



## **American Roulette: Murder-Suicide in the United States**

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Violence Policy Center

OCTOBER 2015

# American Roulette

## MURDER-SUICIDE IN THE UNITED STATES

Road Trip Takes Tragic Turn

**Murder/suicide leaves  
city stunned on Sunday**

**Believe officer killed girlfriend,  
then turned gun on himself**

**GOP IN  
MURDER  
SUICIDE**

**Man kills wife, self at tag agency**

Trip Takes Detour Into Murder And Suicide

**Father kills son, self**

**Maumelle mom killed child, then herself, police say**

**HORROR AT  
THE RANGH**

**Mother of three kills  
two children, herself**

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The Violence Policy Center (VPC) is a national nonprofit educational organization that conducts research and public education on violence in America and provides information and analysis to policymakers, journalists, advocates, and the general public.

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## INTRODUCTION

Murder-suicide is “a dramatic, violent event” in which a person, almost always a man, commits one murder or multiple murders, and then shortly after commits suicide.<sup>1</sup> What makes these acts particularly disturbing is that they involve more than one person and often involve a family. They almost always are committed with a firearm. Yet outside of high-profile mass shootings, the phenomenon of murder suicide usually garners little public attention as a significant contributor to gun-related death and injury. This is despite the fact that, as one medical professional has observed, “because many murder-suicides result in the death or injury of family members and sometimes mass murder, they cause countless additional morbidity, family trauma, and disruption of communities.”<sup>2</sup>

Currently, no comprehensive national database or tracking system exists to systematically document the toll in death and injury of murder-suicide in the United States.<sup>A</sup> In order to more fully understand the human costs of murder-suicide, starting in 2002 the Violence Policy Center (VPC) began collecting and analyzing news reports of murder-suicides, resulting in a series of studies titled *American Roulette: Murder-Suicide in the United States*. This is the fifth edition of the study.<sup>B</sup> For each analysis, the VPC tracked murder-suicide incidents over a six-month period using news reports. For this most recent edition of the report, news reports of murder-suicides were collected for the period January 1, 2014, through June 30, 2014. To be included in the study, both the murder and subsequent suicide had to occur within 72 hours of each other and within this six-month time period. While there is no official data to ensure all incidents that actually occurred were included, this study provides the most accurate portrait possible of murder-suicide in America and is most likely the largest and most comprehensive analysis currently available.

Medical studies estimate that between 1,000 and 1,500 deaths per year in the United States are the result of murder-suicide.<sup>3</sup> This VPC analysis reveals that in the first half of 2014:

- There were 282 murder-suicide events resulting in 617 murder-suicide deaths, of which 285 were suicides and 332 were homicides.
- Using these figures, nearly 11 murder-suicide events occurred in the United States each week during the study period.
- Of the 282 murder-suicide events, 261 were known to involve a firearm (93 percent).

A The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS) compiles and combines data from law enforcement, coroners and medical examiners, vital statistics, and crime laboratories and does include information on “Homicide followed by Suicide.” As of this writing, NVDRS data is being collected in 32 states (Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, and Wisconsin). Aggregate data is currently available for 16 states on the CDC’s NVDRS website (<http://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/nvdrs.html>) and, according to the CDC, “these states or the data from them were not analyzed or chosen to provide a representative sample of the United States population” (<http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/wisqars/NVDRS/About-NVDRS.htm>).

B Prior editions of the VPC study *American Roulette* were issued in April 2002 (<http://www.vpc.org/graphics/amroul.pdf>), May 2006 (<http://www.vpc.org/studies/amroul2006.pdf>), April 2008 (<http://www.vpc.org/studies/amroul2008.pdf>), and May 2012 (<http://www.vpc.org/studies/amroul2012.pdf>). For a chart comparing the key findings of each of these four prior editions as well as this most recent edition, please see page seven.

