Policy & Practice

Court Overturns Gun Ban

The U.S. Supreme Court last month struck down the District of Columbia's ban on handgun ownership in a landmark 5-4 decision holding that the District's law violated the Second Amendment. The D.C. ban, one of the strictest in the nation, made it illegal to own handguns in the District and also required shotgun and rifle owners to unload and disassemble them, or use a trigger lock. A lower court had overturned the ban in March 2007, prompting the Supreme Court challenge. "The Supreme Court's decision undermines our efforts to protect children and adolescents from preventable injuries and deaths," Dr. Robert Sege, director of the division of ambulatory pediatrics at Boston Medical Center and a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Injury, Violence, and Poison Prevention, said in an interview.

Head Start to Cut Enrollment

Faced with an effective $1 billion cut in funding since 2002, costly new administrative requirements, and a lack of congressional action on supplemental funding, Head Start programs across the United States will be forced to cut enrollment by up to 14,000 slots in fiscal year 2009, according to the National Head Start Association. "Unfortunately, the Bush administration and some in the current Congress have decided to leave Head Start twisting in the breeze, forcing us to scrimp, cut corners, and now eliminate slots for thousands of America's most at-risk youths," said the group's board chairman, Ron Herndon. "As a result, the next president and Congress literally will be faced with the question of whether or not they are prepared to do what it will take to ensure we have a Head Start program moving forward."

States Miss Breast-Feeding Measure

Only four states—Alaska, Montana, Oregon, and Washington—have met all five Healthy People 2010 federal targets for breast-feeding, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which bases its results on a 2007 survey of hospitals and birth centers. The survey found that a substantial proportion of facilities used maternity practices that are not evidence based and are known to interfere with breast-feeding. The CDC said that southern states—including states previously determined to have the lowest 6-month breast-feeding rates—tended to have lower scores on the survey. Western states and those in New England generally had higher scores; Vermont and New Hampshire tied for the highest overall maternity practice scores. Healthy People 2010 objectives call for 75% of new mothers to initiate breast-feeding, 50% to continue for 6 months, and 25% to continue for 1 year.

Feds: THC Levels Are at a New High

The federal government says that levels of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) in marijuana are at the highest-ever recorded amounts, and that the potency may be contributing to increasing numbers of teenagers seeking treatment for dependence. The University of Mississippi Potency Monitoring Project tests marijuana primarily taken during law enforcement seizures. The project is funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse. A normal THC level is 1%-5%, but the average potency from the latest quarterly report was 9.6% for marijuana and 24% for hashish. The report is based on 1,248 marijuana samples and 33 hashish samples. The highest recorded potency was 37% for marijuana and 66% for hashish. "The increases in marijuana potency are of concern since they increase the likelihood of acute toxicity, including mental impairment," Dr. Nora Volkow, NIDA director, said in a statement. The federal Office of National Drug Control Policy said that increasing potency may be linked to the increase in treatment admissions for marijuana abuse from 6% in 1992 to 16% in 2006.

Performance-Enhancing Drug Bill

Rep. Elton Gallegly (R-Calif.) has introduced a bill to help eliminate the use of performance-enhancing drugs by high school athletes. The High School Sports Anti-Drug Act would require the Secretary of Education to award grants to states to pilot random drug-testing programs. It would require a parent's written consent before a student could be tested for drugs, and grantees would have to provide recovery, counseling, and treatment programs for students who test positive. The bill also requires grantees to spend at least 10% of their grant funds on prevention. Rep. Gallegly proposes funding for the act of $10 million in 2009 and $20 million in 2010 and in 2011. "The recent Major League Baseball steroids scandal and Marion Jones's being stripped of her Olympic medals show how prevalent the use of performance-enhancing drugs is in amateur and professional sports," he said, adding that it is important to give high-school athletes the opportunity to resist the pressure to use steroids and other dangerous performance-enhancing drugs.

—Jane Anderson