**UConn CSCH Podcast Episode: The Impact of Gun Violence on Kids’ Health**

Helene Marcy: Hello and Welcome to the CSCH Podcast. My name is Helene Marcy, Director of Programs & Communications at the UConn Collaboratory on School and Child Health, or CSCH. The CSCH mission is to facilitate innovative and impactful connections across research, policy, and practice arenas to advance equity in school and child health. CSCH is committed to anti-racist work that prioritizes inclusion, reduces disparities, and creates systemic change. I invite you to take a look at our website at csch.uconn.edu.

Today I’m here with Jennifer Dineen and Kerri Raissian. Jenn is Associate Professor in Residence in the UConn School of Public Policy and Kerri is Associate Professor, also in Public Policy. Both were founding steering committee members of CSCH, way back in 2016 and are CSCH affiliates. Together they’ve recently formed the UConn Center for Advancing, Research, Methods, and Scholarship in Gun Injury Prevention, or ARMS, and today we’re going to talk about that work and how important gun violence prevention is for kids’ health. Welcome to you both!

Kerri Rassian: Hi! Thank you.

Jennifer Dineen: Thank you.

Helene: So tell us a bit about the problem of gun violence. Why is this considered a kids’ health issue?

Kerri: Well, it's considered a kids’ health issue, for you know a number of reasons. But perhaps the statistics that probably gives us the most pause is that it's actually the leading cause of death among children. And so that is a health outcome but of course there are lots of things before we get to something as permanent as death. There’s injury that kids experience in urban centers. There are unintentional shootings that happen with children. There's suicide. There's family violence, and of course what we hear about in the news probably the most are school and other community-based mass shootings. So kids experience gun violence in a lot of ways, and all of those ways are troubling and contribute to the problem of gun violence and gun injury as an overall health problem for kids.

Jennifer Dineen: Additionally, gun violence affects children on a daily basis. So every day more than 20 children in teams in the United States are shot. Five of those children will die from gun violence. Seventeen children or teens will survive their gunshot injuries, and that's going to include children who are intentionally shot by someone else and survive; it's going to include children and teens who die from gun suicide, and also those who are unintentionally shot in instances of family fire. And then, in addition to experiencing gun violence, children and teens are living in communities and in families that are also experiencing gun violence, so that may impact them either through trauma, from witnessing an injury or death, or just living in fear or concern of gun violence.

Kerri: I think a final thing to really also underscore is that gun violence affects children in different communities at very different rates. And this is something that's really important for us, as we think about strategies and interventions, to not only respond to gun violence, but also to prevent gun violence. So, for example, you know, our Black and Hispanic youth, and especially youth that live in urban environments are much much more likely to experience gun violence both directly as victims, but also to witness gun violence, which, of course, leads to trauma and other kinds of social problems. And so this is just really a a huge issue that affects kids in multiple angles.

Helene: So what are some of the ways that we can address it?

Jennifer: We can address this a number of ways, and we can talk about both policy, specific policies, that address both access to weapons that address the environment that children are living in but also practices, right? Some of the strategies are going to be policy strategies, but in place where policy strategies are either lagging or not going to be possible legislatively, providing information about best practices with regard to securing weapons, to preventing child access are sort of an umbrella of tools that we might use.

Kerri:. I think when we talk about policy, we also need to be clear that of course, living in America we have this federalist system of policy making, and so policy happens at lots of different levels. So you have federal policy. You have state policy. You have local policy. Relevant to kids, you may also have school or school district policy or programming that may affect kids differently and allow for different kinds of things. And and those things all interact. And that actually makes this conversation hard, because there's not like a a universal policy path that we have in the US, right. A kid in Connecticut is gonna have a very different policy experience than a kid in my home state, which is Texas. So I think that kind of complicates our our conversation and adds a little bit of nuance that from a research perspective is interesting. But from a practical perspective can create a lot of, a lot of headache and complication.

