Children's Hospital of Philadelphia PolicyLab

Pilot Grants

Exploring State Legislator Language around Firearm Violence and Policy Implications

Health Equity

Statement of Problem

Firearm violence is the leading cause of death among children and adolescents aged 1-19 years old, and the lasting impacts of economic disinvestment, discriminatory policies, and systemic racism have led to numerous disparities.

Interpersonal firearm violence disproportionately impacts historically minoritized communities of color, notably Black adolescents and young adults. In turn, the firearm violence epidemic in the U.S. is an under-recognized social determinant of health.

Furthermore, biased, inaccurate, and racist portrayals of firearm violence result in inequitable policies being passed and leads to worsened health outcomes. These perceptions and portrayals can be gleaned through social media, a medium which directly impacts health policy agenda setting.

Therefore, an improved understanding of policymaker perceptions of the causes of firearm violence and the policies that are considered as solutions is key to addressing firearm violence.

Description

To date, no studies have examined policymaker language characterizing firearm violence. Investigating this provides a critical interpretation of policymakers' perceptions of the issue and its downstream health and public health consequences. This project aims to descriptively identify whether language in public-facing social media posts from state elected officials is congruent with the health and public health realities of firearm injury.

Specifically, we will use content analysis and mixed-methods techniques to describe how lawmakers frame the causes and consequences of firearm violence, discuss evidence-based solutions to firearm injury prevention, and whether they employ biased language in their social media discourse. Additionally, we will associate policymakers' language with three distinct sociopolitical and economic environments to understand the policy windows that allow certain viewpoints to set the health policy agenda.

Next Steps

This contribution is expected to be significant because we will identify if and how policymakers' messaging deviates from the public health reality of firearm violence. More specifically, our hope is that this body of work will inform messaging recommendations to achieve a goal of firearm violence prevention, preservation of rights,

and improvement in child health, safety, and well-being.

Our long-term goal is to co-develop social media recommendations for policymakers that accurately reflect the health and public health crisis of firearm violence, the structural inequities driving it, and evidence-based policy solutions to address it. Using data from this study, we hope to create policymaker-facing social media guidelines to be implemented, evaluated, refined and validated.

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Project Leads

Vivek Ashok
Vivek Ashok
MD
Faculty Scholar

Team

Zachary Meisel
Zachary Meisel
MD, MPH, MSHP
Faculty Scholar
Joel Fein, MD, MPH
Therese Richmond, PhD, RN, FAA
Jonathan Purtle, MSc, MPH, DrPH
Katherine Kellom
Katherine Kellom
Administrative Manager
Isabella Ntigbu
Sneha Kadiyala
JK Vervilles, MD, MPH
Okechi Boms, MD
Andrea Szabo, MD
Matthew Kearney, PhD, MPH

Funders of Project

PolicyLab
Clinical Futures

Project Contact

Vivek Ashok

AshokV@chop.edu