FIREARM SUICIDE IN THE UNITED STATES

Access to a gun during a period of crisis is often the difference between life and death. Approximately 90% of people who attempt suicide with a gun will die. In contrast, over 90% of those who attempt suicide by other methods will live, and they are unlikely to attempt suicide again. This is not because gun users are more suicidal, or more mentally ill. It is because guns are more lethal than any other method of self-harm.

That fact is the driving force behind an epidemic of gun suicide in America. Americans are eight times more likely to die by firearm suicide than people in other high-income countries, thirteen veterans die by gun suicide every day, and child firearm suicide is on the rise. In total, over 21,000 Americans die by gun suicide each year. But firearm suicide can be prevented. Responsible gun storage, a strong background check system, and temporarily removing guns in periods of acute crisis are common-sense strategies to protect those at greatest risk.

Suicide accounts for nearly two of every three gun deaths in this country, and U.S. gun suicide rates dwarf those of other high-income countries.

• Each year, over 21,000 Americans die by gun suicide – nearly 58 deaths per day.1
• More than half of all suicide deaths in the U.S. are carried out with a gun.2
• The gun suicide rate in the U.S. is eight times that of other high-income countries.3
• Older males are more likely to die by gun suicide.4
• Firearm suicide varies by race; whites have the greatest risk of firearm suicide, followed by American Indians and Alaska Natives.5

Child firearm suicide is on the rise—and when children kill themselves with a gun, it’s most often a gun from their own home.

• American children are 11 times more likely to die by gun suicide than their peers in other high-income countries.6
• Until 2007, child firearm suicide was declining in the U.S. Since then, it has increased by 70%—to its highest rate in more than a decade—and now kills approximately 500 American children every year.7
• Four in ten child suicides involve a firearm.8 And when children die by gun suicide, they are likely to be using a gun they found at home: over 80% of youth gun suicides used a gun belonging to a family member.8
• Many American children have easy access to guns. More than 1 in 3 U.S. children live in a gun-owning household, and only half of those households report that all their firearms are locked.9 In all, almost 1.7 million U.S. children live in homes with firearms that are both unlocked and loaded.10
Veterans are at a heightened risk of suicide, and firearm suicide in particular.
• About twenty veterans die by suicide each day.\(^{12}\)
• The suicide rate of the veteran population is 22% higher than that of the civilian population.\(^{13}\)
• Two-thirds of veteran suicides are by gun.\(^{14}\)

Most people who attempt suicide do not die—unless they use a gun.
• When a person attempts suicide, the method they use determines how likely they are to survive.
• Across all suicide attempts not involving a firearm, less than 10% will result in death.\(^{15}\)
  For example, 98% of people who try to kill themselves through drug overdose—the most common method of attempted suicide—will survive the attempt.\(^{16}\)
• For gun suicides, those statistics are flipped: approximately 90% of gun suicide attempts end in death.\(^{17}\)
• Gun users are no more suicidal, or have no greater intent to die, than those who use other methods.\(^{18}\) They simply have access to a particularly dangerous method of self-harm.

Suicide is often an impulsive act, and those who survive a suicidal act are unlikely to try again.
• Many of those who attempt suicide spend 10 minutes or less deliberating before the actual attempt.\(^{19}\)
• More than 90% of people who survive suicide attempts do not later die of suicide.\(^{20}\)
  In fact, 70% of people who attempt suicide and survive have no further attempts.\(^{21}\)
• So, contrary to myth, a person with suicidal intent is not going to kill themselves “one way or another;” if they do not have access to lethal means of self-harm, they are likely to survive the moment of crisis.

Since suicide attempts with a gun are almost always lethal, access to a gun increases the risk of death by suicide.
• Household gun access triples the risk of death by suicide.\(^{22}\)
• People living in states with the highest prevalence of guns are almost four times more likely to die by gun suicide than people living in states with the lowest prevalence of guns.\(^{23}\)
• One study found that the risk of death by gun suicide increased by seven times within the first year of purchasing a handgun.\(^{24}\)
• Research shows that variations in suicide rates across states, cities, and regions are primarily due to variations in the availability of firearms—not by differences in mental health.\(^{25}\)
Common-sense programs and policies can save lives by limiting gun access for children and people at risk of harming themselves.

- Responsible gun storage can prevent firearm suicide by children and teens.
  - Since most children who die by gun suicide use a gun from their own home, responsible storage is central to child suicide prevention. Storing firearms unloaded and locked, with the ammunition locked in a separate location, reduces a child's ability to access those guns and protects children from suicide.26
  - There is widespread agreement that good medical care includes conversations about safe firearm storage. A majority of U.S. adults—including gun owners—believe it's appropriate for doctors to talk to their patients about firearms.27 And gun owners who receive counseling from their physician about firearm storage are more likely to store their guns responsibly.28
  - Communities can take action to promote safe storage. A community-based safe storage training and lockbox giveaway was associated with improved storage practices. And community members like police, veterans, and firearms retailers—people who use guns regularly—are among the most trusted voices in safe storage.29

- Extreme risk protection orders provide an opportunity to intervene and remove firearms from people at risk of harming themselves.
  - Extreme risk protection orders (ERPOs) allow law enforcement or immediate family members to petition a court to temporarily remove firearms from an individual who is at risk to himself or others.
  - Connecticut has a version of an extreme risk protection order law in place, and it has been linked to a reduction in suicides. Researchers estimate that a suicide is averted in approximately one in ten gun removal cases brought under this law.30

- Background checks on all gun sales help keep firearms out of the hands of people with dangerous mental illnesses.
  - In the states that go beyond federal law and require background checks on all handgun sales, including guns sold by unlicensed sellers, there are 47% fewer gun suicides.31
  - Connecticut's background check law, for example, led to an estimated 15% drop in the state's gun suicide rate.32 In contrast, when Missouri repealed background checks, it led to an estimated 16% increase in state gun suicide rates.33

- Veterans Affairs records are an essential part of the background check system.
  - Members of Congress have proposed discarding hundreds of thousands of mental health records from the background check system. This would enable VA beneficiaries suffering from severe mental illnesses to buy firearms. Veterans already bear a disproportionate burden in the U.S. gun suicide epidemic; enabling gun access for those in crisis would only put them at greater risk.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline</th>
<th>Text HOME to 741741 from anywhere in the US, anytime, about any type of crisis.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lifeline is a national network of local crisis centers that provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. suicidepreventionlifeline.org 1-800-273-TALK (8255)</td>
<td>For more information on responsible storage of firearms and how you can help others improve their storage practices, visit besmartforkids.org.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>