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THE ANNIE E. CASEY  
FOUNDATION

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## Child Death Toll: Wisconsin Children Killed by Guns

Every year, children in Wisconsin are killed by guns. They die from their own hands, when they use a gun to commit suicide, or by the hands of other adults and children, who intentionally shoot them. Some die when guns go off accidentally.

Every time a child in Wisconsin dies from injuries inflicted by a gun, the loss is felt on multiple levels. The family suffers the most obvious loss, as it grieves the demise of one of its youngest members. But the community also loses, as it must bear the burden of recognizing that children in the community may not be safe, with African American communities bearing an especially large burden from losing children to gun violence. The entire state loses as well when the potential of a child who will never reach adulthood is wasted.

Wisconsin has made significant progress in keeping children safe from firearms, but we still have a long way to go. Between 1999 and 2014, 408 children in Wisconsin were killed by guns, including 21 children in 2014. Put another way, a child has died from injuries inflicted by a firearm about once every two weeks in Wisconsin since 1999. Firearms are the third leading cause of injury death for Wisconsin children, and they have killed more children in Wisconsin than drowning, fires, and falls combined.

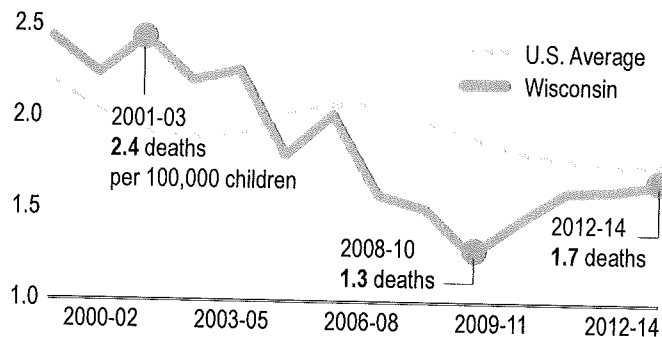
Wisconsin children recently killed by guns include:

- 1-year old Bill Thao, who was killed while playing on the floor at a relative's house in the City of Milwaukee in December 2014. The house was mistakenly targeted during a dispute between drug dealers;
- 11-year old Eric Gutierrez, who was accidentally shot to death in Walworth County in July 2014. Eric and a friend had been playing with guns belonging to the friend's father;
- 17-year old Breanna Eskridge, who was shot and killed in July 2015 while she stood on her porch in the City of Milwaukee; and
- 16-year old Jonathan Wesener, who killed himself in Edgar, Wisconsin in May 2015.

We also pay a high price when children are injured by firearms. For every child fatality from guns, there are five hospitalizations or emergency room visits for Wisconsin children injured by

### Rate of Wisconsin Children Killed by Guns Climbs Again after Significant Decrease

Three year average of the number of children killed by firearms per 100,000 children.



Source: U.S. Centers for Disease Control  
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firearms. Those visits incur an average of \$2.6 million in health care costs each year.

If Wisconsin residents can agree that no child in Wisconsin should be killed by a gun, we can pressure policymakers to implement common sense reforms and reduce firearms as a health hazard to children.

## RECENT INCREASE IN CHILD DEATHS ERASES SOME OF PAST GAINS

After falling to a record low, the number of Wisconsin children killed by firearms has risen in recent years. The recent increase threatens to erase some of the progress made in keeping children safe.

Wisconsin's child death rate from firearms remains considerably below levels of a decade ago, but the increases in the last several years represent a troubling trend. In Wisconsin, the rate of children killed by firearms dropped from a high of 2.4 deaths per 100,000 children in the three-year period ending in 2003, to a low of 1.3 deaths per 100,000 children in the three-year period ending in 2010. Since then, the rate of children deaths by firearms in Wisconsin has climbed again, reaching 1.7 deaths per 100,000 in 2012-14. The figures are for children ages 17 years and younger.