Jennifer: Yeah, most definitely. And I think that you know when we talk about policy, we often think about policy that restricts access to weapons, right? Or it restricts who has access to weapons. And there's been evidence that shows that some of those policies are effective in reducing gun violence. I think what we don't talk about as often, as I mentioned before, the policies that change a child's environment. Sort of what we call the green and clean policies that may add green space to communities, that may clean up or secure areas that were previously higher crime areas and policies that help keep children busy and in more supervised areas, sort of off the streets, and those might be summer school policies. They might be youth employment policies. And so there's a lot of different tools that we have, which can address and reduce rates of injury and death, separate from the weapons themselves.

Kerri: And Jenn, I’m really glad that you brought up summer school programs. This is an area that we have a ton of evidence that actually helps kids, especially kids in urban environments. Most of the research comes from urban environments. Mainly this research started in Chicago, but it's been replicated in other cities. So the Chicago READI program, for example, it's it's an intensive education program. It's about 18 months of paid employment. It provides cognitive behavioral therapy for youth participants, and additional comprehensive support, and an additional six months of job coaching after the 18 month work component ends. And this program has actually seen huge reductions in gun violence among participants—up to like 79% less likely to--the participants preliminary data, showing they're less likely to be to arrested for a shooting or homicide. That's incredible. And we also have results that it's not just necessarily keeping kids busy, because these results persist even when summer is done, even when the summer program is done and we've gone back to sort of our regular fall programming, the participants and programs like READI from Chicago they continue to engage and be the victim of less gun violence. And that's stunning, because you know that's also something that's providing additional benefits? It's also helping with poverty and and job readiness and self-esteem and emotional supports. And social network building. Right? So those are sort of outcomes that that are just sort of like cherries on the top. And this, unlike, you know, sometimes gun policy, is a lot less controversial. I think it's easier to think about in our sort of federalist and very state-centric policy environments that the summer programming and summer employment is something that everyone can probably get behind and support. And everyone can frankly benefit from in really important ways.

Jennifer: Yeah, absolutely. And then the other thing that we've both talked about are good practices, And so we can have policies like child access protection, laws, right, which might hold adults accountable for an an injury or death caused by a weapon they own in the hands of a child inappropriately, but having a child access protection law does not necessitate that people are storing their weapons correctly or safely, securely in a way that a child can't access those weapons without supervision. And so we can have policy. But what's really important is that we have users—citizens, gun owners—who understand how to keep children safe from firearms, how to keep their weapons safe, so they're not stolen and used in a crime, right. And that's policy almost irrelevant. There are states that have those laws. There are states that don't, but in both cases it's the gun owner that we count on to help keep children safe, and so providing that information in non-political, non-polarized ways from trusted messengers. like physicians, maybe, or or clergy or members of a faith, is really important and just good practice.

Kerri: I think the other point about policies or just practices like safe and secure storage of firearms, because Jen's absolutely right that doesn't require a law. That's something that an individual gun owner could do today if they chose to, and even with a law that individual gun owner still has to make that choice to safely and securely store their firearm when it's not in use. But laws or practices like that have a lot of rippling effects to them. They don't just keep children safe. They don't just help make it less likely that a child is going to access their parents’ firearm and take it to school and God forbid, a mass shooting occur. It doesn't just mean that a child is less likely to unintentionally shoot an adult or another child in their environment. It also means that those adult caregivers are less likely to die by suicide. It also means that family violence is less likely to happen. And all of those things affect children. I think the part about how kids are affected by gun violence is is huge, right? Because they experience gun violence both as a direct victim, sometimes. They also experience it whenever the adults in their lives are harmed by guns. It is devastating for a child to lose a parent because of a firearm injury. It is devastating for a child to have a parent that has sustained a firearm injury, because that recovery is long, there may be employment effects. There may be other mental health issues that go along with that as people heal from what is a traumatic event. And so everything we can do to keep the adults in a child's life safer also means we're keeping those kids safer, just maybe through an indirect channel. So things like safe and secure storage— if I could wave a magic wand and get every gun owner to do one thing that I think would be the most effective way that we could reduce gun injury and violence in this country, it would be safe and secure storage of firearms when they are not in use. It would make our homes safer, it would make our communities safer, and it would undoubtedly make our children safer, and so, if I could do one thing to the listeners on this podcast, it would be to safely and securely store your firearms should you have them.