- Of the 285 suicides, 254 were male, 30 were female, and one was of unidentified gender.
- Of the 332 homicides, 252 victims were female, 79 victims were male, and the gender of one victim was not identified.
- Seventy-two percent of all murder-suicides involved an intimate partner. Of these, 93 percent were females killed by their intimate partners. Of these, 94 percent involved a gun.
- Forty-five of the homicide victims were children and teens less than 18 years of age.
- Sixty-three children and teens less than 18 years of age were survivors who witnessed some aspect of the murder-suicide.
- Forty-six percent of murder-suicides involving a male murderer and three or more victims were perpetrated by family annihilators.

By doubling the total number of fatalities during the six-month period for a yearly estimate, there were an estimated 1,234 murder-suicide deaths in 2014. This is within the standard range of estimates for murder-suicides. Due to the necessary limitations of our incident-collection method, this is most likely an underestimate. Anecdotal evidence suggests that our study may have missed a small percentage of murder-suicides. Whether this would be the result of an incident not being reported, not being reported as a murder-suicide, not falling within our self-imposed time frame, or not being published in an online format is not known. In the absence of a comprehensive national surveillance system, there is no means available for a complete and accurate count. However, once again, the VPC study is most likely the most recent, complete, accurate, and detailed accounting available.

## TRENDS IDENTIFIED FROM THE STUDY

Listed below are murder-suicide trends and characteristics as identified from the VPC analysis. Following each subsection is an incident taken from the news reports collected for the study illustrating the subsection's findings. At the end of this section, is a chart comparing key findings of this study with those from the four prior editions.

Following this section is an appendix that lists the number of murder-suicides by state. States with no reported murder-suicides during the six-month period are also listed in the appendix.

Eight states had 10 or more murder-suicides in the six-month period of the study. In order, these states were: Texas (34); California (27); Florida (20); Georgia (16); Pennsylvania (12); North Carolina (10); Ohio (10); and, Tennessee (10).

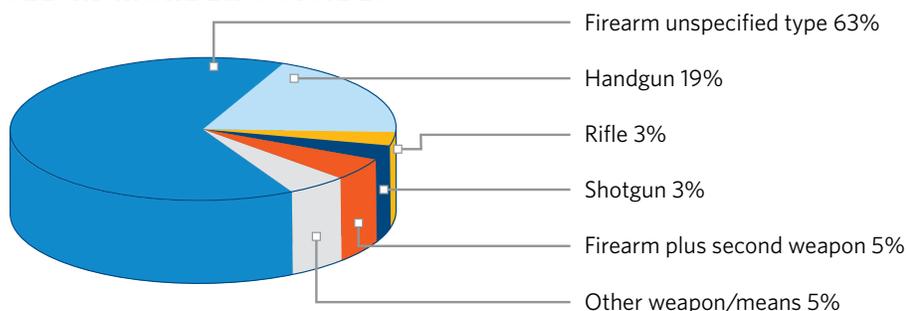
### MOST MURDER-SUICIDES INVOLVE A FIREARM

In the analysis, 93 percent (261 of 282) of murder-suicide incidents were known to involve a firearm. For *all* murder-suicides:

- 19 percent involved solely a handgun;
- 3 percent involved solely a rifle;
- 3 percent involved solely a shotgun;
- 63 percent involved only a firearm which was not identified more specifically than "a gun" or multiple firearm types;
- 5 percent involved more than one weapon, but one of the weapons was a firearm; and,
- 5 percent involved other weapons/means.<sup>C</sup>

The chart below, "Weapons Used in Murder-Suicides," illustrates the weapons used from the VPC analysis of incidents in which the weapon(s) could be identified, including a distribution of firearm murder-suicides in regard to firearm type.

