney General. Public comment on the proposal closed this week.

Stronger gun laws are associated with lower gun death rates, according to multiple studies, so any weakening of gun laws has implications for public health. Experts are particularly concerned about increases to domestic violence if this final rule is published. Rob Wilcox, former deputy director of the White House's Office of Gun Violence Prevention under the Biden Administration, has previously noted, "The presence of a gun in a domestic violence situation increases the chance that the victim will die by 500%."

Why It Matters

Gun violence has significantly affected Americans, with 1 in 5 saying they have had a family member fatally shot. It also has a profound impact on the American healthcare system. Data from the CDC from 2018 to 2023 shows a firearm injury was treated at least every half-hour in a US hospital.

The high case numbers place strain on emergency departments (EDs) and trauma units, including staffing, bed needs, and even blood product availability, especially when multiple gunshot cases occur in the same timeframe. Each year, firearm-related injuries lead to roughly 50,000 ED visits and 30,000 inpatient hospital stays. This can be especially burdensome if an influx in gun injury patients overlaps with other patient surges that further limit resources.

Treating victims of gun violence also contributes to and exacerbates burnout among providers. Repeated exposure to trauma can cause emotional and psychological stress, leading to retention and recruitment issues for health systems.

Gun violence is also a significant burden on hospital finances. Gun injuries require ongoing treatment costs for additional surgeries, follow-up visits, and mental healthcare. A 2020 estimate put costs from gun injuries at \$290 million annually. Gun violence survivors experience increased medical spending of \$2,500 per month on average in the year following an injury.

Almost half of medical expenditures for gun violence are paid for through public insurance programs like Medicaid. But many patients are underinsured or uninsured. A study from Johns Hopkins of more than 700,000 gun violence patients found more than half did not have needed insurance, and often the hospital was left to absorb the cost as uncompensated care. Should many Medicaid enrollees lose coverage as is currently projected with Congress' tax bill, that percentage is likely to increase even further.

To address the rising concerns of gun violence and its impact on health systems, many hospitals have started hospital-based violence intervention programs (HVIPs). These programs, based in EDs and trauma centers, provide support, including counseling, social work services, familial and financial assistance, and education in the immediate aftermath of violence. Programs have been very cost-effective and dramatically reduced reinjury rates from national benchmarks of up to 30% down to below 3%.

Hospitals and health systems are in a unique position to advocate for and implement programs that help reduce gun violence. Evidence shows that screening for violence and education on safe storage, particularly for parents and guardians of children, can help reduce injuries and death. Advocacy to strengthen laws, education, and intervention programs are health systems' best tools to combat the gun violence public

health epidemic.

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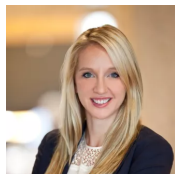
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