

Human Rights Centre Clinic

Tackling Online and Influencer Glamorisation of Gun Violence

Partner: [Lancet Commission on Global Gun Violence and Health](#)

About

In 2024, the Lancet established a new Commission on Global Gun Violence and Health to tackle the escalating global crisis of gun violence. The Commission has been set up to develop evidence-based solutions for reducing gun-related deaths and injuries, ultimately improving public health and safety on a global scale. The Commission consists of an interdisciplinary group of international experts from several disciplines and fields, such as public health, economics, law, medicine, history, and political science, as well as voices from civil society and non-governmental sectors. This project has been set up in collaboration with [Dr Iain Overton](#), Co-Commissioner of the Lancet Commission on Global Gun Violence and Health, and Executive Director of Action on Armed Violence.

Project overview

Firearm manufacturers use tactics, such as targeted marketing, on vulnerable populations – such as young adults or women in minoritised groups – by portraying a disproportionate sense of threat to personal safety and making buying firearms appear attractive through deceptive messaging. A lack of clarity around the adequacy of current checks and balances over such commercial tactics can create a sense of powerlessness and discourage sustained focus on the problem. Inaction leads to normalisation of violence, creating a vicious cycle that becomes harder to break with each passing generation. Moreover, as online content creators increasingly glorify gun

use (often outside formal advertising channels), there is growing concern about how such influencer-led narratives contribute to the social normalisation of firearms.

This project will support the Commission's work by focusing on how online influencers and digital communities, potentially funded by the firearm industry itself, contribute to the glamorisation and normalisation of gun violence. It will identify regulatory gaps in influencer marketing, explore possible solutions, and consider stronger accountability measures for online platforms in managing harmful content. The research findings will contribute to the Commission's evidence base and help inform its recommendations. The project aims to support efforts to address the harmful effects of targeted marketing, deceptive messaging, and limited regulatory oversight concerning firearm promotion through influencer content and digital marketing channels. By contrasting corporate firearm marketing with the often-unregulated influence of online personas, the project will help the Commission address the harmful effects of targeted messaging and the growing public health risk posed by influencer-led normalisation of gun culture.

Background

Civilian gun violence claims an [estimated 600 lives](#) every day around the world, with countless more suffering debilitating injuries that greatly reduce their quality of life. Just six countries – Brazil, Colombia, India, Mexico, the USA, and Venezuela – account for two-thirds of global gun deaths. Although homicides make up most global civilian gun-related deaths at approximately 71%, unintentional firearm discharges and self-harm are also substantial causes of mortality attributable to gun violence. Injuries from gun violence [often result in reduced physical ability](#) for victims, placing them and their families at an increased risk of mental ill health and substance misuse. Inaction on global gun violence has far-reaching consequences. The most immediate of these is the continuation of a preventable human tragedy; lives will continue to be cut short, families shattered, and communities left grappling with fear and trauma. Inaction can strengthen powerful gun lobbies in specific countries, complicating efforts to foster open public discourse and slowing incremental progress on effective gun control measures.

Civilian gun violence [often intersects with complex social issues](#), such as poverty, gang violence, citizens' perceptions of security, and democratisation. With the monopoly on gun ownership no longer remaining with the state, guns exacerbate a breakdown of social order by eroding trust in institutions, which leads to a more fragmented society. [Businesses, for example](#), become reluctant to invest in areas with perceived safety issues, leading to reduced economic opportunities; health systems

have to contend with the [increased likelihood of violence](#) aimed at health-care workers. In these situations, communities are no longer able to provide support to those most in need who, in turn, become even more susceptible to being the perpetrator or victim of gun violence.

The Lancet Commission on Global Gun Violence and Health aims to combine the best of research and practice to catalyse concerted action at the national, regional, and international levels necessary to translate research findings into tangible solutions. The high burden of gun-related death and injury points to a need to find effective solutions and build an evidence-led, global, and renewed understanding of the relationship between guns and health. This understanding must be a multidisciplinary effort that includes the direct and indirect health outcomes associated with gun violence, as well as its economics, political economy, and sociocultural consequences. Such a reckoning must also bring together perspectives from low-income, middle-income, and high-income countries, including the lived experiences of those most affected by guns around the world, such as those living in poverty, young men, and minoritised groups. The aim of the Commission is to facilitate the collection of these perspectives and assess the epidemiological, demographic, economic, and social factors that affect the relationship between gun violence and health outcomes.

In parallel with these longstanding drivers of gun violence, digital platforms have created new pathways for the transmission of violent norms. Social media influencers and online communities, often outside formal regulatory frameworks, increasingly portray firearms as symbols of empowerment, status, or self-defence, particularly targeting (or resonating with) vulnerable populations already affected by structural inequalities. These narratives can mirror or amplify existing commercial tactics, but they are often more personal, viral, and emotionally engaging, making them uniquely potent in shaping perceptions of gun use. The rise of these informal, decentralised actors highlights an underexplored front in understanding the normalisation and desirability of gun ownership, with significant implications for public health interventions and digital regulation.

