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PUBLIC HEALTH REP
Weapons and Minority Youth Violence

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efforts, choosing instead to place funds in community interventions. However, funding sources rely on evidence of success in evaluating the merits of particular programs.

Recognizing these constraints, the working group acknowledged the need to conduct evaluations of the recommended interventions to determine which techniques and approaches work, which of those at high-risk are reached effectively through the intervention, what the long-term impacts on behavior are, and what level of maintenance (resources and program components) is required.

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Introduction: Adapted in part from the background paper submitted by Education Development Center, Inc. (1).

WEAPONS SUCH AS guns and knives are used in more than 80 percent of the homicides involving youth in the United States (2). Weapons, particularly firearms, are an important cause of youth's disabling injuries as well as deaths. In Detroit, 40 percent of all traumatic spinal cord injury results from gunshot wounds (3). Most of the homicides among youth occur in the context of an argument and are committed by someone known to the victim (4). In these cases, the immediate accessibility of a firearm or other lethal weapon is considered by many to be the factor that turns a violent altercation into a lethal event.

The rates for fatal and nonfatal injury reflect the increasing impact of weapon-related deaths and disabilities among minority youth. Homicide rates for persons ages 15 to 24 have been 40 to 50 percent higher than the average for the general population, with a still wider gap (to more than 60 percent) emerging in 1986 and 1987 (5). Among the young, minorities suffer disproportionately. In fact, homicide by firearms is the number one cause of death for young African American men. About 1 in 32 urban African American males from 16 through 24 years of age is the victim of a handgun crime (that is, robbery, assault, homicide) (6). The prevalence and severity of firearm violence has been enhanced by the sophistication of the types of weapons used and by the use of alcohol and other drugs. Among firearms, handguns are disproportionately used in violence.

The principal consequence of firearms is to worsen the consequences of violence: injuries become deaths, and attempted rapes and robberies are successfully completed. Whole communities may be caught in the crossfire, and the people suffer both direct and indirect effects. For example, school absenteeism may increase; health care

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resources expended to treat persons who have been shot are not available for other purposes.

Because injuries caused by firearms typically affect young males and are more severe than other types of injuries, they exact a great financial toll. In 1985, firearm injuries are estimated to have resulted in a productivity loss of \$370,706 per person and cost society an estimated \$14.4 billion in lifetime costs (7). These costs burden not only the injured but also families, employers, the community, and society. The psychological burden of firearm injuries is substantial, but it is difficult to calculate. The cost of fear is borne by the whole community.

These afflicted communities may also be the ones whose residents perceive the greatest need for self-protection. Firearms are frequently acquired for protection, although the data indicate that this may be counterproductive in relation to the safety of household members (8).

If weapons are perceived to provide protection against the unknown, their owners may not be assessing accurately the origin of the danger. Most homicides among youth occur during an argument and are committed by someone known to the victim (4). In firearms homicides, especially those committed by intimates, there is often a long history of abuse and violence (9). Weapons become the tools which amplify aggression and violence. Guns, more than other weapons, increase the likelihood that violence will produce a serious or fatal injury. Additional factors, such as exposure to violence through the media and playing with toy weapons as children, adversely shape our culture and attitudes about violence and weapons.

In recent years, illicit drug trafficking has provided the means and motivation to acquire firearms. Indeed, firearms play an important role in the drug trade (10). In some large cities, the levels of firearm violence have remained the same or even escalated after drug use epidemics have waned. This statistic suggests that once guns are in the community, they are available to settle minor disputes that are unrelated to the drug trade.

There is debate over many elements of firearm policy. Whatever the points that are debated, however, there is agreement that children and adolescents should never have unsupervised access to firearms. Yet such weapons are routinely confiscated by police and school officials across the nation. In California, from July 1, 1988, until June 30, 1989, schools confiscated 10,569 weapons, an increase of 21 percent over the past year (11). Although knives are the most common weapons

found in schools, sophisticated firearms are also available to students, increasing the chances for serious injury or death (12).

Schools and communities across the United States have only begun to address the problem with a handful of programs and interventions that target weapons and youth violence. These essentially aim to educate people about the dangers inherent in possessing weapons, especially firearms; to restrict firearm availability and accessibility; and to reduce the potential lethality of weapons.

