

Firearms & Suicide – What do we know and what can we do?

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Scope of the Problem

- $\approx 2/3$ of US gun deaths are suicides and $>50\%$ of US suicides are gun deaths (23,000+ firearm suicide deaths per year)¹
- Firearms are used in less than 5% of suicide attempts – 85-95% lethality rate causes them to be disproportionately represented among suicide deaths²
- Suicide risk is up to 5x higher in homes with firearms³
- Risk increases further when firearms are stored unsafely^{4,5}

Nature of the Problem

- The vast majority of those who think about suicide never attempt + the vast majority of those who attempt never die by suicide – how badly someone wants to die tells us nothing about who makes that transition⁶
- We are no better now than in the 1950s at predicting suicide death⁷ – system of simply addressing known risk is not working, with annual increases in the suicide rate since 2005 and a $>30\%$ increase since 1999
- Firearms do not cause individuals to become suicidal⁸, but they impact the nature of suicidal thoughts and they make suicidal people far more likely to die⁹
- Firearm ownership is associated with statewide suicide rates, even when we account for mental illness, poverty, race, access to care, religiosity, veteran status, and countless other important factors¹⁰⁻¹³
- Traditional suicide risk factors (e.g. mental illness) tell us a lot about who will think about suicide, but nearly nothing about which individuals will attempt or die by suicide¹⁴
- Those who die by suicide using a firearm tend to belong to demographic groups that avoid mental health care altogether and underreport thoughts of suicide^{15,16}, so our system often does not identify risk within this group until they die. Common refrain is “I didn’t see it coming.” Need primary prevention model.
- Firearms appear to make suicidal individuals more capable of suicide, so we need to not only focus on lowering desire for death, which requires disclosure on the part of suicidal individuals, but also reducing the capability to act lethally on suicidal thoughts

Solution to the Problem

- “Means safety,” formerly referred to as means restriction or means reduction, refers to rendering specific methods for suicide less deadly or less available for a suicide attempt
- Has worked with other public health issues (e.g. needle exchange programs and HIV infections; “Friends don’t let friends drive drunk” and drunk driving fatalities)¹⁷
- Has worked on suicide across the globe (e.g. UK, Sri Lanka, Israeli Defense Force) and across methods (e.g. detoxification of domestic gas, banning highly lethal pesticides, not allowing service members to bring service weapons home on weekends/holidays)¹⁸⁻²⁰
- Preventing an individual from using a specific method does not result in them finding another way to die²¹ – even if they tried, other methods are $<$ lethal than firearms (e.g. 2-3% lethality rate for intentional overdose)
- 70% of those who survive a suicide attempt never attempt again; 90% never die by suicide²². Second chances matter and those who attempt with firearms rarely get a second chance
- Can involve evidence-based legislation (e.g. permit-to-purchase + universal background checks, waiting periods, extreme risk protection orders)²³⁻²⁵ and the promotion of safe storage²⁶
- Many gun owners do not believe that firearm access and storage are related to suicide risk²⁷, so we need a national education campaign led by credible messengers to increase motivation for change
- Promote storing personal firearms unloaded, separate from ammo, in a secure location (e.g. gun safe) and removing from the home during times of crisis
- Promote lethal means counseling in healthcare settings and beyond

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