UNLOCKED AND LOADED: HOW AMERICA’S CHILDREN ARE DYING BY GUN SUICIDE

Executive Summary

On March 21, 2013, in Southgate, Michigan, Tyler Nichols left his first period class at Davidson Middle School. He went into a bathroom, where he shot and killed himself with a handgun. He was discovered by another student who alerted school staff. The school of approximately 800 students was put on lockdown. Students hid in their classrooms; police officers roamed the halls. An hour later, parents were allowed in five at a time to pick up their traumatized children. Tyler left an open suicide note in which he wrote about the difficulties of being a young teenager. According to his mother, Tyler had only recently showed signs that he was struggling with depression. A classmate said that Tyler "was loved by a lot of kids."

Tyler was just thirteen years old. He was too young to legally possess a handgun, but he didn’t need to look far to find the gun he would use to kill himself. Like most children who die by gun suicide, he found the gun at home; it was in his father’s bed stand, unlocked and loaded.

Tyler’s story is staggeringly common. Every day, at least one child takes their own life with a gun: almost 500 American children die by gun suicide every year. Federal law prohibits gun dealers from selling firearms to people under 18 years old, but American children are obtaining them nonetheless; guns are used in 40% of child suicides. It doesn’t have to be this way: children in other high-income countries are more than 90% less likely to die by gun suicide.

And the problem is growing: over the last decade, the child firearm suicide rate in the United States has been on the rise.

Child firearm suicide is a gun violence crisis. It is also frequently preventable. Child suicides are often undertaken impulsively, with unlocked firearms they find at home. Tyler found the gun he used in a nightstand drawer; other children and teens have killed themselves with guns they found in closets and under beds. Because guns are more lethal than any other method of suicide, a child who attempts suicide with a gun is likely to die; approximately 90% of gun suicide attempts end in death. But when children can’t access guns in their moment of crisis, they are much less likely to die—even if they attempt suicide by another method.

Although suicide prevention is a complex issue, one simple step has been shown to help: storing firearms unloaded and locked, with the ammunition stored and locked separately. Responsible gun storage won’t help every child in crisis, but for some children, it’s a matter of life and death.

RESPONSIBLE STORAGE OF FIREARMS—STORING A GUN LOCKED, UNLOADED, AND SEPARATE FROM AMMUNITION—REDUCES A CHILD’S ABILITY TO ACCESS THOSE GUNS, AND HELPS PROTECT CHILDREN FROM SUICIDE.
In 2015, the most recent year for which data is available, 565 children and adolescents died by firearm suicide—the highest recorded number of child firearm suicide deaths.

Child Firearm Suicide Is a Gun Violence Crisis Across America—and It’s on the Rise

Approximately 500 children in the United States die by gun suicide each year. Those suicides account for approximately four in ten child firearm deaths, and 40% of all child suicides. During the teen years, gun suicides are even more prevalent, accounting for nearly half of teen firearm deaths.

Alarmingly, the U.S. child firearm suicide rate has been rising dramatically since its low point in 2007, reversing decreases in earlier years. In fact, child firearm suicide rates rose 70% between 2007 and 2015, to the highest rate in more than a decade. In 2015, the most recent year for which data is available, 565 children and adolescents died by firearm suicide—the highest recorded number of child firearm suicide deaths.

This rise is especially troubling because suicide can cause a copycat effect: when a child dies by suicide, that child’s classmates are more likely to attempt suicide themselves.

Though every region of the country is affected by this gun violence crisis, the rates vary state by state. Between 2010 and 2015, Alaska, Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming had the highest recorded rates of child firearm suicide. Other research shows that youth firearm suicides occur more often in rural areas of the country.

As a whole, child firearm suicide rates in the United States are extraordinarily high compared to those in other high-income countries. In a study of over 20 high-income countries, U.S. children are 11 times more likely than their peers in other nations to die by gun suicide, but they’re no more likely to die by any other suicide method.
Everytown.org/suicide-prevention

Child Suicide is the Result of Access to Lethal Means in a Moment of Crisis—And Guns Are More Lethal Than Almost Any Other Method

The data tell a clear story: access to guns is killing American kids. Suicide attempts are often impulsive; many people who attempt suicide deliberate for less than 10 minutes before taking action. And while mental health concerns are complex and potentially lifelong, an acute suicidal state—in which someone takes a suicidal action—is likely to be temporary, and those who attempt suicide are unlikely to repeat the attempt.