It's not clear what's causing the recent increase in the number of children in Wisconsin killed by firearms. Part of the increase may be due to national trends. Nationally, the number of children killed by guns has plateaued after several years of decreases, indicating that the lack of recent progress towards reducing the number of child deaths is a problem in other states as well as in Wisconsin. And in both Wisconsin and other states, the rate of adults killed with guns has risen over the last several years.

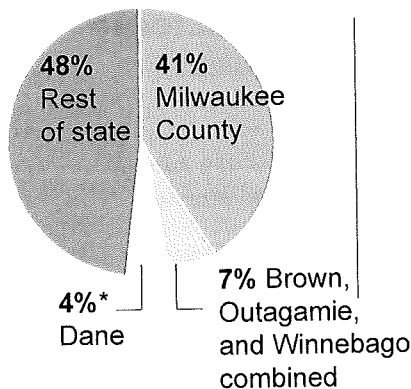
Even if part of the increase in the number of child deaths in Wisconsin is due to reasons that extend beyond the state's borders, the increase in the number of children killed in recent years makes Wisconsin stand out compared to other states. The rate of children killed in Wisconsin rose 31% between 2008-10 and 2012-14, while the national rate dropped by seven percent over that same period. Only seven states had larger increases than Wisconsin in the rate of child deaths from firearms over that period.

Figures in this report are based on data collected by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

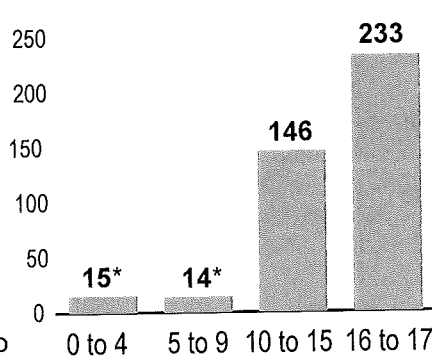
### Characteristics of Child Deaths from Firearms in Wisconsin

For the period 1999-2014.

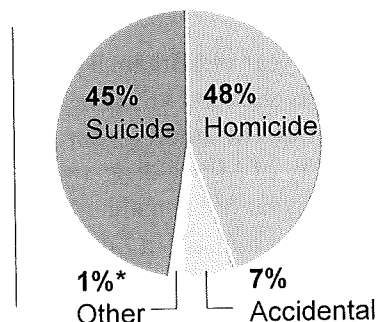
Location by county



Number of victims by age category



Cause



\* The CDC urges caution in interpreting figures such as this one that are based on counts of fewer than 20 deaths.

Source: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Wisconsin Department of Health

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(CDC) and published through the Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS) and the Wisconsin Department of Health. The CDC notes that death rates based on counts of less than 20 deaths can be unstable and should be used with caution. This report uses three-year averages when measuring trends over time, to reduce the variation in death rates that occur from one year to the next, and to make it easier to observe patterns and trends. Figures that use death counts of less than 20 are noted.

## **WHICH CHILDREN DIE, AND HOW**

Knowing which Wisconsin children are killed by guns and how they die may help us shape solutions that can reduce the number of children killed.

### **Location, Age, and Gender of Child Victims**

Child deaths from firearms occur across the state, but children in Milwaukee County are more likely to die from firearms than children in other counties. Between 1999 and 2014, 167 children in Milwaukee County were killed with firearms. That means that 41%, or a little more than four out of every ten firearm deaths of children in Wisconsin, occurred in Milwaukee County. Milwaukee County had 4.4 child deaths from firearms per 100,000 children over this period, compared to a death rate of 1.4 in the remainder of the state. That means that children in Milwaukee County were three times as likely as children in the rest of the state to be killed by firearms.

Other counties in which a significant number of children were killed by firearms over this period include the combined area of Brown, Outagamie and Winnebago Counties, in which 30 children died, and Dane County, in which 16 children died. The appendix includes a list of all Wisconsin counties in which five or more children were killed with guns between 1999 and 2014.

Older children are the most likely to be killed with firearms, but even the youngest children are sometimes victims. Fifteen children in Wisconsin age four years and younger have been killed by firearms since 1999, about one child a year. Another 14 children who were five to nine years old died over this period. The remainder of the children who died were age 10 or older, with the largest share of children — 57% — ages 16 and 17.

