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Gun Deaths Outpace Motor Vehicle Deaths in 10 States in 2009

Firearm-related fatalities exceeded motor vehicle fatalities in 10 states in 2009, the most recent year for which state level data is available for both products. That year, gun deaths outpaced motor vehicle deaths in: Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Indiana, Michigan, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Virginia, and Washington (see chart below for additional information).

While motor vehicle-related deaths are on the decline as the result of a successful decades-long public health-based injury prevention strategy, firearm deaths continue unabated—the direct result of the failure of policymakers to acknowledge and act on this ubiquitous and too often ignored public health problem.

Firearm Deaths Exceed Motor Vehicle Deaths in 10 States in 2009^a				
State	Gun Deaths	Motor Vehicle Deaths	Gun Death Rate per 100,000	Motor Vehicle Death Rate per 100,000
Alaska	104	84	14.89 per 100,000	12.03 per 100,000
Arizona	856	809	12.98 per 100,000	12.27 per 100,000
Colorado	583	565	11.60 per 100,000	11.24 per 100,000
Indiana	735	715	11.44 per 100,000	11.13 per 100,000
Michigan	1,095	977	10.98 per 100,000	9.80 per 100,000
Nevada	406	255	15.36 per 100,000	9.65 per 100,000
Oregon	417	394	10.90 per 100,000	10.30 per 100,000
Utah	260	256	9.34 per 100,000	9.19 per 100,000
Virginia	836	827	10.61 per 100,000	10.49 per 100,000
Washington	623	580	9.35 per 100,000	8.70 per 100,000

^a In 2009 there were 31,236 gun deaths nationwide for a rate of 10.19 per 100,000 and 36,361 motor vehicle deaths (both occupant and pedestrian) nationwide for a rate of 11.87 per 100,000 (both totals include data only for the 50 states). Source: WISQARS database, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

A Tale of Two Products

Motor Vehicles: Effective Regulation Has Reduced Traffic Fatalities

In 2010, the number of fatalities in motor vehicle traffic crashes continued their steady decline for a total of 35,080.^b This drop took place despite a significant increase in the number of miles Americans drove.^c

Experts agree that the formation of the federal National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) in 1966 coupled with a sustained decades-long effort to develop and implement a series of injury-prevention initiatives have saved countless lives. Numerous changes in both vehicle and highway design followed the creation of NHTSA. For example, vehicles incorporated new safety features, including: head rests; energy absorbing steering wheels; shatter-resistant windshields; and, safety belts. In addition, the roads that the vehicles traveled were improved by: better delineation of curves; use of breakaway signs and utility poles; improved illumination; addition of barriers separating oncoming traffic lanes; and, guardrails.^d Experts also cite the increase in the use of seat belts beginning in the mid-1980s as states enacted belt-use laws as well as a reduction in alcohol-impaired driving as Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) and other organizations changed the public's perception of the problem and laws were enacted to increase the likelihood that intoxicated drivers would be punished. Graduated licensing laws are credited with helping to reduce the number of teen drivers crashing on our nation's roadways.^e Between 1966 and 2000, the combined efforts of government and advocacy organizations reduced the rate of death per 100,000 population by 43 percent which represents a 72 percent decrease in deaths per vehicle miles traveled.^f

Firearms: The Last Unregulated Consumer Product Manufactured in America

The health and safety regulation of motor vehicles stands as a public health success story, yet firearms remain the last consumer product manufactured in the United States that is not subject to federal health and safety regulation.

^b Deaths: Preliminary Data for 2010, *National Vital Statistics Reports*, Volume 60, Number 4, January 11, 2012. (Data for 2010 is only available at the national level, no state level breakouts have been released.)

^c National Highway Traffic Safety Administration Press Release, "Traffic Fatalities in 2010 Drop to Lowest Level in Recorded History," April 1, 2011.

