

RESEARCH

Federal Agencies Don't Fund Big Gun-Violence Research. Can California?

By Arielle Martinez

JUNE 20, 2016



RICH PEDRONCELLI, AP IMAGES

Garen Wintemute, a professor of emergency medicine at the U. of California at Davis, is director of its Violence Prevention Research Program, where the new center might be located. “Few people do work in this field,” he says, in part “because so little ... money has been available.”

It has been 20 years since Congress [effectively barred](#) the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention from funding gun-violence research. Now advocates for such research say a proposed center in the University of California system will “fill the gap” left by those restrictions.

The state’s Legislature voted on Thursday to fund the creation of the California Firearm Violence Research Center, with \$5 million to be allocated over five years. The funding is part of a new state budget that Gov. Jerry Brown, a Democrat, is expected to sign into law.

The university system has yet to announce which campus will host the center, the timeline for its development, or the specifics of how it will operate. But the bill's sponsor, State Sen. Lois Wolk, a Democrat, said the center may build on the work of the Davis campus's Violence Prevention Research Program.

The new center's research will provide California lawmakers with scientific evidence that will influence policies on preventing gun violence, Ms. Wolk said.

"Ultimately I hope it will save lives not only in California but throughout the country," she said.

The center will ideally be both a place where researchers can come together to collaborate and a distributor of research grants, said Garen J. Wintemute, a professor of emergency medicine at Davis and the director of its Violence Prevention Research Program. The bill asks the university to create a small grant program as a supplement to the center's research.

'Turn to the States'

The legislation passed just four days after a [mass shooting](#) at a [gay nightclub](#) in Orlando, Fla., that [killed 49 people](#). It was the deadliest shooting in modern American history, and it spurred renewed national calls for gun-control measures. The American Medical Association, for one, announced it would begin actively lobbying Congress to [end the restrictions on CDC research](#).

Stephen P. Teret, a professor of health policy and management at the Johns Hopkins University who studies gun violence, lauded California for taking steps to advance gun-violence research.

"President Obama and Vice President Biden have recognized that it's hard to get anything done with the present Congress, so they've said to turn to the states, and that is precisely what California is doing," he said.

Both Dr. Wintemute and Mr. Teret said that because of the federal restrictions, \$5 million is a huge amount of money for the field.

“It’s one of the reasons so [few people do work in this field](#), because so little of that money has been available,” Dr. Wintemute said. “So for completely understandable, if sad, reasons, they work in fields where they know they’re going to be able to make their salary.”

David Hemenway, a professor of health policy and director of Harvard University’s Injury Control Research Center, said the California legislation was a good start, but the resources of the federal government could do much more.

“The federal government typically has much more money than the states,” he said. “You’d want the feds to create some centers to look at this issue, and with consistent funding, that would be much better.”

Congress’s restrictions on gun-violence research stem in part from lobbying by the National Rifle Association and other gun-rights advocacy groups, and the NRA has released [statements](#) in opposition to a package of [gun-control bills](#) in the California Legislature.

Car Research as Model

Frederick P. Rivara, a professor of pediatrics at the University of Washington and an author of a 1993 [study](#) on gun violence that outraged the NRA and led to the restrictions in place today, likened research on gun violence to research on motor-vehicle deaths and injuries.

“That research has led to safer vehicles, seat belts, airbags,” he said, “but we didn’t have to ban cars.”

The federal government has not banned funding of gun-violence research. In 2013 the National Institutes of Health [offered grants](#) for research focusing on firearm violence. As of Friday, [13 projects](#) — including one led by Dr. Wintemute — had been funded by the program, totaling about \$7.5 million.

And one month after the 2012 elementary-school shooting in Newtown, Conn., President Obama issued a memorandum directing the CDC to study the causes and prevention of gun violence. But the agency has not begun large-scale research in response.

In California the rate of firearms deaths — which include homicides, suicides, and unintentional injuries — has dropped from 9.12 deaths per 100,000 people in 1999 to 7.58 in 2014, according to data from the National Center for Health Statistics. Dr. Wintemute said he would like the new research center to explore the unknown causes of that decline.

Senator Wolk said she had pushed for a research center at the University of California because of its status as a public land-grant institution.

“It has a relationship not only with the public that supports it but to try to work on society’s problems,” she said, “and this is a big one.”

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

SCHOLARSHIP AND RESEARCH

RELATED CONTENT

[Chill on Funding Still Limits Gun-Violence Research](#)

‘I Got Nobody’: Scholars of Gun Violence Describe Their Lonely Battles

NIH Invites Research on Gun Violence



1255 23rd Street, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20037

© 2020 The Chronicle of Higher Education