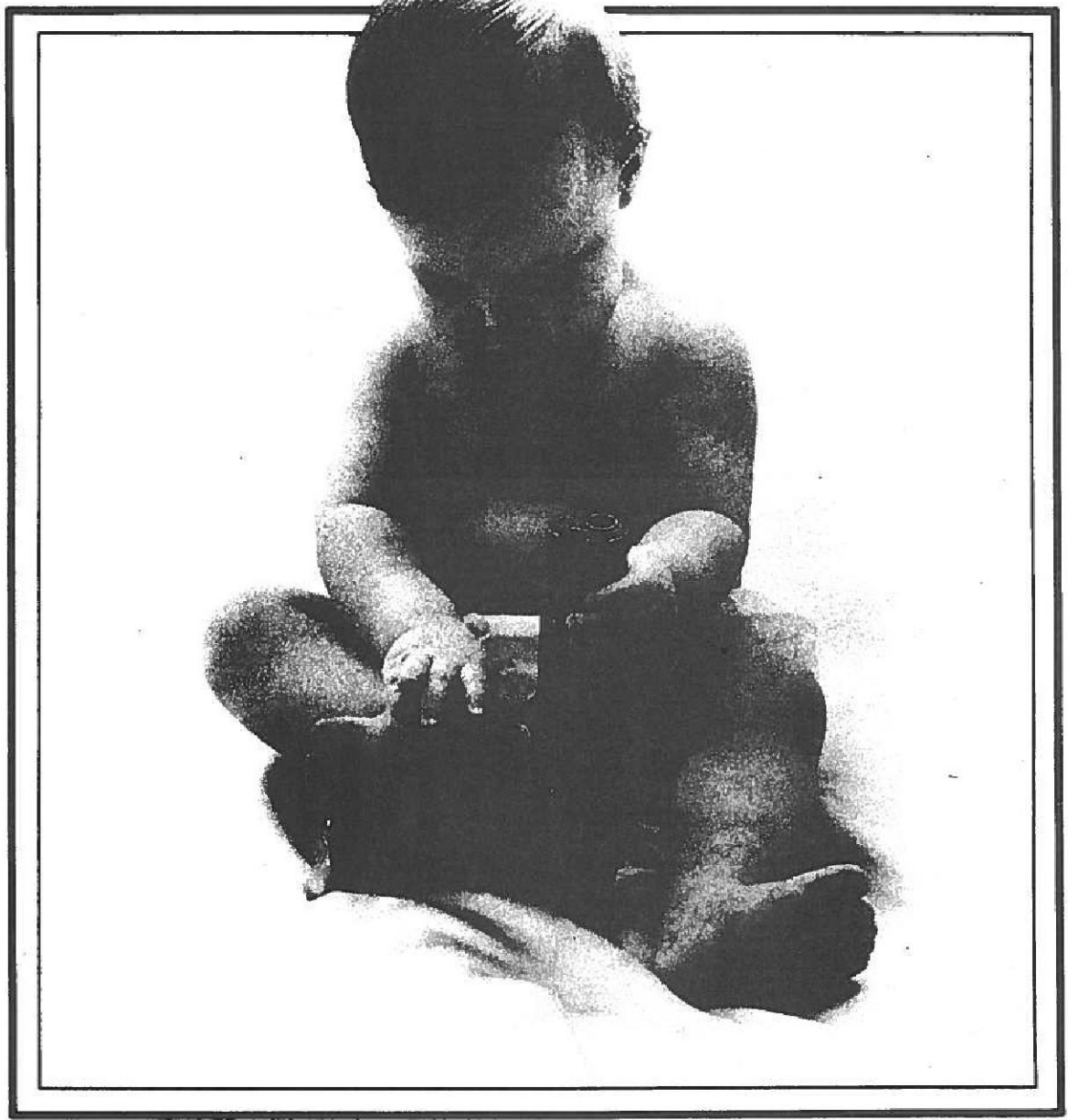


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# The Killing Seasons:

**A Study of When Unintentional  
Handgun Shootings  
Among Children Occur**



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# **THE KILLING SEASONS:**

## **A Study of When Unintentional Handgun Shootings Among Children Occur**

### **Abstract**

In 1987, firearms were the fourth-leading cause of accidental death among American children, ages 14 and under.<sup>1</sup> A study of unintentional shootings among children in California determined that handguns were used in the majority of these tragedies.<sup>2</sup>

In a continuing effort to gather information about how and when unintentional handgun shootings among children occur and what can be done to prevent them, the Center to Prevent Handgun Violence has conducted its second study to examine incidents throughout the country.

