

RESEARCH BRIEF

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FIREARM EXPERIENCES, BEHAVIORS, AND NORMS AMONG RURAL ADOLESCENTS

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BACKGROUND

Compared to urban adolescents, rural adolescents have **greater access to firearms, higher rates of firearm carrying**, and experience **unique firearm-related risk and protective factors**. However, most firearm injury prevention efforts for rural youth have been informed by research conducted in urban areas. Social norms about firearms in an adolescent's family, peer group, and community influence their firearm-related behaviors. Effective firearm injury prevention efforts among rural adolescents should be **developmentally appropriate** and **tailored to firearm-related social norms** in their communities.

STUDY GOAL

This study described **rural adolescents' experiences with firearms** and **firearm-related norms** within their community, peers, and family.

APPROACH

Researchers conducted **surveys, focus groups**, and **interviews** with **93 adolescents aged 12 to 19 in rural Washington State** who were enrolled in a **4-H youth development program**. 4-H is one of the largest and oldest youth development organizations in the United States and offers interest-based clubs, including shooting sports. This study used a **community-based participatory approach** by partnering with personnel in the Washington State University (WSU) Extension system throughout the research process.

RESULTS

Among participants:

47.3%

Participated in 4-H shooting sports club

55.9%

Carried a handgun at some point in their lives

10.9

Years old, on average, at first carry of firearms

22.6%

Carried a handgun at least once in the past year



YOUTH EXPERIENCES
IN RURAL WASHINGTON

Research on Firearm Safety



WASHINGTON STATE
UNIVERSITY

Three themes emerged from surveys and interviews about firearm-related social norms:

Themes	Interview Quotes	Survey Findings
Acceptable use <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legality • Adult supervision • Training 	<p>“Just if it’s not against the law, I think it’s fine to carry.”</p> <p>“[It’s unacceptable for someone to carry] if they’re not trained.”</p>	<p>80.6% said using a firearm without adult supervision was unacceptable.</p> <p>81.7% received formal or informal firearm training.</p>
Reasons for carrying <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acceptable: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Defense of self/property ◦ Recreation • Unacceptable <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Causing harm/intimidation 	<p>“My parents aren’t really in favor of people my age carrying handguns. They realize the kids are kids and we’re all kind of stupid sometimes.”</p> <p>“For the most part unless it’s for sport, but no one really just carries it to carry it, they have a reason.”</p>	<p>67.3% reported last carrying a handgun to and from the shooting range.</p> <p>81.7% said they would NOT be perceived as “cool” if they carried a handgun.</p>
Carrying in the community <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In public spaces • Inconsistent community experiences 	<p>“I don’t see a lot of open carrying in my community. Probably a lot of concealed carry.”</p> <p>“I’d say [it’s not appropriate to carry] in place like schools...because it is just dangerous.”</p>	<p>82.8% reported they believed carrying a firearm to school was wrong.</p> <p>50.5% said it would be “very hard” for them to borrow a handgun from someone in their community</p>

IMPLICATIONS

Compared to urban youth in previous work, rural adolescents in this study **started carrying firearms at a younger age** on average and reported **higher rates of handgun carrying in the past year**. This study also identified contextual differences in reasons for firearm carrying between urban and rural youth, particularly around **social and recreational use**. Generally, rural adolescents were using firearms for reasons viewed as prosocial in rural settings, like hunting and sport shooting. Adolescents wanted to engage in discussions surrounding firearms, and their insights can be used to develop more effective firearm injury prevention programs.

FOR ADDITIONAL INFORMATION, REFER TO:

Weybright EH, Terral HF, Hall A, Varrella G, Ellyson AM, Schleimer JP, Kuklinski MR, Dalve K, Gause EL, Oesterle S, Rowhani-Rahbar A. Firearm experiences, behaviors, and norms among rural adolescents. JAMA Network Open. 2024 Oct 1;7(10):e2441203-.

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