

U.S. Surgeon General Declares Gun Violence “a Public Health Crisis”

Murthy urges gun safety measures, more funding for research and access to mental health care for people who experience gun violence.

July 17, 2024 By Rachana Pradhan, Fred Clasen-Kelly and KFF Health News

U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy declared firearm violence a public health crisis, as gun deaths and injuries punctuate daily life in America.

On nearly every day of 2024 so far, a burst of gunfire has hit at least four people somewhere in the country. Some days, communities have endured four or five such shootings.

The nation’s top doctor called on policymakers to consider gun safety measures such as bans on assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition magazines and universal background checks for all firearm purchases. [His advisory](#) also urges a “significant increase” in funding for research on gun injuries and deaths, as well as greater access to mental health care and trauma-informed resources for people who have experienced firearm violence.

In 2022, more than 48,000 people [were killed by guns](#) in the U.S., or about 132 people a day, and suicides accounted for more than half of those deaths, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. An additional 200-plus Americans seek emergency care for firearm injuries each day, [according to estimates](#) from Johns Hopkins University research. No federal database records nonfatal gun injuries.

The Office of the Surgeon General does not set or carry out gun policy, but historically its reports and warnings have nudged policymakers and lawmakers to act.

Murthy, a physician, told KFF Health News he hoped to convey the broader toll of gun violence on the nation and the need for an urgent public health response. He cited soaring gun deaths among children and teens and noted that “the mental health toll of firearm violence is far more profound and pervasive than many of us recognize.”

“Every day that passes we lose more kids to gun violence,” Murthy said, “the more children who are witnessing episodes of gun violence, the more children who are shot and survive that are dealing with a lifetime of physical and mental health impacts.”

Firearm-related homicides over the past decade and suicides over the past two decades have

driven the sharp rise in gun deaths, the advisory says.

Guns are the leading cause of death for children and teens, with higher death rates [among Black and Hispanic youths](#). Researchers from Boston University found that during the height of the covid pandemic, Black children were [100 times as likely](#) as white children to experience gun injuries. Hispanic and Asian children also saw major increases in firearm assault injuries during that time, that study showed.

Joseph Sakran, executive vice chair of surgery at John Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore and chief medical officer for Brady United Against Gun Violence, said the surgeon general's declaration is a "historic moment that sounds the alarm for all Americans."

But Sakran added: "It cannot stop here. We have to use this as another step in the right direction. No one wants to see more children gunned down."

Murthy has long said gun violence should be framed as a health issue. He argued that the approach has been successful in combating significant societal problems, citing tobacco control efforts that took hold following the then-surgeon general's [landmark 1964 report](#) concluding that smoking cigarettes causes lung cancer and other diseases.

"We saved so many lives, and that's what we can do here, too," Murthy said.

Murthy's move is one of several recent Biden administration actions designed to combat gun violence, as most gun-related measures remain political nonstarters in Congress. Federal officials have allowed states [to use Medicaid dollars](#) to pay for gun violence prevention, and the White House has called on hospital executives and doctors to [gather more data about gunshot injuries](#) and to routinely counsel patients about the safe use of firearms.

While available data points to tragic outcomes across American communities, government officials and public health researchers have long been stymied by [sparse federal funding](#) devoted to gun violence research and the scope of its health effects.

"I've been studying gun violence for about 33 years now and there's still some really basic and fundamental questions I can't answer," said Daniel Webster, a gun violence researcher at Johns Hopkins University.

"To really understand gun violence, you need to do more than just look at publicly available surveillance data," he said. "You need to actually do in-depth studies involving the populations at highest risk for shooting or being shot."

A [Brady analysis found](#) that of the 15 leading causes of death in the U.S., firearm injuries received the third-lowest amount of federal research funding through the National Institutes of Health for each person who died. The only causes of death that garnered less research funding through NIH were poisonings and falls, according to the analysis.

Sonali Rajan, an adjunct associate professor of epidemiology at Columbia University who researches the effects of gun violence on children, said political leaders and others need to reframe the debate on gun violence from crime to public health.

“We are raising a whole generation of children for whom exposure to gun violence is normal,” Rajan said.

In Michigan, “we had a kid survive the Oxford High School shooting only to go to Michigan State University and see another mass shooting,” she said. “It is unbelievably shameful.”

Serving as President Joe Biden’s surgeon general since 2021, Murthy has, at times, caused political controversy with his views on gun violence.

Over a decade ago, former President Barack Obama nominated Murthy to be the nation’s top doctor. But [Murthy’s support for a federal ban](#) on the sale of assault weapons and ammunition and additional restrictions on gun purchases drew the ire of the National Rifle Association, as well as Republicans and some Democrats in Congress. The U.S. Senate narrowly confirmed Murthy to the job [in December 2014](#), more than a year after his nomination.

Murthy has previously issued advisories on social isolation and loneliness, youth mental health, and the well-being of health workers. He said gun violence comes up in many of his conversations with young people about the mental health challenges they’re facing.

“Fears around gun violence have really pervaded so much of the psyche of America in ways that are very harmful to our mental health and well-being,” Murthy said.

Many other causes of death are treated differently as to understanding the problems and developing solutions, Webster said. But “that’s generally not what we’ve done with gun violence. We’ve oversimplified it and overpoliticized it.”

As Sakran put it: “As we look at firearm injuries, there’s arguably no public issue that’s as urgent.”

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