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Gun in home triples murder risk

BOSTON (Reuter) – Having a gun in the home nearly triples the likelihood that someone will be murdered and the victim is usually a family member or close friend, a study of 388 homicides in three U.S. states indicates.

The research, published in Wednesday's issue of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, appears to contradict the wide-spread belief that keeping a gun at home is an effective means of personal protection.

"This study shows that the practice is counterproductive," said the research team, led by Dr. Arthur Kellermann of the University of Tennessee at Memphis.

The study involved an investigation of the causes of homicides in Tennessee, Ohio and Washington state.

The research team found that the likelihood of a homicide in the home rises when illegal drugs are used there or when physi-

cal fights occurred.

But after researchers adjusted the data for drug use and fighting, they found that the risk of homicide was 2.7 times higher in homes with guns than in homes without.

"Despite the widely held belief that guns are effective for protection, our results suggest that they actually pose a substantial threat to members of the household," Kellermann and his colleagues concluded.

At the same time, a study of cases involving forced entry showed that having a gun in the home offered little protection.

Kellermann's team reached its conclusions by gathering information from people close to the victims, and from unrelated people in the same neighbourhood who shared the same age, race and sex as the victims.

Journal editor Dr. Jerome Kassirer wrote in an accompanying editorial that the findings point out the need for stronger gun

control laws and built-in improvements in firearm safety such as coded safety locks to prevent accidental firing.

Such controls are strongly opposed by the National Rifle Association, the major U.S. gun lobby group.

Even if stricter controls are adopted, the passion for guns would likely persist, Kassirer said.

He cited a letter from a West Coast surgeon who told of having "to go from the operating room to tell a young couple that their little boy was dead" – shot while playing with his father's handgun.

"The mother collapsed into tears," the surgeon wrote. "The father, who told me he was an NRA member, did not cry, but became visibly angry, saying: 'I taught the dumb kid how to use it right!'"

REFERENCE: Kellermann, A.L., Rivara, F.P., Rushforth, N.B., Banton J.G., Reay, D.T., Francisco, J.T., Locci, A.B., Prodzinski, J., Hackman, B.B. and G. Somes: Gun ownership as a risk factor for homicide in the home. *New Engl. J. Med.* **329**(#15): 1084-1091 (1993); see also the editorial on pages 1117-1118. [DC Library call number: PER R11.B7]

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