Nine out of ten people who survive a suicide attempt will not go on to die by suicide, and over two-thirds of people who survive a suicide attempt never try to kill themselves again.

When a child 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. For example, 98% of people who try to kill themselves through drug overdose—the most common method of attempted suicide—will survive the attempt. That means that people who attempt suicide will often have a chance to recover and get help. But for gun suicides, those statistics are flipped: approximately 90% of gun suicide attempts end in death. That's one reason why a gun in the home triples the risk of death by suicide.

Over 80% of children who die by firearm suicide used a gun from their own home. Despite this risk, gun owners do not always take sufficient precautions to prevent children from accessing firearms. More than 1 in 3 American children live in a gun-owning household, and only half of those households report that all their firearms are locked. In all, almost 1.7 million children live in homes with loaded, unlocked firearms. And kids know where the guns are—over 40% of adolescents in gun-owning households reported easy access to a gun and the ability to shoot it.

For all of the reasons outlined above, access to a gun in a moment of crisis increases a child’s risk of death by suicide: Since suicide attempts are often impulsive and non-fatal, many who attempt suicide will survive, and they will not go on to die by suicide in the future. But since suicide attempts with a gun are almost always lethal, a person who attempts gun suicide is unlikely to get that second chance. A child who attempts suicide using anything other than a gun is likely to survive—and they aren't likely to try again. But a child who uses a gun in their suicidal act is likely to die.

To Lower the Risk of Child Suicide, Store Guns Locked and Unloaded

The law, common sense, and the American public agree: Children should not have unsupervised access to guns. Federal law prohibits firearms dealers from selling guns to children, and generally prohibits children from possessing handguns. Despite these prohibitions, children in crisis are accessing guns—and turning them on themselves.

Since most children who die by gun suicide use a gun from their own home, responsible firearm storage is central to child suicide prevention. Responsible storage of firearms—storing a gun locked, unloaded, and separate from ammunition—reduces a child’s ability to access those guns, and helps protect children from suicide. Not every crisis in a child’s life can be predicted or prevented; it is crucial that children do not have access to firearms in those moments.
Many gun owners report that they bought a gun to protect their homes and families, but protection isn’t just about external threats. **Responsible gun ownership requires responsible storage** to protect children from risk in their own homes. It is also important, for gun owners and non-gun owners alike, to ask about others’ storage practices and to stress the importance of responsible storage with family, friends, and other community members. These conversations matter: research shows that when physicians counsel patients on responsible storage, it can improve storage behaviors, keeping kids safer.\(^{34}\) But it doesn’t have to stop there—firearms retailers, police, gun owners and others who handle guns regularly are among the most trusted voices when it comes to firearm storage.\(^{35}\)

Like too many other children who die by gun suicide, Tyler Nichols had access to an unlocked gun in his house. And that led to irreversible tragedy. **Responsible gun storage can’t make up for what Tyler and his loved ones experienced, but it can stop other children, families, and communities from suffering the same thing.**

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**The National Suicide Prevention 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)**

Text **HOME** to **741741** from anywhere in the US, anytime, about any type of crisis.

For more information on responsible storage of firearms and how you can help others improve their storage practices, visit **besmartforkids.org**.


10 Fowler KA, Dahlberg LL, Haileyesus T, Gutierrez C, Bacon S. Childhood firearm injuries in the United States. Pediatrics. 2017;140(1):e20163486. The number used in the study was calculated by averaging the number of child firearm suicides from 2012 through 2014.

11 Fowler KA, Dahlberg LL, Haileyesus T, Gutierrez C, Bacon S. Childhood firearm injuries in the United States. Pediatrics. 2017;140(1):e20163486. There is some debate about at what age a child develops the cognitive ability to formulate suicidal ideation. The study used the age of 10 because reported child firearm suicides under that age are incredibly rare, and because children younger than 10 may not be capable of forming suicidal intent.


16 Swanson SA, Colman I. Association between exposure to suicide and suicidality outcomes in youth. CMAJ. 2013 Jul 9; 185(10): 870-877.