Jennifer: I agree with that 100%. And I think one of the things that Kerri’s just illustrated so well that fits, or maybe illustrates the CSCH mission, is about the whole child. And so often, when we think about children and firearm injury and death, we think about mass shootings and we think about mass shootings that take place in schools. Those receive a lot of attention for good reasons. They are incredibly tragic. Schools are still, and we want them to remain one of the safest places that children should go. And children should be able to feel safe in their school environment. So I don't want to minimize those, but they count for a very, very small percentage of child gun death and injury, like. I think, about 1% or less than 1%. And so those give this issue, and the serious health concern all a platform and a lot of attention about how vulnerable children are to gun violence. But if we think about the whole community and the whole child, children are what vulnerable to gun violence because of self, harm or suicide. Children are vulnerable because of trauma from family members inflicted. Children are vulnerable from accident and an unintentional shootings. But children are also vulnerable, as Kerri points out, because if the adults in their life are not safe, not only is that traumatic for a child, but it can impact their care. It impacts the fact that somebody is not there to take care of all of the things that a child needs taken care of to grow up in a healthy and secure way. And so it's a much broader conversation than we typically have.

Helene: you both mentioned the trauma that kids experience. Can you talk a bit more about that, and how we can address that specifically.

Jennifer: One way that we can address it is by providing appropriate services and supports. One of the things we haven't talked very much about is the federal legislation that's happened that's been child focused over the past year, including the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act. So not only did that legislation strengthen background, check laws, make it more difficult for children, or those under the age of 21 to purchase a gun, but it also provided additional funds for mental health support in schools, and I think schools are probably a primary delivery of mental health care for children in this country, and so we certainly can address, in part, some of the trauma by providing children access to good services and supports, and some of it is also debriefing, and Kerri might be able to talk about this in more detail. But when it comes to things like drills, or practicing being safe in schools, how we help children process that goes a long way to whether or not there's trauma incurred.

Kerri: Yeah. So school emergency drills get a lot of attention, lock down drills, as they're sometimes called. We took drills in schools in a number of ways, some of which we are more accustomed to. Fire drills. We do those very routinely. Today we have to think about what to do if there is an active threat on the campus of a school, specifically a shooter, an active shooter. Something that is rare, doesn't happen often, but should it happen, not being prepared has tragic consequences. And so what we have to figure out how to do is to have those lockdown drills in a way that prepares the adults in charge to be the adults in charge, and to take care of the situation, and also make sure that the children know what they need to do in the event of a school-based mass shooting or an active shooter on campus. There's a woman by the name of Jaclyn Schildkraut, and she has done a lot of work on how to do this in a way that empowers kids and makes kids feel safe when they're doing this. And and what she would say is a lot of this is about muscle memory, and that kids need to know what to do. But of course, their caregivers, those teachers, the staff, responding officers, etc. They have to be trained first, and they have to be really comfortable with what they need those kids to do. And so I would just offer that our response to school-based mass shootings has to first be about prevention, and then about response that is trauma-informed, and then it's got to have a debrief afterwards that involves the kids and also their parent caregivers, because when those kids go home, if their parent caregivers or guardians don't know how to talk to them then the conversation can't move forward. Fires in school are also rare, but we do those fire drills because we need to be ready. And in an environment, in a country where we have more guns than people, we're going to have to be prepared for school-based mass shooting.

Now I also want to underscore that things like hardening schools are not the answer to school-based mass shootings because we cannot harden every environment that a child will be at. Things like soccer season are about to start. There's no hardening of the soccer field. We can't harden everything, and so we need a multi-tiered response to keep kids and frankly, all of us safe from from gun violence.

Helene: So tell us about some of the work that you're doing with ARMS and what you hope to accomplish with it.

Kerri: We we want to do a lot. You know, our first order charge is to increase the quality research that's being done so that we can figure out how to solve this problem. We want to make UConn research as extensive and as meaningful as it can possibly be. And we think that that is best achieved through interdisciplinary research. So Jenn and I are in the school of public policy, which is by nature an interdisciplinary place. But you know, UConn has lots of fields, and we need all the expertise—we need expertise from engineering to the law school, to social work, to sociology to our colleagues at UConn Health. And so, you know, UConn is very lucky that we have amazing scholars in all of these domains. And so our first charge is to really try to harness the collective research power here at UConn to create meaningful research and solutions.