In "The Killing Seasons: A Study of When Unintentional Shootings Among Children Occur," the Center examined 532 unintentional handgun shootings among children ages 16 and under from 1986-1988. The findings can be summed up by saying that these tragedies most often occur when children are left unsupervised at home for long periods of time. Specifically, the findings included: unintentional shootings among children dramatically increased in the summer months (June-August) and in the holiday season (November-December); 42 percent of the shootings occurred in the afternoon hours (12 noon-4:59 p.m.); no adults were on the premises when two-thirds of the shootings occurred; and, during the school year, the highest percentage of shootings occur on weekends, but during summer vacation, the highest percentage occurred on weekdays.

The Center's first study, "Child's Play: A Study of 266 Unintentional Handgun Shootings of Children," was released on July 3, 1988. The study's findings included: nearly 40 percent of the shootings occurred in the homes of friends and relatives; nearly half of the handguns used in the shootings were found by children in bedrooms; most of the incidents occurred when no adults were on the premises; boys were far more likely to be the victims and the unintentional shooters; and children ages 9-16 were most often the victims and shooters.

### **Method**

The Center studied 532 unintentional handgun shootings that resulted in death or serious injury from January 1986-December 1988. The victims and the shooters were children ages 16 and under. The data were compiled from news media reports and in 63 cases through follow-up conversations with police departments and hospitals. The incidents represent all unintentional handgun shootings of children reported to the Center where at least the

following criteria were available:

- \* Age of the victim;
- \* Age of the child shooter;
- \* Police confirmation that the weapon used was a handgun;
- \* Site where the shooting occurred;
- \* Month, date, and year of the shooting; and
- \* Either the time of day of the shooting or whether adults were on the premises at the time of the shooting.

No incident meeting these criteria was excluded, but the incidents in this report represent only a portion of unintentional handgun shootings involving children during this period -- 273 other incidents were reported to the Center, but details about these incidents did not meet the criteria set forth above. Many more shootings occurred, but went unreported to the Center.

It must be noted that the findings of this study almost exclusively rely on the accuracy and number of accounts published in our nation's newspapers. However, a comparison between excluded and included cases reveal no important difference as to ages of the victims and shooters, times of the year, days of the week, times of the day, or whether adults were on the premises at the time of the shooting. The following is a breakdown of excluded cases:

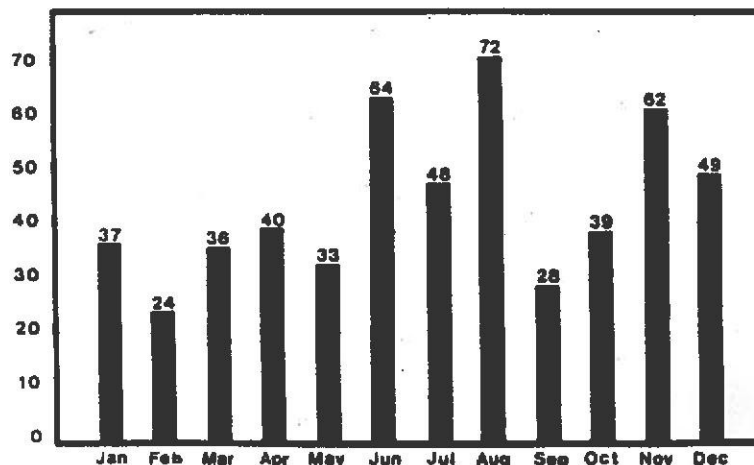
- \* In 52 percent, the time of day and the location of adults could not be determined;
- \* In 25 percent, the type of firearm used in the shooting could not be determined;
- \* In 19 percent, the age of the shooter was unavailable;
- \* In 3 percent, the date could not be determined;
- \* In 1 percent, the site of the shooting was unavailable;

