

Gun deaths in US rise to highest level in 20 years, data shows

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A steady rise in suicides involving firearms has pushed the rate of gun deaths in the US to its highest rate in more than 20 years, with almost 40,000 people killed in shootings in 2017, according to new figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The CDC's Wonder database shows that in 2017, 39,773 people in the US lost their lives at the point of a gun, marking the onward march of firearm fatalities in a country renowned for its lax approach to gun controls. When adjusted for age fluctuations, that represents a total of 12 deaths per 100,000 people – up from 10.1 in 2010 and the highest rate since 1996.

What that bare statistic represents in terms of human tragedy is most starkly reflected when set alongside those of other countries. According to a recent study from the Jama Network, it compares with rates of 0.2 deaths per 100,000 people in Japan, 0.3 in the UK, 0.9 in Germany and 2.1 in Canada.

Jama found that just six countries in the world are responsible for more than half of all 250,000 gun deaths a year around the globe. The US is among those six, together with Brazil, Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela and Guatemala.

That America is sapped by a continuing epidemic of gun deaths is hardly news. But the new CDC data raises concern that even within that relentlessly consistent story of bloodletting, the carnage continues to worsen.

While much of the public attention is on the intense tragedies of gun massacres in the US – 2017 saw the deadliest mass shooting by an individual to take place in the country in modern history, when 58 people died in the 1 October rampage on the Las Vegas Strip – in fact most suffering takes place in isolated and lonely incidents that receive scant media coverage.

Of those, suicide is by far the greatest killer, accounting for about 60% of all gun deaths.

Here too the age-adjusted rates are showing an alarming increase. In 2017, the CDC data shows, 6.9 per 100,000 – almost 24,000 people – killed themselves with a gun, up from 6.1 in 2010 and 5.9 in 2000.

Research by the Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence underlines that the tragedy of gun violence and suicides is not spread randomly across the country, but is concentrated precisely in those places where gun ownership is most prevalent and gun laws at their loosest. When the fund analysed the new CDC statistics, it discovered the highest rates of gun suicides occurred in three states which also have the greatest gun ownership – Montana (19.4 gun suicides per 100,000), Wyoming (16.6) and Alaska (16.0).

Alaska has the highest rate of gun ownership in the US, with 61.7% distribution. Wyoming (53.8%) and Montana (52.3%) are also at the top of the league table.

The statistics speak to a brutally simple truth. Studies have shown that suicide attempts often take place in a moment of hopelessness that can last barely minutes – which means that easy access to a firearm can in itself exponentially increase the risk of self-harm.

“People often think with suicides involving firearms that there's nothing we can do to prevent this,” said the Education Fund's policy analyst, Dakota Jablon. “But looking at these numbers it's clear that simply having a lot of guns around increases the danger.”

Jablon pointed out that access to a gun in the home increases the odds of suicide more than threefold.

The CDC data shows that gun homicides account for a smaller proportion of the total of gun deaths, but here too there has been a worrying uptick in the past few years. The CDC figures show that 14,542 people were killed in firearm homicides in 2017, a rate of 4.6 per 100,000 that held steady on the previous year.

That was up from an equivalent rate of 4.2 in 2015 and 3.6 in 2010.