Children who are killed by firearms are primarily male. Five out of six children in Wisconsin killed by firearms between 1999 and 2014 were boys.

### **Causes of Deaths: Homicide, Suicide, and Accidents**

The number of children killed by guns from homicide and suicide is roughly equal, each making up just under half of the total number of child deaths in Wisconsin since 1999. Accidental deaths from guns make up seven percent of the total. Other deaths, which include deaths caused by law enforcement and deaths for which the cause is unknown, make up one percent of the total.

In recent years, more children have died from suicide with guns than by homicide with guns. Still, the number of deaths is relatively similar. In the 2012-14 period, 34 children died from suicide with guns, compared to 29 children from homicide.

Officially, 27 children died from accidents with firearms in Wisconsin between 1999 and 2014. But that number may not be an accurate reflection of the true number of children who died. Reviews of records of firearm deaths have shown that some deaths are coded as homicides if the shooter intentionally pulled the

trigger, regardless of whether the shooter intended to harm the victim.

According to an article in the New York Times:

“A New York Times review of hundreds of child firearm deaths found that accidental shootings occurred roughly twice as often as the records indicate, because of idiosyncrasies in how such deaths are classified by the authorities. . . As a result, scores of accidental killings are not reflected in the official statistics that have framed the debate over how to protect children from guns.”<sup>1</sup>

The uncertainty over the number of children killed by firearms in accidents means that the actual number may be much higher. But even official numbers represents an unacceptably high death toll: on average, two children in Wisconsin die each year from shootings categorized as accidental.

## AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN MUCH MORE LIKELY TO BE KILLED BY GUNS THAN OTHER CHILDREN

African American children in Wisconsin are much more likely than children of other races to be killed by guns, and unlike white children, are more likely to be killed from homicides than suicides. There is no clear answer as to why these differences exist, but it is important to note that high-poverty communities are much more likely to have high rates of crime and violence, and children in these neighborhoods are less likely to have high-quality schools and safe places for them to play. Acknowledging and examining the difference among children of different races killed by guns, without reinforcing stereotypes, is important to help shed further light on the best ways to keep all children and communities safe.

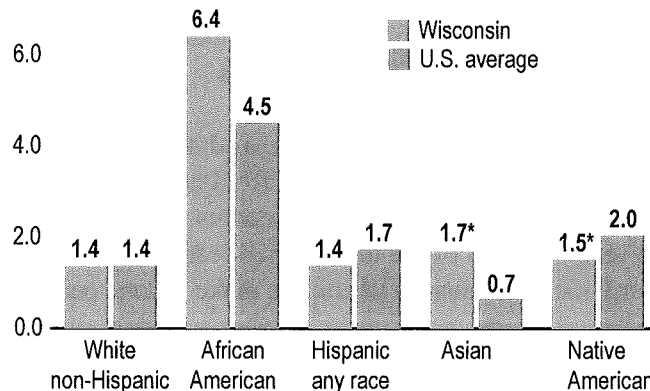
Wisconsin children who are black are nearly five times as likely as their white non-Hispanic peers to be killed by guns: 1.4 out of every 100,000 white children were killed with guns between 1999 and 2014, compared to 6.4 African American children. For African American children in Wisconsin, firearms are the leading cause of injury deaths. Death rates of Hispanic, Asian, and Native American children in Wisconsin are roughly similar to that of white children.

If African American children in Wisconsin had been killed by guns at the same rate as white non-Hispanic children, the number of African American children killed during this period would have dropped from 140 children to 30. That means a total of 110 children who died would have been spared.

Not only are African American children in Wisconsin more likely to die from guns than their white counterparts, they

### African American Children More Likely to Die from Guns than Children of Other Races

Number of children killed by firearms per 100,000 children, for the period 1999-2014.



\* The CDC urges caution in interpreting rates such as this one that are based on counts of fewer than 20 deaths.