## RESULTS

### Times of the Year

While a significant number of incidents occurred in each month, the frequency of shootings dramatically increased during specific times of the year -- the summer months (June-August) and the holiday season (November-December). In all, 56 percent of the shootings occurred during these times. (CHART A)

(CHART A) -- Number of Incidents by Month

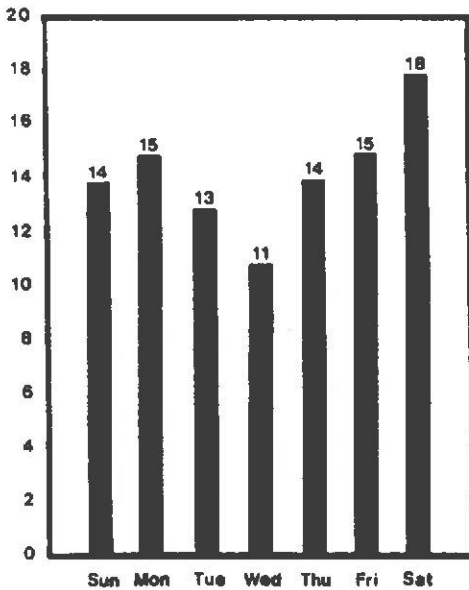


**Days of the Week**

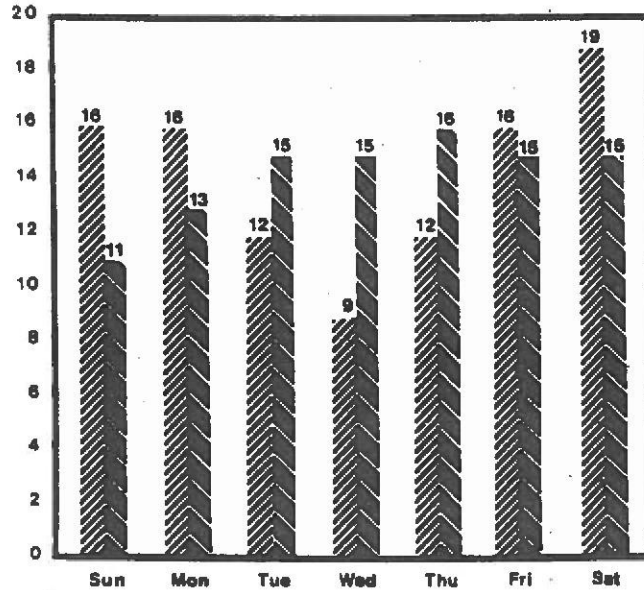
While the shootings were widely dispersed throughout the week, the highest percentage of shootings occurred on Saturday. The lowest percentage took place on Wednesday. (CHART B)



A clearer pattern developed when the incidents were categorized into summer-vacation and school-year shootings. During the school-year (September-May), the peak times for shootings were at the beginning and end of weeks. However, during the summer, the percentage of incidents during the midweek (Tuesday-Thursday) dramatically increased. (CHART C)

**(CHART B) -- Percentage of Shootings by Day**



**(CHART C) -- Percentage of School-Year and Summertime Shootings by Day**



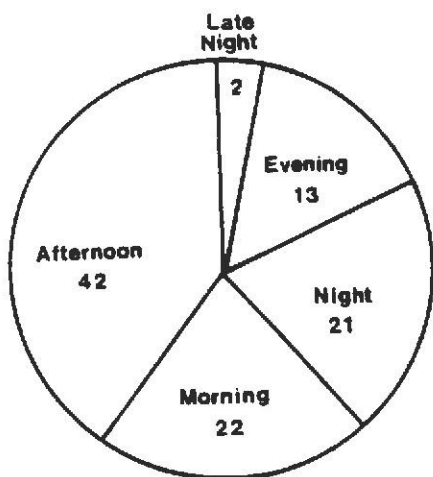
 School-Year Shootings  
 Summertime Shootings

