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ALL IN THE FAMILY (PART II)

A decade after Part I, domestic killings remain commonplace



For *Police Issues* by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. West Valley City, Utah isn't crime-free. But with [134,470 residents](#) and [five murders](#) in 2023, the working-class suburb's 2023 homicide rate of 3.7 per 100,000 pop. was less than half [Salt Lake City's 7.6](#). West Valley's peaceful mien, though, took a heavy hit on December 17 when a critically wounded teen and five family members [were found shot dead in their home](#). Officers found a handgun under the father's body. It's believed that the 42-year old man used the weapon to massacre his family, then commit suicide.

Our source of information about domestic shootings, the [Gun Violence Archive](#), codes this episode a "family annihilation." Alas, such tragedies are by no means rare. Here's a few we recently came across while perusing news stories for our daily [Police Issues](#) updates:

- **[December 2024, Milpitas, Calif.](#)**: Prosperous places are hardly immune. In the tony Silicon Valley community of 80,000, a welfare check prompted by relatives led cops to discover the bodies of a middle-aged couple and their two children. As in West Valley, police found a gun – it was legally registered to the father – and concluded that he massacred his family, then committed suicide. Mom and Dad were going through a divorce. Dad, who reportedly had mental problems, had just bought the gun.
- **[October 2024, Tijeras, New Mexico](#)**: Family shooters aren't always dads. Rural New Mexico deputies were called to a home where neighbors had heard gunfire. Inside they found an armed twenty-four year old who was unhurt but "covered in blood." And in a nearby ravine they discovered the bodies of his

mom, dad and 17-year old sister, whom the young man had admittedly shot dead. He used his mother’s legally-acquired gun. His motive was undisclosed, but he apparently had mental health issues.

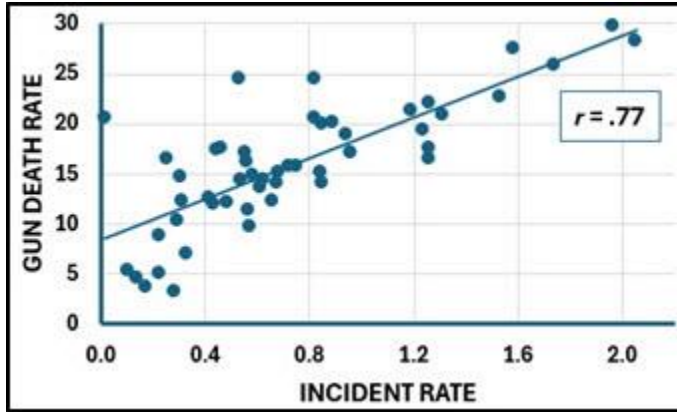
- **[December 2024, Belen, New Mexico](#)**: Some shooters are mere teens. In a working class suburb of Albuquerque an “extremely intoxicated” 17-year old informed 9-1-1 that he had just massacred his family. He surrendered to deputies without incident. Inside the home they found the bodies of his mom, dad and two brothers, ages 14 and 16. Each had been shot dead, apparently with the handgun that was on the kitchen table.
- **[October 2024, Fall City, Washington](#)**: Youngsters regularly figure in family massacres. Consider the 15-year old who told 9-1-1 that his brother “just shot my whole family and committed suicide too.” Only problem is, the caller was the killer. He used his father’s pistol to murder both his parents and three siblings, ages 7, 9 and 13. Only his 11-year old sister survived, and that’s because, although wounded, she had managed to flee through a window. [She told police](#) that her brother “had recently gotten into 'a lot of trouble' for failing some tests at school.”

“[Kids With Guns](#)” focused on school shootings. While plentiful, their numbers are no match for the appalling frequency of the gunplay that besets American homes. A decade ago, our prior foray into domestic violence, “[All in the Family](#)” (Part I), focused on episodes where fathers slaughtered their families. We now take a more inclusive approach. Using [Gun Violence Archive data](#), we selected all incidents of gun violence in 2023 across the 50 States (D.C. and territories excluded) that involved domestic violence, had a single assailant, and where one or more victims were wounded or killed. Here are the totals broken down by assailant age:

	2023 incidents	Victims shot	Victims wounded	Victims killed
18 and older	2123	2639	1711	928
17 and younger	65	74	49	25
	2188	2713	1760	953

Here are the incidents coded by the *Archive* as a “family annihilation”:

