

Study finds gun violence in rural America rises as deer hunting season begins

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Across rural America, the increased presence of loaded guns in homes and vehicles could lead to a spike in gun injuries and homicides at the start of every deer hunting season, a new study warns.

In fact, in the U.S. rural counties covered by the study, "more people were killed by gunfire in the first week of deer [hunting](#) season than in any other week of the calendar year," said a team led by Patrick Sharkey, a professor of sociology at Princeton University in New Jersey.

The finding held even after his team factored out gun deaths linked to hunting accidents, which they noted are exceedingly rare.

The study was [published](#) Aug. 14 in the journal *JAMA Network Open*.

As Sharkey and colleagues noted, across the board, the sheer availability of guns—especially when unlocked and loaded—has long been tied to greater risks for gun violence.

The researchers suspected that the annual opening of deer hunting season was a perfect moment to test this theory, as guns are brought out of storage by millions of hunters across the United States.

The study tracked 2014–2021 statistics on gun shootings occurring in 854 rural U.S. counties spread across 44 states.

Researchers calculated the rate of shootings during the week prior to each county's opening date for the annual deer hunting season, and compared those numbers to shootings occurring during the first three weeks of the hunting season.

The result: Firearm shootings that injured or killed county residents jumped by an average of 49% during the first week of the season compared to the week before, Sharkey's team reported.

That rate was still 41% higher during the second week, but the increase fell to "close to zero" by the third week of deer hunting season.

The sharp rise and fall over those three weeks is not surprising, the Princeton group said, since data has shown that in Wisconsin, for example, "70% of annual deer harvested are killed in the first nine days of the season."

Also, the trends in shootings "were largely replicated when [rare] hunting accidents were removed from the analysis," they added, suggesting that the bulk of shootings were person-on-person violence.

Again, that's not surprising: One prior study conducted in rural counties found a 300% jump in arrests involving men with a shotgun as each deer hunting season began, the researchers noted.

All of the evidence "leads us to conclude that the most plausible explanation for the increase in shootings the week after the start of deer hunting season is the heightened presence of firearms in public and private spaces," the study authors wrote.

As to what can be done to reduce the risk, Sharkey's group believe that "enhanced firearm regulations that govern firearm storage, carrying and purchasing, particularly in states where [deer](#) hunting is popular, may serve to reduce the number of shootings that occur at the onset of the hunting season."

More information: Patrick Sharkey et al, Deer Hunting Season and Firearm Violence in US Rural Counties, *JAMA Network Open* (2024). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.27683](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.27683)

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