### WEAPONS USED IN MURDER-SUICIDES



<sup>C</sup> The 5.0 percent involving other weapons/means consisted of 14 incidents in which the weapon(s)/means could be identified. For these 14 incidents, the weapons/means used were: asphyxiation (1); blunt force (1); carbon monoxide poisoning (2); drove car off bridge (1); fire (1); hammer (1); hanging (3); jump from bridge (1); knife or cutting instrument (6); prescription drugs (3); stood in front of train (1); suffocation (4). The total number of murder weapons/means exceeds the number of incidents because multiple weapons/means were used in nine cases. The means were not identified in seven incidents.

All major murder-suicide studies in the United States completed since 1950 have shown that firearms are by far the most common method of committing homicide, with the offender choosing the firearm for suicide as well.<sup>4</sup> Estimates range from firearms being used in 80 percent to 94 percent of cases, but many other weapons, including aircraft, have been used. As one expert on a National Institute of Justice panel focusing on murder-suicide noted, guns are the “low-hanging fruit.”<sup>5</sup>

## **MOST MURDERERS IN MURDER-SUICIDES ARE MALE**

In this study, 89 percent of the offenders were males who acted alone. Other studies analyzing murder-suicide have found that most perpetrators of murder-suicide are male—more than 90 percent in recent studies of the United States.<sup>6</sup> Another study which only looked at murder-suicides *involving couples* noted that more than 90 percent were perpetrated by men.<sup>7</sup> This is consistent with homicides in general, in which 89 percent of homicides are committed by male offenders. However, most homicides involve male victims killed by male offenders (68 percent), whereas a male victim being specifically targeted by a male offender in a murder-suicide is relatively rare.<sup>8</sup>

**MARYLAND:** In January, Darion Aguilar, 19, shot and killed two strangers in a local mall. Aguilar arrived at the Mall in Columbia in a taxi at 10:15 am. By 11:15 am he walked into a Zumiez skateboard gear shop and entered the dressing room. Seconds later he emerged, wielding a loaded shotgun. He fired six to eight rounds, fatally wounding the two employees present, Brianna Benlolo, 21, and Tyler Johnson, 25, before turning the weapon on himself. When police investigated afterwards, they found his backpack in the dressing room containing a homemade, crude explosive device constructed from firecrackers. Examination of his journal revealed that Aguilar had written about experiencing depression and having suicidal thoughts as well as killing others.

## **MOST MURDER-SUICIDES INVOLVE AN INTIMATE PARTNER**

The most prevalent type of murder-suicide was between two intimate partners,<sup>D</sup> with the man killing his wife or girlfriend. Such events are commonly the result of a breakdown in the relationship.<sup>9</sup> The average age difference between the offender and primary victim was 3.8 years. Overall, the age difference ranged from none to 49 years. (Other studies on fatal violence for spouses have found that there is a greater risk of homicide victimization as the age difference between the husband and wife increases.<sup>10</sup>) In this study, 72 percent of all murder-suicides involved an intimate partner. Of these, 93 percent were females killed by their intimate partners. Of these, 94 percent involved a gun.<sup>E</sup>

D For the purposes of this study, an intimate partner or intimate acquaintance is defined as a spouse, common-law spouse, ex-spouse, girlfriend/boyfriend, or ex-girlfriend/boyfriend.

E In comparison, in 2013—the most recent data available—for all homicides (where the relationship could be determined) 18 percent of homicide victims were killed by an intimate partner. Of these, 77 percent were females killed by their intimate partners. Data from the 2013 FBI Supplementary Homicide Report, analysis by the Violence Policy Center.

**TENNESSEE:** In January, Chad Ingle, 49, shot and killed his wife Shirley, 59, before killing himself. Investigators reported that Ingle shot his wife from their house as she tried to escape him. Her body was discovered at the end of a neighbor's driveway, with multiple gunshot wounds. Ingle was found in an upstairs bedroom with multiple self-inflicted gunshot wounds.

