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**Violence Policy Center**

# **Gun Deaths Outpace Motor Vehicle Deaths in 14 States and the District of Columbia in 2011**

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## GUN DEATHS OUTPACE MOTOR VEHICLE DEATHS IN 14 STATES AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA IN 2011

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-related fatalities exceeded motor vehicle fatalities in 14 states and the District of Columbia in 2011, the most recent year for which state-level data is available for both products from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That year, gun deaths (including gun suicide, homicide, and fatal unintentional shootings) outpaced motor vehicle deaths in Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, District of Columbia, Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, Nevada, Ohio, Oregon, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, and Washington (see table below for additional information).

### Gun Deaths Exceed Motor Vehicle Deaths in 14 States and D.C. in 2011<sup>1</sup>

Jurisdiction	Gun Deaths	Motor Vehicle Deaths	Gun Death Rate per 100,000	Motor Vehicle Death Rate per 100,000
Alaska	126	87	17.41	12.02
Arizona	964	872	14.91	13.48
Colorado	573	512	11.20	10.01
District of Columbia	86	39	13.89	6.30
Illinois	1,114	1,080	8.66	8.40
Louisiana	865	750	18.91	16.39
Maryland	542	517	9.28	8.85
Michigan	1,156	1,016	11.70	10.29
Nevada	376	281	13.82	10.33
Ohio	1,227	1,178	10.63	10.21
Oregon	420	371	10.86	9.59
Utah	308	277	10.94	9.84
Vermont	78	62	12.45	9.89
Virginia	868	816	10.71	10.07
Washington	624	554	9.15	8.12

<sup>1</sup> In 2011 there were 32,351 gun deaths nationwide for a rate of 10.38 per 100,000 and 35,543 motor vehicle deaths (both occupant and pedestrian) nationwide for a rate of 11.41 per 100,000. Source: WISQARS database, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

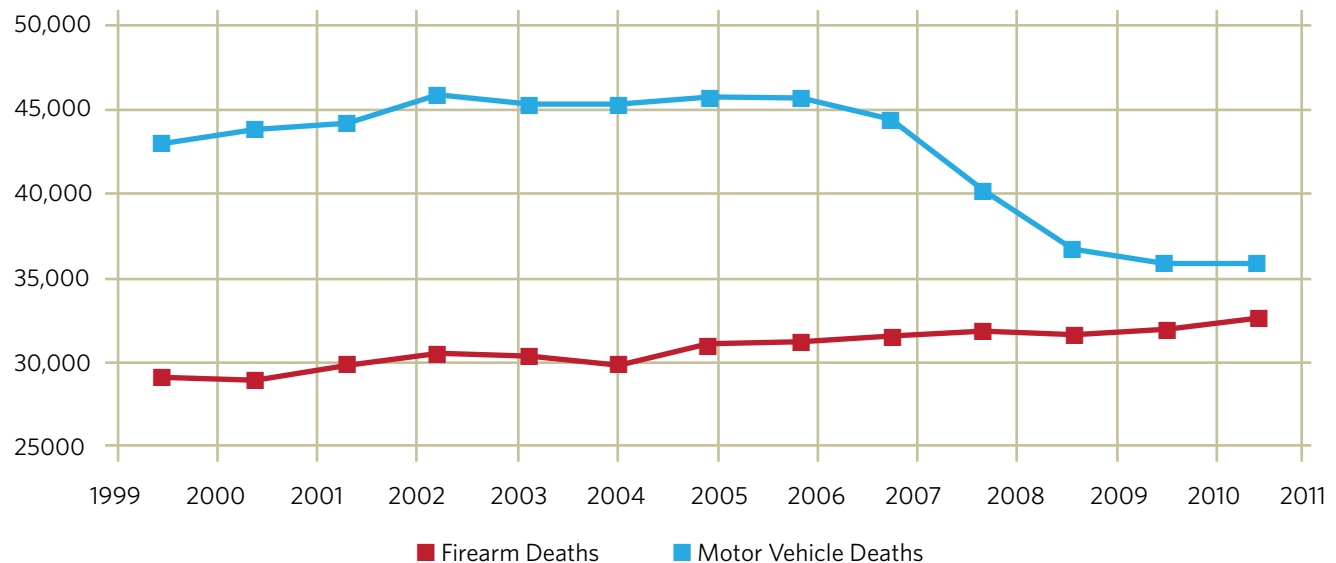
## A TALE OF TWO PRODUCTS

### MOTOR VEHICLES: EFFECTIVE REGULATION HAS REDUCED TRAFFIC FATALITIES

In 2011, the number of fatalities in motor vehicle traffic crashes totaled 35,543.<sup>2</sup> The fatality rate per 100 million vehicle miles of travel fell to a historic low in 2011.<sup>3</sup>

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 through: better delineation of curves; use of breakaway signs and utility poles; improved illumination; addition of barriers separating oncoming traffic lanes; and, guardrails.<sup>4</sup> 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

### FIREARM AND MOTOR VEHICLE DEATHS 1999 TO 2011



2 Source: WISQARS database, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

3 "Traffic Safety Facts — 2011 Data," National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, April 2013.

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

to reduce the number of teen drivers crashing on our nation's roadways.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> Despite this success, safety advocates continue to push for new improvements, such as backup cameras, to further reduce the death toll.

## **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 not subject to federal health and safety regulation.

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.<sup>7</sup>

As Dr. David Hemenway, director of the Harvard Injury Control Research 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."<sup>8</sup>

More than 90 percent of American households own a car<sup>9</sup> while little more than a third of American households contain a gun.<sup>10</sup> And yet, if charted out year by year as seen in the preceding graph, deaths nationwide from these two consumer products are on a trajectory to intersect.

5 "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.

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

7 As noted previously, literally every other consumer product sold and manufactured in the United States is regulated by a federal agency for health and safety—guns 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; and, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), motor vehicles.

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

9 "Transportation Statistics Annual Report 2012," U.S. Department of Transportation, Research and Innovative Technology Administration Bureau of Transportation Statistics, 2013.

10 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>. According to NORC, in 2012 only 34.4 percent of U.S. households had a gun in the home.

## CONCLUSION

Fourteen states and the District of Columbia 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 continue to 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 one: 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, as well as 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, cost in lives lost every year to gun violence.

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