Although our knowledge of problems related to firearms has grown rapidly, important gaps in our information base persist. Some firearm-based interventions work. Local area restrictions and sentence enhancements have been associated with lower rates of firearm violence (13, 14, and unpublished manuscript, G.I. Pierce, and W.J. Bowers: "The Impact of the Bartley-Fox Gun Law on Crime in Massachusetts," Northeastern University, Center for Applied Social Research, Boston, 1979). There is also a need to address gaps in current regulations, such as the exemption of the domestic gun manufacturing industry from the restrictions that apply to imports.

Underlying Assumptions

The following assumptions or guiding principles apply to all recommendations that follow this section:

- Because weapon ownership and use involve deeply rooted social, economic, and racial issues, interventions should address these issues, where they are appropriate. However, it is possible to reduce the incidence and severity of weapon-related injuries by strategies that do not directly address these issues.
- For an intervention targeting a specific community to be successful, key elements at the community level must be adequately represented in planning, implementation, and leadership roles.
- Intervention strategies must be characterized by features that reflect a clear understanding of the impact of racism and classism on weapon-related violence. Interventions must be designed in a way that recognizes that the underlying causes of weapon-related violence are primarily institutional in nature. That is to say, weapon-related violence is, in part, related to feelings of powerlessness, disenfranchisement, and differences in the way that institutions such as the criminal justice system treat poor people and people of color.

Although education alone will not prevent firearms injuries, public education can . . . raise the level of debate about the best ways to prevent firearms injuries in the community.

- A long-term investment in prevention programs should be a clearly stated priority of the program's funders. Changing attitudes and values as well as behaviors, particularly in such an emotionally charged area, requires time—more than 1–3 years. Time-limited interventions may make communities feel exploited and confused and may ultimately do more harm than good.

Priority Interventions

The work group on weapons and minority youth violence examined interventions recommended for communities and interventions to be implemented at all levels. Legal approaches are identified for community, State, and national levels. However, a wider range of interventions at the local level reflect the need to address people's understanding of the right to own weapons, the perceived need to own weapons, and the protection that they believe gun ownership affords them. These issues must be addressed locally, where cultural premises are better understood and workable solutions can be identified. Also, given the absence of effective regulations in many communities, education about firearms and the injuries that they produce is critical to the development of effective prevention strategies. Although education alone will not prevent firearm injuries, public education can have the benefit of raising the level of debate about the best ways to prevent firearm injuries at the community level.

At the community level, the following interventions have priority:

- 1. Develop community consensus regarding the possession and use of weapons. Two steps are needed to achieve this consensus:
 - Develop a surveillance system for intentional injuries that collects information about the nature, circumstances, and weapons surrounding the injury so that community members become aware of the scope of the problem.

- Develop community awareness forums that address issues involving risk versus benefit of weapons ownership and use.

The level of community consciousness needs to be raised about the issues of weapons and their use. Communities must have sufficient information to educate people about the risks and benefits associated with access to firearms, such as whether or not guns should be in the home, the perceived need for security, and the perceived notion of safety when one owns a weapon.

The absence of adequate information on the impact of firearm violence in the community could be filled by the establishment of a surveillance system to provide community-specific information about who is involved in weapons-related violent behavior, the circumstances surrounding the violent act, and whether drugs and alcohol were involved. This information could be used to correct many of the myths and misconceptions that surround acts of violence. Surveillance data on firearm injuries could also be the basis for informing the community about the comparative risks and associated costs of easy access to firearms and for developing community consensus and, ultimately, for developing appropriate policies.

Programs to develop community consensus should be designed to ensure the clear participation and leadership of a broad community-based coalition. It is also critically important that any such programs include input from groups that bear the disproportionate burden of weapon-related violence.

2. Improve security and safety in high-risk environments along with the perception of safety. Modifying the environment to reduce the opportunity for weapon-related violent behavior should include the following:

- Neighborhood watches to increase the perception of safety at the community level and to improve community-police relationships.
- Technological devices that reduce the possibility of hiding weapons or of situations that could lead to violent behavior, such as metal detectors in schools and other high-risk areas to detect hidden weapons. Although there are few data on the effectiveness of technological or environmental strategies aimed at reducing injuries from violence, these types of strategies have successfully reduced other types of injury.
- Legal measures that limit the numbers of people

eligible to own firearms or the types of firearms that can be owned and carried. These interventions deal with some aspect of the sale, distribution, nature, possession, or use of firearms. Currently, regulations are most strict at the point of use and are weakest regarding manufacture and importation (1).

3. Require firearm safety courses as a prerequisite to obtaining a license to possess a gun. These courses teach people how to handle, use, maintain, and store firearms safely.

4. Ban the manufacture, sale, and importation of certain types of weapons and ammunitions that are designed to increase severity of injuries.

