

PRESS RELEASE

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Harvard School of Public Health: American Females at Highest Risk for Murder

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70% Of All Women Killed in Industrialized Nations Are American Link between household firearm ownership levels and female homicide rates

Boston, MA - A new study from the Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH) finds that among high income nations, the United States has the highest rate of female homicide victimization. The United States accounts for 32% of the female population among 25 high income countries, but 70% of all female homicides, and 84% of all female firearm homicides. Some 4,000 American females are murdered each year.

A female in the United States is 3 times more likely to be murdered than a female in Canada, 5 times more likely to be murdered than a female in Germany, and 8 times more likely to be murdered than a female in England and Wales. The US female homicide victimization rate is 5 times that of all the other high income countries combined. The firearm homicide rate for US females is 11 times higher than that in the other high income countries.

The article, "Firearm Availability and Female Homicide Victimization Rates among 25 Populous High Income Countries," is published in the spring 2002 issue of the Journal of the American Medical Women's Association (www.jamwa.org).

David Hemenway, PhD, director of the Harvard Injury Control Research Center at HSPH, and lead author of the study, said: "The difference in female homicide victimization rates between the US and these other industrialized nations is very large and is closely tied to levels of gun ownership. The relationship cannot be explained by differences in urbanization or income inequality."

Other studies of high income countries have found a relationship between levels of household gun ownership and overall homicide rates, but this association was primarily driven by male homicides, since most homicide victims are male. The current study is one of the first to examine international female homicide rates.

“The circumstances of male and female homicides tend to be quite different,” said Hemenway, “at least in the United States. While men are typically killed away from home by a non-intimate, women are more likely to be killed at home by a spouse, ex-boyfriend, or other intimate acquaintance.”

Hemenway emphasized that a cross-sectional study cannot prove causation, and that factors other than firearms explain some of the differences across nations. “After all, slightly less than half of all American females who are murdered are killed with a firearm.” Nevertheless, the results of this study are consistent with other studies of women that indicate a gun is an important risk factor for homicide. A recent study in the *Journal of Urban Health* looking at female homicides across US states found that in states with higher levels of household gun ownership, there were higher rates of female homicide victimization, even after accounting for differences in urbanization and poverty. The results were driven by the differences in firearm homicide.

Victimization surveys show that compared to the other high income countries, the United States does not have higher levels of property crime or violent crime except for lethal violence.

Hemenway said: “Guns are often bought for protection, but the US has the most guns, and, clearly, we are not doing a good job protecting American women. The experience of all other developed countries shows that we can do better.”

The study was supported in part by grants from the Joyce Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Open Society Institute, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Harvard School of Public Health is dedicated to advancing the public’s health through learning, discovery, and communication. More than 300 faculty members are engaged in teaching and training the 800-plus student body in a broad spectrum of disciplines crucial to the health and well being of individuals and populations around the world. Programs and projects range from the molecular biology of AIDS vaccines to the epidemiology of cancer; from risk analysis to violence prevention; from maternal and children’s health to quality of care measurement; from health care management to international health and human rights.

For more information and charts associated with these data, contact Robin Herman at (617) 432-4752 or Kevin Myron at (617) 432-3952.