Source: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Wisconsin Department of Health  
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<sup>1</sup> Michael Luo and Mike McIntire, “Children and Guns: The Hidden Toll,” New York Times, September 28, 2013.

are more likely to die from guns than African American children in other states. In Wisconsin, 6.4 African American children per 100,000 were killed with guns between 1999 and 2014. Nationally, 4.5 African American children per 100,000 were killed by guns during this period, considerably lower than the Wisconsin rate. Put another way, African American children in Wisconsin were 42% more likely to die from guns than African American children in other states. If African American children in Wisconsin were killed at the same rate as African American children in other states, 41 African American children in Wisconsin who died during this time would still be alive.

## Wisconsin's Rank Among the States Varies by Race

Wisconsin's rank in death rates of children from guns, among states with information, for the period 1999-2014.

RACE OR ETHNICITY	WISCONSIN'S RANK	STATES WITH DATA
All children	28 out of	50
White non-Hispanic	32	48
African American	6	37
Hispanic any race	17	30
Asian	1*	5

\* The CDC urges caution in interpreting figures such as this one that are based on counts of fewer than 20 deaths. No information is available for Native American children in Wisconsin.

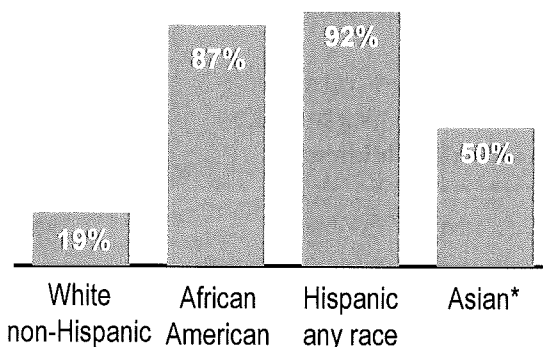
Source: U.S. Centers for Disease Control  
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Wisconsin ranks near the middle of the states in overall child death rates from guns during this period — 28th out of 50 states. But that overall ranking hides a great deal of variation in Wisconsin's ranking in death rates by race. Wisconsin also ranks near the middle of the states — 32nd out of 48 states — in gun deaths rates for white non-Hispanic children, but ranks much higher for deaths of black children: 6th out of 37 states with information. That means only five states for which there were figures had higher death rates for black children than Wisconsin: Missouri, Nebraska, Illinois, Michigan, and Louisiana. Wisconsin ranked 17th out of 30 states for gun deaths of Hispanic children.

Wisconsin ranked first for Asian child deaths among the states for which there was information, but the limited data available makes it difficult to determine whether Asian children in Wisconsin are actually more likely to be killed by guns than Asian children in all other states. The CDC publishes data on deaths of Asian children from guns for only five states. In the other 45 states, the CDC suppresses the data because there were fewer than 10 deaths between 1999 and 2014. The small number of deaths in those states could be due to small populations of Asian children in these states, or because these states are safer for Asian children in relation to firearm deaths, or a combination of these factors.

## Firearm Deaths of Black, Hispanic Children Are Usually Homicide-Related

Share of Wisconsin children killed by firearms who die from homicide, 1999-2014.



\* The CDC urges caution in interpreting figures such as this one that are based on counts of fewer than 20 deaths. No information is available for Native American children.

Source: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Wisconsin Department of Health  
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While it is difficult to determine with certainty how the safety of Asian children in Wisconsin compares to that in other states, one troubling aspect is that Wisconsin has a higher number of deaths of Asian children than some other states with much higher numbers of Asian children. Between 1999 and 2014, twelve Asian children in Wisconsin were killed with guns. That's more deaths than occurred in New York (which has seven times as many Asian children as Wisconsin), Hawaii (five times as many Asian children), and Illinois (three times as many Asian children).

Children of all races die from both homicides and suicides committed with guns. However, the main cause of death differs substantially with the race and ethnicity of the children who die. African American and Hispanic children in Wisconsin who died between 1999 and 2014 from injuries inflicted by guns were much more likely to die from homicide than from other causes such as suicide or accidents. Eighty-seven percent of African American child deaths from guns were homicide, and 92% of Hispanic deaths. That's far higher than the 19% of white children who were killed by firearms who died from homicide.