Project output

The Lancet Commission will work with a project team from Essex Human Rights Centre Clinic to produce a report focusing on how online influencers and digital communities contribute to the glamorisation and normalisation of gun violence. The team will conduct research on relevant frameworks governing influencer marketing and online content regulation in selected jurisdictions, particularly the UK and EU and

examples from other regions, notably the US, where appropriate. The report (totalling approximately 10,000-12,000 words) will address the following questions/issues:

1. What is the current framework for regulating influencer marketing and firearm-related content in the identified jurisdictions?
2. Where do current frameworks fall short in addressing influencer-led glamorisation of firearms and targeting of vulnerable populations?
3. What measures could strengthen oversight and reduce harmful exposure particularly among vulnerable populations via social media? Can good practice examples from other jurisdictions be found?
4. What kinds of accountability measures could be developed or reinforced to ensure that online platforms better manage firearm-related influencer content and its public health impactst?

In order to help answer the above research questions, the team will conduct interviews with relevant experts and subsequent qualitative analysis of interview findings.

The team will also submit a 1,000-2,000 word blog post summarising key findings in May 2026.

To strengthen the project's evidentiary base, this research will incorporate a review of existing empirical studies aimed at assessing the relationship between exposure to influencer-led firearm content and subsequent attitudes or behaviours relating to gun ownership and use. This may include analysing audience demographics, and any available survey data linking online exposure to shifts in perceptions of safety, desirability of gun ownership, or intent to purchase, drawing where appropriate on studies from the US and other jurisdictions. In so doing, this project seeks to distinguish between mere correlation and plausible causal pathways, ensuring that recommendations are grounded in demonstrable impact rather than assumption. While not a primary focus, this empirical review will support the project's regulatory analysis by helping to ground its recommendations in a clearer understanding of how digital influence may shape real-world perceptions and risks.

The report will contribute foundational evidence that, over time, can inform measures aimed at tangibly reducing the harmful effects associated with targeted marketing, deceptive messaging, and inadequate regulatory oversight of firearm promotion. The Lancet Commission will consider these findings as part of its broader effort to develop global policy recommendations, potentially supporting regulators and civil society actors in crafting targeted interventions against harmful influencer practices. Through this work, the Commission ultimately aims to contribute to meaningful change in life

outcomes of communities previously ravaged by the entirely preventable issue of gun violence.

Timeline

Phase 1: November – December 2025:

- Preliminary research, understanding the project and developing the report outline.
- Identifying a list of experts or advocates for interviews and questionnaires.
- Securing ethical approval, if necessary.
- Outline and bibliography to be submitted to the partner organisations for comments.

Phase 2: January – March 2026:

- Carrying out the interviews online.
- Research and data gathering.
- Submission of the first full draft to the partner.

Phase 3: April – June 2026:

- Revision and finalising the report.
- Blog for the Lancet Commission on Global Gun Violence and Health, on their site or another platform, about the main findings of the project.
- Presentation of project to the partner organisation.

Initial reading

1. European Audiovisual Observatory, *National Rules Applicable to Influencers* (2025) available at: <https://rm.coe.int/national-rules-applicable-to-influencers/1680b5540c>.
2. C Goanta and S Ranchordás (eds), *The regulation of social media influencers* (Edward Elgar Publishing 2020).

3. A Antoniou, 'Navigating freezones in the influencerdom: a shadowlands guide' (2024) 29(1) Communications Law - Journal of Computer, Media and Telecommunications Law 8-21.
4. A Antoniou, 'When Likes Go Rogue: Advertising Standards and the Malpractice of Unruly Social Media Influencers' (2024) 16(1) The Journal of Media Law 74-117.
5. F Pflücke, The Case for Increased Responsibility and Liability of Brands in Social Media Influencer Marketing (2024) 13(1) Journal of European Consumer and Market Law 4 – 11.
6. C González-Díaz and N Quintas-Froufe, 'Regulating influencers' commercial communication: No legislation, hardly any self-regulation and policy recommendations' (2024) 16(4) Policy and internet 859-878.
7. C González-Díaz et al, 'The figure of the influencer under scrutiny: highly exposed, poorly regulated' (2024) 9 Frontiers in Communication doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2024.1454543.
8. European Parliament, Policy Department for Economic, Scientific and Quality of Life Policies, *The impact of influencers on advertising and consumer protection in the Single Market* (Feb 2022) available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2022/703350/IPOL_STU\(2022\)703350_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2022/703350/IPOL_STU(2022)703350_EN.pdf).
9. EU Commission, *Influencer Legal Hub* (2023) available at: https://commission.europa.eu/live-work-travel-eu/consumer-rights-and-complaints/influencer-legal-hub_en#more-resources (for background, see the press release by Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers 'Commission and consumer authorities look into business practices of influencers', published on 16 Oct 2023, available at: https://commission.europa.eu/news-and-media/news/commission-and-consumer-authorities-look-business-practices-influencers-2023-10-16_en)
10. Library of Congress: *Influencer Marketing: A Research Guide*, available at: <https://guides.loc.gov/influencer-marketing/regulations>

Focal point

- Dr Iain Overton, Co-Commissioner of the Lancet Commission on Global Gun Violence and Health, ioverton@aoav.org.uk

