

New CDC report understates accidental shooting deaths of kids

By RYAN J. FOLEY
Associated Press

IOWA CITY, Iowa — Government statistics released this week claiming that 77 minors in the U.S. were killed by unintentional gun discharges last year significantly understate the scope of an enduring public health problem.

A review of shootings nationwide by The Associated Press and USA TODAY Network found that at least 141 deaths of minors were attributed to unintentional or accidental shootings in 2015 — 83 percent higher than what the Centers for Disease Control reported.

Advocates for stricter laws and new technology meant to keep guns away from children argue that many of the deaths are preventable, and the undercount is significant because it can skew the public policy debate. Lobbyists for the firearms industry, including the National Rifle Association, cite the CDC statistics to argue that such deaths are so rare that voluntary education — not additional laws or regulations — are needed.

CDC officials have acknowledged that their statistics are low because they rely on how coroners classify the fatalities on death certificates. Some coroners rule deaths in which one child unintentionally shoots another as a homicide — rather than an accidental discharge — because they fit the definition of being killed by another. They also can classify them as undetermined if the intent is unclear — for example, if it's not certain whether a minor committed suicide or accidentally shot himself.

AP and USA TODAY Network counted fatal shootings that were declared accidental or unintentional by investigating agencies. The media organizations' review did not include deaths where guns were fired on purpose, such as cases of stray bullets or celebratory gunfire.

The undercount for 2015 is in line with, but more significant than, the one observed for 2014, when the CDC missed one-third of the 113 deaths documented by the media outlets.

The CDC data, released Thursday, does track a trend identified in the media organizations' review in which deaths of all minors are most common among 3-year-olds, who typically pick up unsecured, loaded guns in their homes and



AP Photo/Lisa Marie Pane File

In this June 28 file photo, Mark Rosenberg, the former director of the CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, poses for a photo outside his home in Atlanta. A review by The Associated Press and USA TODAY Network found 141 deaths of minors were attributed to unintentional or accidental shootings in 2015, or 83 percent higher than what the Centers for Disease Control reported. Rosenberg said he believes the nation could eliminate all unintentional gun deaths involving children.

fire back at themselves. The data also shows another spike in deaths among 15- to 17-year-olds, who are more likely to be shot by another teen playing with a gun.

Mark Rosenberg, former director of the CDC's National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, said he believes the nation could eliminate all unintentional gun deaths involving children. He said "it's crazy" the government isn't doing more research into how to prevent them, in part because of a 1996 law that declared the CDC cannot use research funding to advocate or promote gun control.

"I think people 30 years from now are going to look back at this time and say, 'My God, how did we, as parents, as a nation, tolerate these deaths? These shooting deaths where a toddler kills a sibling or where a child is gunned down by a gun that they found in their home — how did we ever put up with that?'" Rosenberg said. "We use the word 'accident' and lull ourselves into this deadly complacency that says, 'This is just the cost of having firearms in our country'. It's not."

Rosenberg said accurate data is needed to persuade lawmakers and

firearm owners to make changes, for instance to adopt smart gun technology that would only allow the owner to fire the weapon.

The NRA said Friday that its Eddie Eagle gun safety program, which tells students not to pick up any guns they see, has helped reduce the number of unintentional shootings in the last two decades but that more can be done.

"The NRA believes firearms education, safety, and training is the key to preventing accidental shootings," spokeswoman Catherine Mortensen said.

Cecily Wallman-Stokes, senior research manager for Everytown for Gun Safety, an advocacy group founded by Michael Bloomberg, said the problem of inadequate data about gun violence goes far beyond unintentional shootings. For example, she said the government can't say how many people are injured by guns or how many women are shot to death by their dating partners.

"Timely, reliable data have led to lifesaving advances in other public health issues like traffic safety, tobacco use, and lead exposure," she said. "Gun violence deserves the same."

BRIEFLY

Obama orders review of election-season hacking

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Barack Obama has ordered intelligence officials to conduct a broad review of election-season cyberattacks, including the email hacks that rattled the presidential campaign and raised fresh concerns about Russia's meddling in U.S. elections, the White House said Friday.

The review, led by intelligence agencies, will be a "deep dive" into a possible pattern of increased "malicious cyber activity" timed to the campaign season, White House spokesman Eric Schultz said. The review will look at the tactics, targets, key actors and the U.S. government's response to the recent email hacks, as well as incidents reported in past elections, he said.

The president ordered up the report earlier this week and asked that it be completed before he leaves office next month, Schultz said.

"The president wanted this done under his watch because he takes it very seriously," he said. "We are committed to ensuring the integrity of our elections."

Syrian forces squeeze Aleppo

BEIRUT (AP) — Nearly two weeks into a crushing blitz, Syrian forces and their allies have taken control of nearly all of what was once an opposition stronghold in eastern Aleppo, touching off a new wave of evacuations Friday and raising concerns about hundreds of men who have disappeared and are feared to have been seized by the government.

A flood of civilians

streamed out on foot in the wake of the relentless campaign by forces loyal to President Bashar Assad to drive rebels from their rapidly crumbling enclave. They joined tens of thousands who have fled since Nov. 26, seeking shelter from the nonstop bombardment and crippling siege.

"The writing on the wall looks as if eastern Aleppo's battle is virtually over," said Staffan de Mistura, the U.N. special envoy to Syria, in an interview with The Associated Press at U.N. headquarters.