Jennifer: Yeah, definitely, and our second charge is along the lines of providing scholars here at UConn, assistance in translating and disseminating their good work to the people who are working on the ground and in communities and health care settings and schools who want to make sure that they are putting into place practices or policies that are evidence-based in keeping all of us safe, but specifically on this topic, keeping children safe. And so, you know, Kerri and I like to say the work we do here at UConn needs to be useful, but also usable. So people who are working to do research, to prevent or reduce gun injury are doing things that they want to actually have an impact and help save lives. And we have to take those from the channels that academics typically use to disseminate their work. So helping UConn scholars translate and disseminate their work is important and helping others access those work. So one of the things ARMS is building is an information clearinghouse where anybody—physicians, educators, policymakers—can come and search for the best evidence on particular types of gun injury or gun injury in particular settings.

Kerri: and, I think, related to both of those points to sort of tie it up with a bow, is that ARMS seeks to be a resource. A resource to other researchers, a resource to the community, to the state, to practitioners, to policymakers, to all of those different stakeholder groups that may be curious about what can be done to reduce gun violence and injury in their setting, because every setting looks differently. So we talk to school administrators. We talk to policymakers, we talk to pediatricians, we talk to all of those folks, in hopes of figuring out sort of what their contribution to reducing gun violence and injury can look like, because we all do have a unique contribution. And, as we said before, this problem is really multifaceted and really interacts with our lives in a lot of different ways. And so we're here to be a resource to help people figure out what that might look like for them.

Helene: That's great. Jenn, you mentioned earlier about the mental health legislation. But for both of you, are there any other policies, programs, or initiatives that are promising, and that give you hope, as they relate to gun violence.

Kerri: Yes, of course. You know it's really hard, honestly. Gun violence policy in this country is at a very strange place. Over the summer, the Supreme Court made what is just sort of informally or shorthand referred to as the Bruen decision. And the Bruen decision has really made it very uncertain what gun violence policy in this country is going to look like moving forward. It's really asking the courts to completely reconsider how we think about gun policy in this country and it takes a very originalist interpretation of the Constitution, such that if you know a law wasn't a applicable at the time of the constitution's writing, it's not clear that we should have that gun law now. And of course lots of things have changed since the Constitution. You know, states can really be divided up into what I think of just in a very sort of simplistic way, is states that have permissive gun laws and states that have restrictive laws. And so how Bruen will come to bear in those States is definitely a space that the people like Jenn and myself are watching, and we just, we just don't really know what the future of gun policy holds in this country because of the way that our federal bodies interact and affect each other through their decision making.

Jennifer: What is underlying in Kerri’s comments, but I'm not sure was explicit, is that where we do have research to show which policies are effective in reducing rates of gun injury and death, and which may not be, the policies that we have evidence showing effective are those who restrict access to firearms from those who should not probably have them. When states with child access protection laws which are more related, right, are likely to be linked to a secure storage strategy have lower injury, gun injury, and death laws. So this restrictive policy context is— In terms of our research evidence— shown to reduce rates of gun injury and death. While the policy landscape is changing, what it says to Kerri and myself and other researchers are, then it's very important to double down on understanding what are the best practices.

