

Facts about Firearm Injuries and Fatalities among Children in Cape Town

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“Girl of two dies in crossfire”

The newspaper heading provided is an unfortunate yet common incident of a toddler killed in crossfire. Children, firearms and violence are a combination of elements that taint South Africa’s young democracy. The Convention on the Rights of a Child states in article 19, that all children have the right to protection [1]. This right encompasses the protection against physical or mental violence, injury or abuse of children [2]. Firearms in all its contradiction were designed to protect, injure and kill. Children should not be burdened with the responsibility to protect or defend themselves from or with firearms.

This fact sheet presents data of firearm injuries and fatalities among children in Cape Town in order to illustrate the need for improved gun legislation in South Africa in accordance with the right to protection. South Africa’s high incidence of firearm deaths and injuries in the early 1990s gave rise to a civil society campaign that involved a process toward stricter firearm control in national government policy and law reform [3]. This led to a replacement of the Arms and Ammunition Act of 1969 and the emergence of the Firearms Control Act in 2004. Since then South Africa has made some progress in decreasing the numbers of firearm related deaths. However, children are still dying and maimed from gun related injuries – why is this?

Firearms in South Africa

In 1996 violence was the leading cause of fatal injuries in South Africa [4]. This trend seems to be consistent after almost 11 years. In a recent study conducted by the National Injury Mortality Surveillance Systems (NIMSS) from January to December 2004 the leading cause of non-natural deaths was homicide, which accounted for 39.8% of all fatal injuries in South Africa. It should be noted that of the external causes of homicide, firearms were ranked as the leading cause of external death. Of more than 19 000 cases of reported external deaths; 1 in 4 people died as a result of firearms injuries [5].

Firearms in Cape Town

Cape Town was selected for this fact sheet based on the availability of data and research on firearm injuries and fatalities before and after the implementation of the Firearms Control Act of 2004. According to the available data for Cape Town (1992-2004) firearms were and still are instrumental in injuring and killing many South Africans, both adults and children[6],[7],[8].

Table 1- Main findings from primary data collection in Cape Town

Research findings 1992-1996 before Firearms Control Act 2004
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Firearm homicides were a significant cause of external death• Firearm injuries in children and adolescents (0-19) increased from 142 in 1992 to 421 injuries in 1996, thus depicting a three-fold increase.• The majority of victims were Coloured males• The common place of injury were on the road or inside the child’s home
Research findings 2001-2004 after Firearms Control Act 2004
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Children and adolescents are still vulnerable firearm injuries• The majority of adolescents injured by guns were Coloured males, and most are injured accidentally (caught in crossfire)• The majority of deaths occurred on roads followed by private homes.

Source: Ibid

Table 1 and 2 uses three main sources to provide an overview of firearm-related injuries and fatalities in Cape Town over time. It provides an overview of findings from data collected from 1992-1996 and 2001-2004, all findings are based on hospital and mortuary data. Table 1 illustrates the incidence of gunshot injuries, highlight vulnerable groups and serves to illustrate whether

Facts about Firearm Injuries

or not South Africa has made progress in protecting its children from firearms. Table 2 supports recent data that indicates that firearms are in fact still a problem needing serious attention.

Table 2 shows that after 11 years of research and evidence children are still being exposed to, injured and killed with firearms. The patterns of injury and deaths seem to remain consistent. Table 2 represents data of 222 cases of firearm related injuries at Red Cross Children's Hospital's (RXH) trauma unit it provides a snapshot of the reality health practitioners face everyday.

Table 2-Gun shot wound in children presenting at Red Cross Children's Hospital

- Although all ages were affected, there was a trend of increased frequency with increasing age. The average age was 7 years.
- 67% were male, and the majority were Black or Coloured.
- Where available, the common reason given for firearm injury was being caught in the crossfire of a gun fight.
- 60% of those admitted to ICU were head injuries.

Source: Van As AB et al [9]

Research conducted between 1994-2000 indicates that people were not killed or injured by AK47's instead the majority of firearm victims were injured and killed with handguns many of these victims were children [10]. A large proportion of children who were killed as a result of gunshots lived on the Cape Flats areas namely; Mitchells Plain, Hanover Park, Philippi, Manenberg, Bishop Lavis and Elsie's River [11], [12] [13]. Because of the violence caused by fighting between gangs, many innocent people – including women and children - get caught in the crossfire. As a result, many have died or have been maimed for life. The consequence of gun violence and injury does not only cause physical disability and emotional trauma to the victim, it affects families and entire communities. Impoverished communities with gangsterism and high crime, overcrowding, poor basic amenities, lack of infrastructure e.g. leisure pursuits and poor safety and security perpetuate circumstances in which firearm injuries and fatalities occur. Many of these issues stem from poverty. The biggest, current contributor to household poverty in South Africa is the very high rate of unemployment [14]. Furthermore, recent media coverage has seen a surge of reports on family murders highlighting the use of firearms in acts of domestic violence with fatal outcomes [15]. Notwithstanding, firearms in communities at large without stricter legislation to govern its use is to the detriment of the nation's people. It is evident that there has not been sufficient or significant changes made to ensure children's safety against firearms because children are still dying as a result of its use.

Recommendations

Legislation

- There is a need to reduce the number of firearms used and sold in South Africa. Handguns should be banned. Increase age limit for obtaining firearm licence from 21 to 25 years.

Education

- A heightened awareness within communities about firearms control is vital.

Research

- Further evidence based research is necessary to inform and impact on policy-makers decisions about legislation.

Sources

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