5. Educate the community regarding product liability litigation against gun manufacturers. This approach is based on the premise that manufacturers should be aware of the negative health effects of the use of firearms because of the growing body of scientific literature on the subject. Therefore, manufacturers should be able to foresee the danger of their products and be held accountable for them.

6. Increase efforts to restrict illegal trafficking in guns.

At the State or national level, these legal approaches are recommended by the working group:

- Transfer authority over guns to another department or agency, such as the U.S. Department of Justice or the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) and enhance its regulatory powers. The Federal agency that has jurisdiction over firearms is the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms within the Department of the Treasury.
- Efforts to restrict illegal trafficking in guns should be enhanced.
- Design and performance standards for firearms production should be established for domestic and foreign manufacturers.
- All gun owners should be licensed. Only licensed dealers should be legally permitted to sell guns (that is, private sales are prohibited), and all sales should be recorded. Just like drivers of motor vehicles, persons desiring to purchase and own a gun would have to take a test to prove ability, hold a picture license, register their firearms, and suffer punishment for a violation.
- A law should be enacted that establishes a national waiting period (for example, the Brady bill), that would allow for background checks of those wishing to purchase a handgun.

- State laws that preempt localities from legislatively addressing the gun issue should be fought and repealed. It must be recognized, however, that local gun regulations may have little more than symbolic value unless they are coordinated and supported by appropriate regulations at the State and Federal levels.

Evaluation Priorities

Principles of evaluation research. The working group recognized that requirements for rigorous scientific evaluations may reduce the sense of community ownership of an intervention and may prevent the undertaking of some worthwhile interventions. Therefore, while such evaluations should be promoted, excessively extensive evaluation requirements may be counterproductive.

However, subsequent discoveries of avoidable flaws in evaluations that have been advertised as rigorous and scientific may, over the long term, unfairly undermine the credibility of the interventions being evaluated. This danger is especially great in a field as politically charged as firearms regulation. Therefore, the design of funded evaluations should be of the highest scientific quality. The amount and duration of funding should be sufficient to ensure that evaluations are carried out as designed. This is most likely to occur if the funding of interventions and their evaluations are coordinated.

Effects of gun policy will vary because of special local conditions. Therefore, evaluations should be designed to specifically allow for and measure the differential impact on minority communities.

Specific criteria for evaluation may vary with the type of regulation. In general, culturally valid measures of the following are important concerning the regulation of guns: (a) the impact on morbidity and mortality, (b) monetary costs of weapon-related injuries and who pays, (c) the effect on community consensus, (d) the effect on perceived security, (e) the equity of enforcement, (f) the effect on violent and nonviolent crime rates, and (g) the effect on weapon ownership and weapon-carrying behavior.

Subjects for evaluation research. Each of the priority interventions recommended in the preceding section should be rigorously evaluated. Additionally, the following evaluative studies are suggested:

1. alternative data sources for surveillance of violence-related injuries,

... requirements for rigorous scientific evaluations may reduce the sense of community ownership . . . and may prevent the undertaking of some worthwhile interventions.'

2. programs designed to reduce weapon-related violence in schools and high-risk environments,
3. impact of strategies to reduce weapon prevalence, including their effect on the flow of legal weapons to illegal markets,
4. impact of changing weapon regulations in communities including the impact among minority youths,
5. impact of weapon-specific interventions on violent behaviors,
6. impact of consensus-building interventions on policymakers and the community.

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Interventions in Early Childhood | PC

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Introduction: Adapted from the background paper prepared by the Education Development Center, Inc. (1).

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THE INCREASE IN REPORTED VIOLENCE during the last few decades has prompted a growing concern about its origins. The basic values, attitudes, and interpersonal skills acquired early in life are pivotal in the development of predispositions for violent behavior later in life. In addition, early childhood exposures to violent behavior, abuse, and neglect have been demonstrated to be risk factors for violent behavior and victimization during adolescence and adulthood (2,3). Violence prevention strategies that seek to (a) promote nonviolent values, attitudes, and interpersonal skills; (b) mitigate the consequences of exposures to violence; or (c) reduce risk factors for violence by targeting young children or their families, or both, are an important and underrecognized component of any long-term strategy to prevent violence.

Early childhood aggression is a critical consideration in the design of effective primary prevention efforts (personal communication, Carolyn Newberger, EdD, Children's Hospital in Boston, October 1990). Although children who demonstrate aggressive behavior at an early age will not necessarily behave violently as adults, they are at higher risk

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