Large crowds to celebrate S. Korean president's impeachment

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Large crowds were expected to gather in South Korea's capital on Saturday to celebrate the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye over an explosive corruption scandal that saw millions protest in previous weeks.

Protesters were planning to march near the Seoul presidential palace where the notoriously aloof Park will remain mostly alone for up to six months until the Constitutional Court rules whether she should step down permanently.

On Friday, South Korean lawmakers impeached Park, a stunning and swift fall for the country's first female leader. The vote came weeks after state prosecutors accused Park of colluding with a longtime friend to extort money and favors from companies and to give that confidante extraordinary sway over government decisions. Park has apologized for putting trust in her friend, Choi Soon-sil, but denies any legal wrongdoings.

It's Trump's war soon: Afghan future is cloudy at best

By ROBERT BURNS
AP National Security Writer

KABUL, Afghanistan — Afghanistan has fallen so far from Americans' consciousness that some may have forgotten it's called the forgotten war.

It also is America's longest war. Now in its 16th year and showing little sign of ending, it will soon be the responsibility of Donald Trump, two presidents removed from the October 2001 invasion.

During the presidential campaign, neither Trump nor Democrat Hillary Clinton offered new ideas for breaking the battlefield stalemate. They hardly mentioned the country, let alone a strategy.

And yet, the war that began as America's response to 9/11 grinds on as nearly 10,000 U.S. troops train and advise the Afghan army and police, hopeful that at some point the Afghans can stand on their own against the Taliban — or better, that peace talks will end the insurgency.

A look at the war Trump inherits from President Barack Obama, what U.S. troops are doing and why the outlook is so clouded.

The U.S. mission

While Obama was a long-time critic of the Iraq war, he always cast the Afghanistan fight as vital.

Shortly after taking office in 2009, Obama looked to fix what he saw as U.S. failures in Afghanistan and Pakistan. He tripled troop levels in Afghanistan, but the surge did not force the Taliban to the negotiating table. Pakistan remains a sanctuary for the Taliban.

In December 2014, the U.S. ended its combat role in Afghanistan, but there will be at least 8,400 troops there when Trump takes office.

American troops and their coalition partners perform two tasks: The first, Operation Resolute Support, is to train and advise Afghan forces fighting the Taliban. The second, Operation Freedom's Sentinel, is to hunt down and kill al-Qaida militants, as well as those affiliated with the Islamic State and other groups using the country as a hideout and potential launching pad for attacks.

"The interests we are pursuing here are clear and enduring," Defense Secretary

Ash Carter said during a visit Friday. He cited the goals of preventing another 9/11-type attack on America and helping Afghanistan attain enough stability to remain a long-term security partner.

The U.S. performs its counterterrorism work in Afghanistan in two ways. First, it goes after al-Qaida and Islamic State operatives as a U.S.-only mission. Gen. John Nicholson, the top U.S. commander in the country, said last week that U.S. special operations forces have conducted 350 such missions in 2016 — an average of nearly one per day. These killed or captured nearly 50 leaders and other members of al-Qaida, he said.

Secondly, U.S. forces operate with Afghan special forces in hunting Islamic State fighters; these operations have killed the top 12 IS leaders in Afghanistan, Nicholson said.

He said that of the 98 militant groups designated by the U.S. as terrorist organizations, 20 are in Afghanistan, the world's highest

concentration. That alone says much about the inconclusive — some would say failed — outcome of Obama administration's efforts.

Nicholson said Friday the remnants of al-Qaida, the group whose 9/11 attacks were the reason the U.S. invaded, still "has the intent" to attack America.

The outlook

Nicholson and many U.S. generals who preceded him see reason for hope in the country. They point to modest progress against corruption and expanded opportunities for women.

He said he is confident the Afghan army, which suffered heavy losses in 2016, will continue to improve.

"It was a tough year," he said. "They were tested. They prevailed."

His predecessor, retired Gen. John Campbell, says the Afghans deserve continued support.

"The Afghan government is now taking on the Taliban more so than ever before," he said Friday in an email

exchange.

Some analysts, however, worry that the Obama administration missed opportunities to improve security and strengthen the government.

Frederick W. Kagan, a military historian and director of the Critical Threats Project at the American Enterprise Institute, says security has deteriorated despite U.S. efforts to build up the army and police.

"If that's not good," he said of Afghan security, "nothing else matters. And it's not good."

Kagan says Obama is leaving his successor a worrisome situation.

"We're sliding toward the collapse of this government and potentially a renewal of the civil war," he said.

Trump's war

Trump will not have an easy time disentangling the U.S. military from Afghanistan, short of an unlikely decision to simply walk away. He has said little about the country but has called broadly for an end to "nation-

building" efforts.

Michael Flynn, the retired Army lieutenant general who will be Trump's national security adviser, sees Afghanistan as part of a broader war the U.S. must fight for generations.

"We defeated al-Qaida and the Iranians in Iraq, and the Taliban and their allies in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, they kept fighting and we went away," he wrote in his 2016 book, "Field of Fight." "Let's face it: Right now we're losing, and I'm talking about a very big war, not just Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. We're in a world war against a messianic mass movement of evil people, most of them inspired by a totalitarian ideology: radical Islam."

Trump's choice to lead the Pentagon, retired Marine Gen. James Mattis, is a veteran of combat in Afghanistan. He has written that the U.S. devotes too few resources, guided by too little strategic clarity, to Afghanistan. But how that translates into action by the next White House is unclear.

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