Based on these differences, it is reasonable to conclude that efforts aimed at reducing the number of children who die from homicides using guns would be most likely to protect African American and Hispanic children, while efforts to reduce suicide deaths among children would be more likely to protect white children.

## FINDING SOLUTIONS TO PROTECT CHILDREN

If we take no action to keep Wisconsin children safe, we risk continuing the recent increase in child deaths from firearms. Instead, we should adopt policies to push the number of child deaths to a new low. In fact, we believe that our goal should be to reduce the number of child fatalities from firearms in Wisconsin to zero.

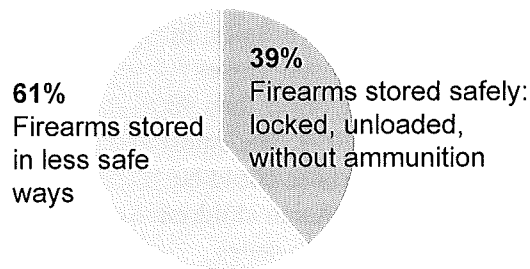
Part of the challenge in designing strategies to protect children is that the reasons behind both the long-term decline in the number of child fatalities and the recent increase are not completely clear. The research on firearm safety and the best way to keep children safe is extremely limited, due to a long-term ban on research by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Still, the limited evidence that does exist points to steps we can take to reduce the death toll of Wisconsin children.

Protecting children from firearms isn't the only step we need to take to make sure children are safe. Children die from injuries incurred in homicides, suicides, and accidents from means other than firearms. But reducing firearm deaths could make a significant dent in the number of children who die from suicides and homicides. More than four out of ten of both homicides and suicides of children are committed using a gun. Firearms are by far the most lethal

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### In Most Homes, Guns are Stored in a Way that is Accessible to Children

Firearm storage patterns in homes with children.



Source: "Firearm Storage Patterns in US Homes with Children," Mark Schuster et al.  
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method of attempting suicide, with more than 9 out of 10 attempts being lethal.<sup>2</sup>

### **Smart Gun Technology Could Hold the Key**

One way to keep children safe is to change the design of guns in a way that makes them more difficult to operate for children and other unauthorized users. In much the same way that child-proof tops for medication bottles have reduced the number of fatal overdoses of children, child-proof guns could reduce the number of children who are killed using guns.

Smart guns, which include a feature that allows the gun to be fired only by an authorized user, have the potential to reduce child suicides, accidental shootings, and some homicides. One type of smart gun allows a user to fire it only when it is within close proximity to a special watch that is activated by the user with a code. When not close to the watch, the gun will not fire. Other technology, still emerging, would allow a gun to be fired only if the fingerprint of the person holding the gun matched a list of allowed users.

Smart guns are not widely available for purchase in the U.S., in part due to opposition from the National Rifle Association and other pro-gun lobbying organizations. But if consumers demand to buy guns with safety features that protect children, those models are available. President Obama has issued an executive order for the government to research and potentially buy smart gun technology.

### **Encourage Safe Storage as a Way to Prevent Children from Using Guns**

Children by nature are impulsive and curious, which can be a dangerous combination when it comes to guns. Reducing children's access to guns would make it more difficult for them to commit impulsive acts that can have disastrous consequences. Limiting children's access to guns would likely have a bigger effect on reducing suicide deaths than on accidental or homicide deaths. That is because in suicide deaths, children are the ones committing the act, whereas adults pull the trigger in many accidental and homicide deaths of children.

Many of the firearms used to kill children come from the child's home or from the home of someone close to the child, particularly in the case of suicides. One study showed that more than 75% of the firearms used in suicide attempts and unintentional injuries by children were stored in the residents of the victim, a relative, or a friend.<sup>3</sup>

Many Wisconsin children share their home with guns, and those guns are often stored in a way that makes them accessible — and dangerous — for children. In the Midwest, four out of every ten households that include children have at least one firearm in the home.<sup>4</sup> If the same pattern holds true for Wisconsin, more than half a million children in Wisconsin live in households with guns. A study found that among homes with both children and guns<sup>5</sup>:

- In only four out of ten homes, owners stored guns in the way that makes it most difficult for children to use the guns: locked and unloaded, with the ammunition stored separately.
- In another three out of ten homes, owners stored guns unlocked, but unloaded and with the ammunition stored separately.
- In one of ten homes, owners stored guns in the way that is most accessible and dangerous for children: unlocked and loaded.