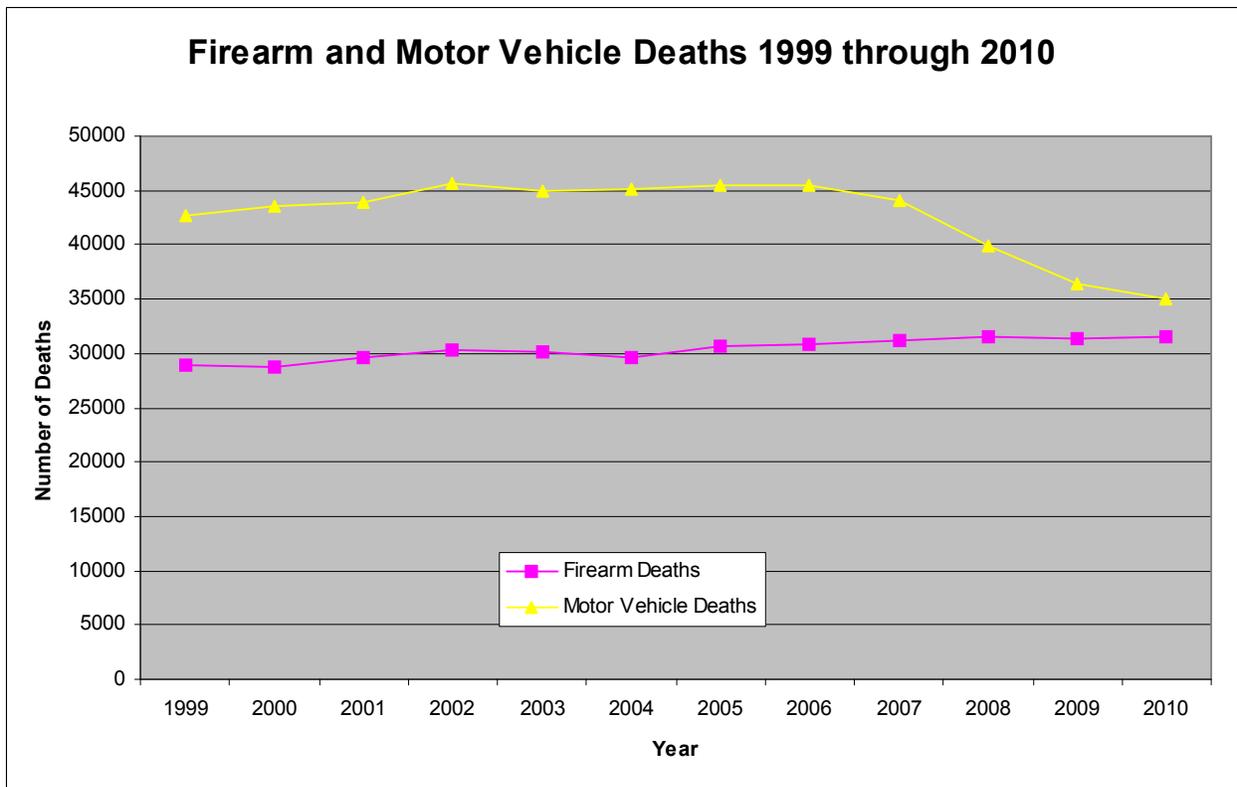
^d "Motor-Vehicle Safety: A 20th Century Public Health Achievement," *JAMA*, June 9, 1999—Vol 281, No. 22 (*MMWR*, 1999; 48:369-374).

^e "50 years of progress: Where do we go from here?," presentation by Adrian K. Lund, PhD, President, Insurance Institute for Highway Safety at Edmunds' Safety Conference: Truly Safe?, May 24, 2011.

^f David A. Sleet, *et al*, "Traffic Safety in the context of public health and medicine," AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety (2007).

While the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives is charged with enforcing our nation’s limited gun laws, it has none of the health and safety regulatory powers afforded other federal agencies such as NHTSA.^g

As Dr. David Hemenway, director of the Harvard Injury Control Research Center and the Youth Violence Prevention Center, notes in his 2004 book *Private Guns, Public Health*: “[T]he time Americans spend using their cars is orders of magnitudes greater than the time spent using their guns. It is probable that per hour of exposure, guns are far more dangerous. Moreover, we have lots of safety regulations concerning the manufacture of motor vehicles; there are virtually no safety regulations for domestic firearms manufacture.”^h



^g As noted prior, literally every other consumer product sold and manufactured in the United States is regulated by a federal agency for health and safety—guns and ammunition are the unique exception. Examples of federal agencies and the products for which they are responsible include: Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), household products (except for guns and ammunition); Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), pesticides and toxic chemicals; Food and Drug Administration (FDA), drugs (including tobacco) and medical devices; National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), motor vehicles.

^h David Hemenway, *Private Guns, Public Health*, University of Michigan Press, 2004, p. 182.

More than 90 percent of American households own a carⁱ while fewer than a third of American households contain a gun.^j And yet, if charted out year-by-year as seen in the graph on the prior page, deaths nationwide from these two consumer products are on a trajectory to intersect.

Conclusion

Ten states already experience gun death rates that exceed their motor vehicle-related death rates. If current trends continue, the number of states where gun deaths outpace motor vehicles deaths will only increase.

The historic drop in motor vehicle deaths illustrates how health and safety regulation can reduce deaths and injuries that were at one time thought to be unavoidable.

Such an approach to injury prevention has been applied to every product Americans come into contact with every day—except for guns. And as is the case with motor vehicles, health and safety regulation could reduce deaths and injuries associated with firearms.

Comprehensive regulation of the firearms industry and its products could include: minimum safety standards (i.e., specific design standards and the requirement of safety devices); bans on certain types of firearms such as “junk guns” and military-style assault weapons; limits on firepower; restrictions on gun possession by those convicted of a violent misdemeanor; heightened restrictions on the carrying of loaded guns in public; improved enforcement of current laws restricting gun possession by persons with histories of domestic violence; more detailed and timely data collection on gun production, sales, use in crime, involvement in injury and death; and, public education about the extreme risks associated with exposure to firearms.

America is reaping the benefits of decades of successful injury prevention strategies on its highways, but continues to pay an unacceptable, yet equally preventable, price in lives lost every year to gun violence.

ⁱ “Households by Number of Motor Vehicles: 2010,” Research and Innovative Technology Administration (RITA), Bureau of Transportation Statistics.

^j For a detailed history of gun ownership in the United States as reported by the General Social Survey (GSS) conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago, see the April 2011 Violence Policy Center report *A Shrinking Minority: The Continuing Decline of Gun Ownership in America*, <http://www.vpc.org/studies/ownership.pdf>.