### **MANY MURDER-SUICIDES WITH THREE OR MORE VICTIMS INVOLVE A MALE "FAMILY ANNIHILATOR"—A SUBCATEGORY OF INTIMATE PARTNER MURDER-SUICIDE**

Many multiple-victim murder-suicides involving a male murderer and a large number (three or more) of victims are perpetrated by family annihilators. In this report, 46 percent (six of 13) of murder-suicides involving a male murderer and three or more victims were perpetrated by family annihilators. Family annihilators are murderers who kill their intimate partners and children, as well as other family members, before killing themselves. In many cases, a family annihilator is suffering from depression and has financial or other problems and feels the family is better off dying with him than remaining alive to deal with the problems at hand.<sup>11</sup>

**FLORIDA:** In June, Sonny Medina, 36, shot and killed his wife Maria Navas, 29, and their three daughters, ages 10, five, and two, before turning the gun on himself. Authorities responded to a 911 call around 2:25 am. When they arrived at the family's residence they found all five family members deceased from gunshot wounds. Medina's wounds were determined to be self-inflicted. Medina and Navas were experiencing marital issues, and Navas had been considering leaving Medina since a few weeks prior to the shooting.

### **MOST MURDER-SUICIDES OCCUR IN THE HOME**

In this study, 81 percent of murder-suicides occurred in the home. Though not specified in most studies, available data confirm that the home of the offender and/or victim is the most likely place for murder-suicide. Studies show that within the home, more murder-suicides are committed in the bedroom than any other room.<sup>12</sup>

**FLORIDA:** In January, Jennifer Berman, 48, shot and killed her two teenage children Jacqueline, 15, and Alex, 16, before killing herself. Her ex-husband, Richard Berman, became concerned after being informed by Jennifer that she "was going to harm the kids." He called 911 en route to the home. Upon arriving at the house, he discovered the bodies of his two children and his ex-wife. All the victims had been shot. Jennifer was facing serious financial issues and foreclosure on the family home following their divorce the previous month.

## **CHILDREN ARE OFTEN VICTIMS OF, AND WITNESSES TO, MURDER-SUICIDE**

Forty-five of the homicide victims were children and teens less than 18 years of age. Sixty-three children and teens less than 18 years of age were survivors who witnessed some aspect of the murder-suicide.<sup>13</sup>

**INDIANA:** In April, Remanard Castro, 55, shot and killed his estranged wife, Nina, 42, in a Catholic school parking lot, before killing himself. Nina was waiting with her daughter, 16, to pick up her son, 14, from school. Castro accosted her in the school parking lot while she was waiting, and fatally shot her. Both children witnessed the incident. Police followed him back to his residence, where they found him in the back of the house with a gun in hand. When the officer ordered Castro to drop his weapon, he shot himself. He was pronounced dead at the scene. Earlier in the year Castro had been charged with rape and criminal confinement for allegedly assaulting Nina Castro after she had gone to his home to collect some belongings. Castro had pointed a gun to her head and forced her to have sex with him.

## **UNIQUE FACTORS MAY DRIVE MURDER-SUICIDE AMONG THE ELDERLY**

In this study, 33 percent of murder-suicides involved a murderer 55 years of age or older. Older people rarely commit homicide. If most murder-suicides involve family turmoil, a smaller, discrete category involves older people where the declining health of either the victim, the offender, or both is an issue.<sup>14</sup> In 2013, only eight percent of known homicide offenders were 55 years of age or older.<sup>15</sup> Suicide, however, is disproportionately represented in this age group, with 35 percent of suicide victims being 55 years of age or older.<sup>16</sup>

**MARYLAND:** In April, the bodies of Lester Wright, 90, and his wife Midge, 91, were discovered in their home. Police were dispatched to their residence following a 911 call from a concerned family member. Responders found Midge lying in bed with two gunshot wounds to the chest, and Lester on the floor with three similar self-inflicted gunshot wounds. He was transported to the hospital, where he died shortly after from his injuries. Both of the Wrights had been in declining health and had planned to move into an assisted living facility within days.