<sup>2</sup> The Wisconsin Department of Health Services and other partners, "The Burden of Suicide in Wisconsin," 2014.

<sup>3</sup> David Grossman, Donald Reay, and Stephanie Baker, "Self-Inflicted and Unintentional Firearm Injuries Among Children and Adolescents: the Source of the Firearm," Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine, August 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Mark A. Schuster, MD, PhD, Todd M. Franke, PhD, Amy M. Bastian, MPH, Sinaroth Sor, MD and Neal Halfon, MD, MPH, "Firearm Storage Patterns in US Homes with Children," American Journal of Public Health, April 2000, Vol. 90, No. 4.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

Encouraging gun owners to improve their storage techniques could reduce the access children have to guns and make it harder for children to use those guns to commit impulsive acts. Two potential ways of improving storage techniques that have shown some success include:

- Talking with a doctor. Counselling by a physician can help families understand the health implications of how they store their guns. After discussion with their family doctor and receiving recommendations about how to improve firearm safety, participants were three times as likely to improve their firearm storage habits compared to patients who did not have the discussion, according to one study.<sup>6</sup>
- Broader penalties for owners who are careless with their guns. Wisconsin is one of 27 states that penalize gun owners who allow their firearms to fall into the hands of a child. In Wisconsin, it is a chargeable offense to leave a loaded firearm within easy access of a child, but the penalty is relatively minor. Some states go further and require gun owners to store their weapons in a particular way, and provide penalties for improper storage even if a child does not actually gain access to the gun.<sup>7</sup>

As with many areas of gun policy and gun violence, there is limited research on the link between strong gun storage and child access prevention laws and the number of children killed by firearms. Some research has shown that criminal penalties for unsafe storage of firearms have resulted in a significant decrease in the number of child deaths from firearms, while other research has indicated that these laws must be narrowly drawn in order to be effective.

Efforts focusing on promoting safe storage of guns in children's homes would be most likely to protect white children. That's because white families with children are about three times as likely to have a gun in the home as families of other races. Promotion of safe storage techniques, while an important tool in reducing child deaths, should be combined with other approaches to increase the likelihood that all children will be kept safe.

### **Keep Firearms out of the Hands of People Most Likely to Do Harm**

One way of protecting children is to reduce the level of overall gun violence, particularly homicides. Children make up one out of every ten homicide victims in Wisconsin killed with guns.

There are a variety of ways to try to reduce the number of homicides committed with guns. One way is to do a more thorough job of identifying people who are not legally allowed to buy guns and blocking their purchases. Doing so would make it more difficult for people who are likely to commit harm to obtain a gun. People prohibited from buying guns include people with a felony conviction or a misdemeanor conviction of a crime related to domestic violence, drug addicts, the most seriously mentally ill, and others.

A few states require background checks for all firearm purchases, so as to identify people who are not allowed to buy guns, and to prohibit them from making the purchase. But many states, like Wisconsin, only require background checks for purchases made from licensed retailers, which are thought to make up about 60% of firearm sales. When someone purchases a gun from a private party, a background check is not conducted and the seller has no way of knowing whether the purchaser is legally allowed to buy the gun.

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6 Teresa Albright, MD, and Sandra Burge, PhD, "Improving Firearm Storage Habits: Impact of Brief Office Counseling by Family Physicians," *The Journal of the American Board of Family Practice*, January 2003, Vol. 16 no. 1.

7 Alex Yablon, "Roughly 400 Americans Will Die in Unintentional Home Shootings This Year. Safe Storage Laws Aim to Lower That Number," *The Trace*, September 30, 2015.



