

New research shows violence is broadly felt by millions of Californians

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Research led by UC Davis Professor Garen Wintemute shows that violence indirectly impacts most Californians. Though relatively few may experience or witness a violent act, a large majority of surveyed

Californians reported having an "experience of violence" (EV). These included hearing gunshots in their neighborhood, encountering a sidewalk memorial to a violent death or learning about a violent event through their social network. The research was published in the journal *Injury Epidemiology*.

"If we ask broadly about the experience of [violence](#), rather than focusing on acute events, we find that two-thirds of Californians have a direct personal stake," said Wintemute, who directs the UC Davis Health Violence Prevention Research Program and is an emergency department physician. "Our main conclusion is that almost everybody is touched by this, and we're a state with relatively low rates of firearm violence. I would expect the situation would be worse in many other states."

While most violence research focuses on personal victimization, the UC Davis Health team took a broader view to better understand how these acts become embedded in communities. The survey indicates experiences of violence are perilously widespread:

- An estimated 3.4 million Californians may have three or more EVs.
- 5 million personally know multiple people who have been intentionally shot.
- 3 million know people who may be at risk of committing violence against themselves or others.

"We had people who responded that they passed sidewalk memorials 25 times or more a week," said Wintemute. "And I thought, at what point does living in your neighborhood resemble living in a cemetery? What does that do to your sense of a future for your community and yourself?"

In addition to hearing gunshots or seeing memorials, survey EVs

included being aware of someone who had been intentionally shot by someone else, intentionally shot themselves or might commit a violent act (against another person or themselves).

Of the 2,870 respondents, 64.6% reported one or more EVs; 11% reported three or more. Women and men had similar experiences. Perhaps most surprising, people who did not own a firearm, but lived with someone who did, had more EVs through their social networks, compared to those who owned firearms and those who did not. Secondhand gun ownership may be a public health risk, much like [secondhand smoke](#).

The Davis team believes this survey will provide more information on how violence can permeate communities and hopes these findings might inform public policy and education.

"If people who live in homes with guns, but don't own guns themselves, have these many experiences of people at risk of violence, they could be a whole new resource for intervention," Wintemute said. "Maybe we can work with them to help at-risk people and reduce suicides and possibly other firearm violence."

In California, a legal mechanism known as a Gun Violence Restraining Order can temporarily remove firearms and ammunition from people at risk of harming themselves or others.

The group is now working on a follow-up study to measure how these experiences may impact mental and [physical health](#).

"If we show they are associated with ill effects, we may be able to intervene," said Wintemute. "There are few people in California who can say this does not affect them, and since we're all involved, let's work together on solutions."

More information: Garen J. Wintemute et al, Experiences of violence in daily life among adults in California: a population-representative survey, *Injury Epidemiology* (2022). [DOI: 10.1186/s40621-021-00367-1](https://doi.org/10.1186/s40621-021-00367-1)

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