2023 incidents	Victims shot	Victims wounded	Victims killed
80	238	19	219

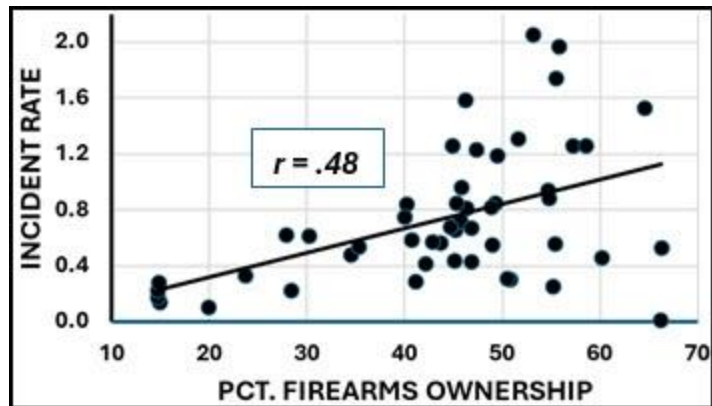


As this graph demonstrates, States (each is a “dot”) experienced markedly different outcomes. Still, their 2023 domestic violence incident rates tracked their [2023 gun death rates](#) quite closely. States with low incident rates generally had low gun death rates, and those with higher incident rates suffered from elevated gun death rates. That relationship is

reflected in the “*r*” (correlation) statistic. It ranges from zero, meaning no relationship between variables, to 1, which designates a perfect, lock-step relationship. Of course, accurate data reporting is a must. Check out Wyoming (top left dot.) Although its gun death rate was a substantial 20.6, it reported only one incident of gun-involved domestic violence in 2023. Removing Wyoming from the picture increased the overall *r* between incident rate and gun death rate to a substantial .82.

What might lower the frequency of domestic violence incidents that involve gunplay? Fewer gun-owning households and stronger gun laws are two approaches.

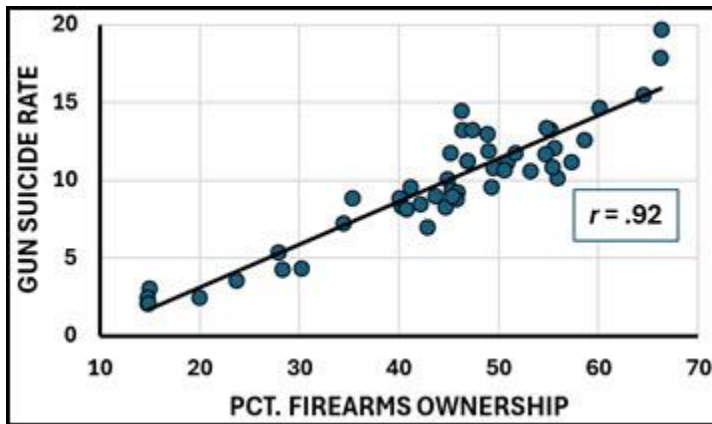
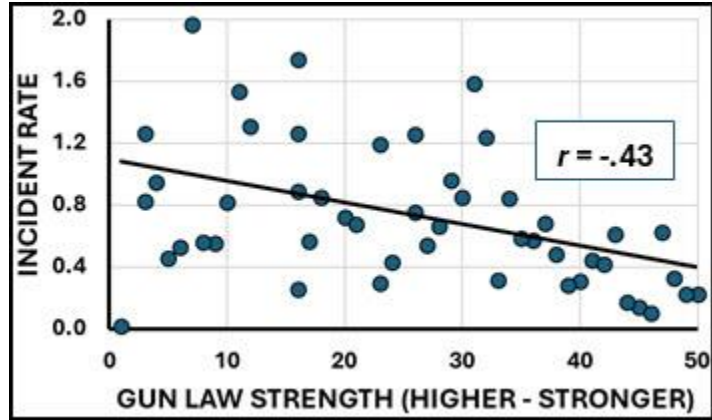
- **FAO - pct. household firearms ownership:** We computed the correlation between [2023 state firearms ownership data](#) from *Rand* and each State’s domestic violence incident rate. It produced a moderate *r*= .48. While they’re clearly not in lock-



step, more guns are generally associated with more incidents of domestic firearms violence. Of course, accurate reporting is a must. Once again, note incident-less Wyoming at the lower right. Removing it from the calculation increased the overall “*r*” between FAO and the

incident rate to a considerably heftier .56.

- GLS - State gun law strength:** *Giffords' State gun law strength scores* (but with the order reversed so that 1 represents the State with the weakest gun laws and 50 the strongest) were correlated with State domestic violent incident rates. At $r = -.43$ the relationship is also only moderate (the r is negative, meaning that the variables move in opposite directions). As law strength goes up, incidents decrease; again, not in lockstep. However, pulling out incident-less Wyoming (lower left) strengthened the correlation to a more respectable $r = -.51$.



