GUN SUICIDE IN THE U.S.

Gun suicides account for nearly two-thirds of U.S. gun deaths – a fact too often overlooked both in the country's political and policy debates about guns, and in many suicide-prevention programs.

- **America experiences an extraordinary rate of gun suicide.**
  - More than half of all suicides in the U.S. are carried out with a gun.¹
  - The rate of gun suicide in the U.S. is eight times that of other high-income countries, even though Americans are 60 percent less likely than those populations to kill themselves with means other than firearms.²

- **Suicide is often an impulsive act, and most people who attempt suicide do not die from it. But that is not the case if they use a gun.**
  - More than 90 percent of people who attempt suicide and survive do not later die of suicide.³
  - In contrast, when people attempt suicide with a gun they rarely get a second chance: around 90 percent of suicide attempts with guns result in death – compared with 69 percent of suffocations, 31 percent of falls, and 2 percent of drug overdoses.⁴
  - As a consequence, people who die by suicides with guns outnumber people who die by suicide by the next most frequent method (suffocation) more than two-to-one.⁵

- **Access to a gun is associated with a marked increase in risk of suicide.**
  - A study of handgun purchasers in California found that they were at seven-times greater risk of dying by suicide in the year after buying the gun, and the risk remained above average for at least six years.⁶
  - People living in states with the highest prevalence of guns are 3.8 times more likely to kill themselves with firearms than are people living in states with the lowest prevalence of guns.⁷ There is no difference in their rates of suicide by non-firearm methods, so overall those in the high-prevalence states are 1.9 times more likely to kill themselves by any means.⁸
  - A policy change in the Israel Defense Forces dictating that troops leave their weapons on-base when they go home for the weekend was associated with a 70 percent decline in gun suicides over the weekend, resulting in a 40 percent reduction in their total suicide rate.⁹

- **U.S. service member are at a heightened risk of firearm suicide.**
  - In 2014, an average of 20 veterans took their own lives each day, accounting for nearly 1 in 5 suicide deaths in the country. The suicide rate of the veteran population is 21 percent higher than that of the civilian population, and it increased 31 percent from 2001 to 2014.¹⁰
  - Two-thirds of suicides among active duty troops involve firearms, even higher than the share among civilians.¹¹
Requiring background checks prior to guns sales is associated with reduced suicide rates.

- The 1994 federal law requiring background checks on guns sold by licensed gun dealers was associated with a reduction in suicide rates among people 55 and older.\textsuperscript{12}
- In states that go beyond federal law and require background checks for all handgun sales, including those sold by people other than licensed gun dealers, there are 48 percent fewer gun suicides than in states that do not.\textsuperscript{13}
- One study found that when Missouri repealed its law requiring background checks on all handgun sales, the state's firearm suicide rate increased by 16 percent. In contrast, when Connecticut passed a law requiring background checks on all handgun sales, its firearm suicide rate fell 15.4 percent.\textsuperscript{14}
- A study of gun suicides among 80,000 mentally ill adults in two large Florida counties found that 28 percent were prohibited from having firearms at the time of their deaths,\textsuperscript{15} suggesting that enforcing firearm prohibitions by requiring background checks on all gun sales could reduce firearm suicide.

Other legislative measures also show promise for reducing suicide.

- Gun Violence Restraining Orders (GVROs) – which allow a court to temporarily restrict a person's access to firearms upon a showing that the person poses a danger to themselves or others – represent a promising strategy for reducing suicide. Between 1999-2013, more than half the time Connecticut's law was invoked it was because a person posed a risk to them self.\textsuperscript{16} Preliminary results of an evaluation of the law suggested that it prevented one suicide for every 7 to 16 orders issued – saving between 49 to 103 lives over that period.\textsuperscript{17}
- Child Access Prevention (CAP) laws – which impose criminal liability when a gun owner stores a firearm irresponsibly and a child gains access to it – are associated with an 8.3 percent decline in rates of overall suicide by children aged 14-17. Such laws were estimated to have prevented a total of 333 suicides over a twelve-year period in eighteen states that implemented them.\textsuperscript{18}
Everytown for Gun Safety, “Gun Violence By The Numbers,” available at: http://every.tw/1N3rXMc


U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Suicide and self-inflicted injury,” available at: http://1.usa.gov/1RYhXvP


The high-prevalence group included WY, SD, AK, WV, MT, AR, MS, ID, ND, AL, KY, WI, LA, TN, and UT, with a total population of 116 million. The low prevalence group included HI, MA, RI, NJ, CT, and NY, with a total population of 119 million.