Kerri: But I will say in addition. So the main policy change that came from the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, which was the legislation enacted almost concurrently with Bruen, increased funding for Extreme Risk Protective Orders for States. So that States could implement their own ERPO or red flag laws, as those are sometimes referred to. So what ERPOs are is they are if someone identifies a person, typically that someone has to be mandated in the legislation, so often law enforcement here in Connecticut that also includes physicians and health care providers. If they identify someone that should not have a firearm, that they are a danger to themselves or others, and they are not safely storing that firearm and are not able to safely store that firearm, then you can actually ask a court to remove that firearm. And so I sort of think of that as an extension of secure firearm storage—it’s just not voluntary secure firearm storage. And a judge has to make that determination to ensure that everyone’s sort of rights are being upheld, but also in balance with public safety. Those laws have a lot of promise. They seem to be quite effective at reducing suicide, especially among older white males, who are actually the group at largest risk of suicide. And suicide is, in fact, the largest form of gun violence that we have in this country. About 55% of all gun deaths are suicide. And so to the extent that it can help there, I think that's great. I think we need to look at how to, however, expand ERPOs or red flag laws. Interestingly enough, Florida, enacted its ERPO law after the Parkland mass shooting and of course the Bipartisan Community Safers Act happened but after the tragedy at the Uvalde elementary school, at Robb Elementary in Uvalde, Texas. And so what ERPOs haven't seemed to be really applied to are, in fact, preventing school-based mass shootings. And to really thinking about how we keep youth that may be a danger to themselves or others from having firearms, and that's often the intent of this legislation. And so we need to think about ways to expand how ERPOs are used. Maybe think about how the folks that can implement ERPOs—law enforcement, physicians, family members in some states, etc.—can understand this policy tool, and that, in fact, is the point of the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, that we increase funding to States to both pass ERPO laws, and then to better implement their ERPO laws. And so that's also a focus of our work at ARMS, and some of the work that Jenn and I are doing. It's just another policy tool, though, that sort of underscores, there's not a policy tool that affects one particular kind of gun violence because gun violence happens in all these interconnected ways. One policy tool can really help to alleviate the burden of gun violence across communities, across children, across families and across the spaces that all of us inhabit.

Jennifer: We've been talking about policy and thinking about going in hopeful directions. And another way that we're seeing policy take place in a way that acknowledges that guns are part of the American fabric but we still need to keep children safe, are strategies that we've used to live with other things that are dangerous to children. So this year Senator Markey from Massachusetts, along with, I think, 15 other senators, including Connecticut Senators Murphy and Blumenthal, introduced the Keep Kids Safe from Gun Marketing Act. I think that's it, and its aim is to prevent gun manufacturers from marketing to children. There are firearms that are specifically made for children—easier to use, appropriate size, and they're marketed to children. And in the United States we have prevented tobacco companies, cigarette companies, and alcohol companies from marketing to children along with companies that sell vaping products, for example. And and so that Act to me is another acknowledgment of--there are legislative strategies, or there are strategies that we can pursue that many people can agree on, and that something that adults should have access to children don't necessarily have access to, right. We regulate movies and televisions and all sorts of things in that way.

Kerri: Yeah. And of course, even in Connecticut. We've seen firsthand the devastating effects of when guns are marketed to children. The Sandy Hook shooter, of course, had guns marketed to him, and, in fact, the Sandy Hook families successfully sued Remington for marketing to children. So this is something that can have very real and devastating consequences. And and it's something that we're glad to see legislation happening on. I think that it underscores the need, however, to think about this holistically. You know, we talk a lot about gun control, if you will, and gun policies, and while those explicit policies are really important, it's also really important to think about some of these more indirect channels like marketing, like mental health, like summer school, Medicaid expansions, for example, like chronic—we haven't even talked about, we can't talk about everything on one podcast—but like chronic disinvestment in our urban communities, all of the—which is the clean and green that that Jenn did mentioned. But it's really piggybacking on this chronic disinvestment in our communities. All of these things are part of gun violence prevention strategy. You know, just like CSCH is all about the whole child, this also has to be about the whole gun violence, prevention movement.

Helene: So tell us how listeners who are interested in learning more about ARMS can find out more.

Kerri: Well, there are a number of ways they can find out more. One, you know, we try to be really active on Twitter, which can be an interesting space to interact but we are there. Our Twitter handle is @ARMS\_GVP\_RIG. And so there we'll post all kinds of different resources that are coming out, new research that we find useful to disseminate and of course, any event that we are co-sponsoring. We are part of InCHIP at UConn, and so we also have a landing page on their website. But most excitingly is that the ARMS website will be launched any day now. And that will have the Clearinghouse that Jenn spoke about earlier as well as you know, events and contact information, and a list of all our affiliates, and hopefully lots of resources that people will find useful

Helene: Thanks. This is such a great initiative that you both started and it’s such an important Center. Thank you so much for joining us today to talk about your work.

Jennifer: Thanks.

Kerri: Thanks for having us.

Helene: We’ll add links to the ARMS work in the podcast description. And a reminder to our listeners that you can find out about Jenn, Kerri and all of our affiliates at the CSCH website, csch.uconn.edu. You can also follow us on social media @UConnCSCH. Thanks for listening.