Tinkering with gun ownership and gun laws might also be useful for other purposes. State gun death rates, which are available through [CDC Wonder](#), include suicides. In 2022, the most recent year for which data is available, over half of suicides – 54.6 percent – were committed with a gun. We computed the correlation between gun suicides and firearms

ownership (FAO). It came in at a startling, near-perfect $r = .92$. Gun suicide's association with gun law strength (GLS) was also quite strong, at $r = -.78$. Suicides, though, were only weakly related with our “usual suspect,” poverty. Their r was only .18.

Alas, in the land of “ r ” there’s always a catch. Household gun ownership and gun law strength are themselves strongly correlated. Their $r = -.81$ is negative: as one increases the other decreases, and very much in sync. Problem is, strong mutual ties between “causal” variables can distort the magnitude of their individual correlations with the “effect” variable of interest (i.e., gun suicide.) Check out this table:

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GUN SUICIDES - CORRELATIONS				
ORIGINAL		CONTROL FOR:		
FAO	GLS	GLS	FAO	SUICIDE
.92	-.78	SUICIDE		
	-.81	FAO	.79	
-.81		GLS		-.15

Applying the statistical technique of “[partial correlation](#)” reveals that when we “control” for gun law strength – that is, remove its influence – the correlation between firearms ownership and gun suicide recedes from $r = .92$ to $r = .79$. Still, it remains a hefty number. But when we take gun ownership out of the picture, the sizeable $-.78$ r between gun law strength and suicide drops to a measly $-.15$. This suggests that gun law strength’s original relationship with gun suicides was mostly due to the influence of gun ownership.

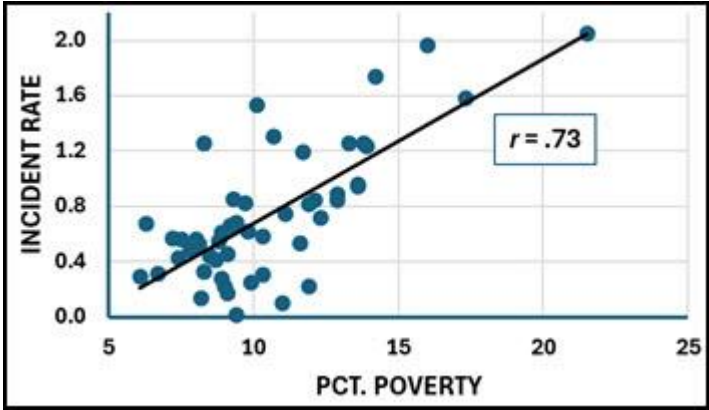
[CDC Wonder](#) reports 48,204 gun deaths in 2022, the most recent year with full data. However, it considers rates for six States and D.C. unreliable, likely because their death counts may have been understated (i.e., Wyoming). For the 43 States with fully reliable stat’s, the CDC reported 47,279 gun deaths. About 56 percent were suicides (26,385) and 41 percent (19,397) were homicides. But only a small proportion involved incidents of domestic violence. According to the [Gun Violence Archive](#), 2,165 gun deaths in 2022 (1,657 victims, 508 suspects) stemmed from a domestic dispute. That’s about 4.6 percent of the CDC’s modified (43-State) gun death count and 11 percent of its modified gun homicide count.

Still, our graphs suggest that stiffening gun laws and reducing household firearms ownership can help. As for gun suicides, limiting household gun ownership seems to be the undisputed “champ.” It makes perfect sense that having fewer guns at home will lead to less lethal misuse by their inhabitants. Getting there, though, isn’t so simple. “Blue” California, which Giffords credits for having the strictest gun laws in the U.S., suffered 87 domestic violence incidents in 2023 that met our criteria (single assailant; one or more victims wounded or killed). While its incident rate of 0.2/100,000 pop. was one of the lowest, it was nonetheless matched by Massachusetts and New Jersey and bested by New York (it came in at 0.1).

What else could be done? That’s simple: eliminate poverty. We’ve often examined its role in crime. (Check out “[Policing Can’t Fix What Really Ails](#)” and “[See no Evil – Hear no Evil, Speak no Evil](#)”.) No, poor people aren’t criminals. But poverty acts as a robust container for a host of real-world factors – broken homes, lack of childhood supervision,

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gang activity, lousy education, poor job skills, lack of health supports – whose collective influence may be the most proximate “cause” of criminal misbehavior. And perhaps, of domestic violence shootings. This graph examines the relationship between [2023 State pct. of households in poverty](#) from the Census and the *Gun Violence Archive’s* 2023 State domestic violence incident rates:



Alas, if cops could only do something about poverty...