**Times of the Day**

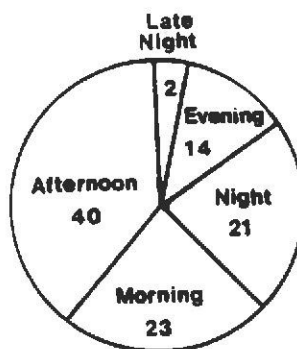
In 447 (84%) of the cases, the time of the shooting could be determined. The afternoon hours (12 noon-4:59 p.m.) were the most common time for the shootings -- nearly doubling the second most common time, morning (5:00-11:59 a.m.). Incidents were least likely to occur during the late-night hours (12 midnight-4:59 a.m.). (Chart D)

Nearly half of the summer shootings occurred in the afternoon -- more than doubling the second most common time, night (8 p.m.-12 midnight). In the school year, the percentage

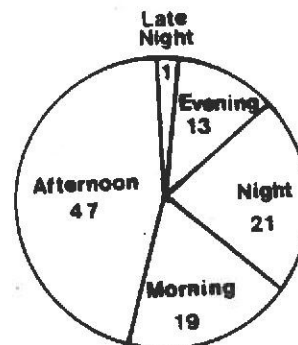
of afternoon shootings declined, while the frequency of morning (5:00-11:59 a.m.), evening (5:00-7:59 p.m.), and late-night shootings slightly increased. The percentage of night (8:00-11:59 p.m.) shootings remained constant. (Charts E & F)



(CHART D) -- Percentage of Shootings by Time of Day



(CHART E) -- Percentage of School-Year Shootings by Time of Day



(CHART F) -- Percentage of Summertime Shootings by Time of Day

### Adult Supervision

In 351 (66%) of the cases, it could be determined if adults were present at the locations when the shooting took place.

No adults were present at the locations in 66 percent of the incidents, with no significant differences between the school-year and the summertime.

When examining data on adult supervision and the times of the shootings, four of every five afternoon (12 noon-4:59 p.m.) shootings occurred when no adults were present -- a substantially higher figure than for other times of the day. Sixty-seven percent of the shootings in the evening and night occurred when no adults were present.

### Discussion

The findings of this study are reinforced by common sense. They show that unintentional shootings among children most often occur when children have free, unsupervised time.

Summertime and weekends during the school year are particularly dangerous for children because both are times when children are often unsupervised for long periods. A large number of the shootings during November and December happened when children are at home for holiday vacations. Many shootings throughout the school year occur in the afternoon when children arrive home from school and are often left unsupervised at their homes or those of friends.

It is interesting to note that the findings of this study are in close correlation with observations in Houston, Texas, by the Houston Child Safe Committee. The Committee found that accidental shootings of children most often occur Friday through Sunday, on major holidays or in the summer.

This reinforces once again the advice of the law enforcement and medical communities that parents must take proper precautions to protect their children from handguns in their own home and in those of their children's friends. Parents take precautions to lock up or remove prescription drugs, cleaners with poisonous chemicals, matches, and sharp objects. Clearly, they should do the same with handguns, because more children are unintentionally killed with handguns than by falls or poisoning, according to the National Safety Council.<sup>3</sup>

Removing handguns from the homes of children is the best way to prevent unintentional shootings. However, parents who feel they must have handguns in the home should, at a very minimum, keep them unloaded and locked away from their children. And, even if parents do not own handguns, they should check with adults at other places where their children play to make sure they follow the same safety precautions.

While this study pinpoints specific times of the year when children are most at risk, it is important to note that parents should take the precautions mentioned above all year. Through the studies conducted by the Center to Prevent Handgun Violence and others, it is clear that a loaded, easily-accessible handgun in the home with children is an invitation to tragedy.

### References

1. National Safety Council. *Accident Facts, 1988 Edition*. Washington, DC.
2. Wintemute, GJ: When Children Shoot Children, 88 Unintended Deaths in California. *JAMA* 1987; Vol. 257:3107-3109.
3. National Safety Council. *Accident Facts, 1988 Edition*. Washington, DC.

This study was conducted by the Center to Prevent Handgun Violence, a nonprofit, education and research organization in Washington, D.C. The Center was established in 1983 to educate the public about the scope of handgun violence in America and the risks and responsibilities of handgun ownership.

Dennis Smith, the Center's director of public education, supervised the research and writing of this study. Vanessa Scherzer, public education assistant, and the Center's Executive Director Barbara Lautman assisted with the study.