The lack of background checks for private party sales helps guns move from the legal firearm market to the illegal market:

“Private-party sales facilitate the diversion of guns from legal commerce into criminals’ hands: although it is always illegal for certain classes of people to buy a gun, it is illegal to sell a gun to such people only if the seller knows or has reasonable cause to believe that he or she is doing so. Unscrupulous private sellers may simply avoid asking questions that would lead to such revelations.”<sup>8</sup>

Background checks aren’t perfect, in part because the information they rely on is sometimes incomplete. Mental health records and records of people convicted of crimes involving domestic violence are not always fully available through a background check. But there is some evidence that universal background checks reduce gun-related crimes. Research has shown that identifying prohibited persons through background checks and denying their gun purchases reduces their risk of committing new gun-related or violent crimes by approximately 25%.<sup>9</sup> Reducing the likelihood that a particular individual will commit a gun-related crime could contribute to a reduction in the number of children killed with guns. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends background checks for firearm purchases as one way to “reduce the destructive effects of guns in the lives of children and adolescents.”

States that have changed requirements for background checks have seen corresponding changes in the level of gun violence. In Missouri, after lawmakers repealed a law requiring background checks and permits for all handgun sales, the gun homicide rate was 16% higher than it was in the years before — even though, nationally, the rate declined by 11% over the same period. In the 1990s, when Connecticut enacted a background check law similar to the one that Missouri repealed, gun homicide rates declined by 40% in the following years.<sup>10</sup>

## **WORKING TOGETHER TO KEEP CHILDREN SAFE**

Examining the number and characteristics of children killed with guns in Wisconsin raises as many questions as answers about how to reduce gun fatalities. We still have a lot to learn as to why some children are more likely to be killed with guns than others, and the best ways to keep all children safe. Simply acknowledging that children in Wisconsin are killed with guns, and that we need to take action to reduce the number of children lost, is a first step we can take together.

Many people in Wisconsin hold passionate, and differing, opinions about guns. Sometimes it seems as if there is no middle ground. But we should all be able to agree that every child in Wisconsin deserves to be kept safe from injury or death inflicted by guns.

Tamarine Cornelius

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<sup>8</sup> Garen Wintemute, MD, MPH, Anthony Braga, PhD, and David Kennedy. “Private-Party Gun Sales, Regulation, and Public Safety, *New England Journal of Medicine*, August 5, 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Garen Wintemute, MD, MPH, “Background Checks for Firearm Transfers,” Violence Prevention Research Program, University of California, Davis, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Sabrina Tavernise, “In Missouri, Fewer Gun Restrictions and More Gun Killings,” *New York Times*, December 21, 2015.

## APPENDIX

### Number of Wisconsin Children Killed by Guns

For the period 1999-2014, for ages 17 and under.

YEAR	NUMBER
1999	37
2000	30
2001	33
2002	29
2003	38
2004	23
2005	31
2006	19
2007	32
2008	13
2009	16
2010	22
2011	20
2012	22
2013	22
<u>2014</u>	<u>21</u>
Total 1999-2014	408

#### CHARACTERISTICS OF CHILD VICTIMS

##### Gender

Male	340
Female	68

##### Race and Ethnicity

White non-Hispanic	228
Black	140
Hispanic, any race	25
Asian	12
Native American	5

Source: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Wisconsin Department of Health  
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## Location of Child Fatalities in Wisconsin Caused by Guns

For the period 1999-2014, for ages 17 and under.

COUNT	NUMBER
Milwaukee County	167
Dane County	16
Brown County	10
Outagamie County	10
Winnebago County	10
Racine County	8
Walworth County	8
Waukesha County	8
Polk County	7
Rock County	7
Sheboygan County	7
Grant County	6
Lincoln County	6
Manitowoc County	6
Marathon County	6
Marinette County	6
St. Croix County	6
Forest County	5
Kenosha County	5
Oconto County	5
Portage County	5
<u>Other counties</u>	<u>94</u>
Total 1999-2014	408

Source: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Wisconsin Department of Health  
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