**AMERICAN ROULETTE: SELECT COMPARISONS FOR THE YEARS 2001, 2005, 2007, 2011, AND 2014**

Category	2001	2005	2007	2011	2014
Murder-suicide incidents involving a firearm	95%	92%	89%	90%	93%
Murder-suicide incidents in which the killers were male	90%	94%	95%	90%	89%
Murder-suicide incidents that involved intimate partners	74%	74%	73%	72%	72%
Average age difference in intimate partner killings	6.6 years	6.3 years	6.0 years	3.3 years	3.8 years
Murder-suicide incidents that occurred in the home	76%	75%	75%	80%	81%
Number of children killed in murder-suicides	N/T	47	45	55	45
Number of children who witnessed murder-suicides	N/T	N/T	44	66	63
Murder-suicide incidents among the elderly	21%	23%	27%	25%	33%

\* N/T = Not Tabulated

## CONCLUSION

Most people think of suicide as a solitary act, affecting only one person. Yet, the effects of murder-suicide go far beyond the shooter: family, friends, co-workers, and absolute strangers are among those who are killed as a result of these acts of desperation. Moreover, murder-suicide often leaves children parentless. During the six-month period tallied in this study, there were 282 suicides—yet the *total* number of deaths was 617. More people died from murders associated with the suicide—332—than from the suicides themselves. These numbers call into grave question the common belief that suicide, especially firearms suicide, is a solitary act that affects only the shooter.

Domestic violence is associated with a very significant number of murder-suicides. Therefore stronger domestic violence legislation may be one avenue of intervention, including programs that assist men with coping with issues of anger, control, and separation. Moreover, experts have suggested that more research should be focused on the impact that domestic violence murder-suicides have on the families in which they occur. The establishment of state-level domestic violence task forces to examine the particular circumstances of domestic murder-suicide—including cultural, social, economic, and geographic issues—should be encouraged. State and local authorities should evaluate and establish best practices for domestic violence prevention and intervention for governmental and non-governmental efforts.

Depression and the strain of providing care for a failing spouse have been cited by experts as a significant contributing factor to murder-suicide among older persons.<sup>17</sup> Health care options that provide aid to older caregivers and that aim to monitor and treat depression in such cases may be one useful intervention.

The most common catalytic component in murder-suicide is the use of a firearm. Firearms allow shooters to act on impulse. Every major murder-suicide study ever conducted has shown that a firearm—with its unmatched combination of high lethality and easy availability—is the weapon most often used to murder the victims, with the offenders then turning the gun on themselves.<sup>18</sup> In this study, access to a gun was the critical component for almost all of the murder-suicides. Of the 35 murder-suicides with more than one homicide victim, 33 were known to be firearm-related. The presence of a gun allows the offender to quickly and easily kill a greater number of victims. If there had not been easy access to a firearm, these deaths may simply have been injuries or may not have occurred at all. Efforts should be made to restrict access to firearms where there is an increased risk of murder-suicide, for example where an individual has a history of domestic violence and/or has threatened suicide. State and local officials, including judges, should aggressively enforce laws that currently prohibit individuals with a misdemeanor domestic violence conviction or who are the subject of a restraining order for domestic violence from purchasing or possessing a firearm. Research shows that state laws restricting those under domestic violence restraining orders from accessing firearms, and laws allowing the warrantless arrest of those in violation of domestic violence restraining orders, are associated with reductions in intimate partner homicide.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, a comprehensive nationwide database to track murder-suicide should be established or integrated into existing data collection mechanisms. In order to better understand the phenomenon and develop

effective prevention strategies, the data collected should be detailed and include: the gender, sex, age, ethnicity, and profession of the perpetrator and victim(s); the type of weapon used, including the make and model of firearm; the specific location of the event, e.g. workplace, specific room in residence; and, any available information regarding the motivation of the murderer.

## APPENDIX: MURDER-SUICIDES BY STATE AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

This appendix lists murder-suicides by state and the District of Columbia. This chart includes the number of murder-suicide incidents recorded during the six-month study period, as well as the total number of people who died. It is important to note that lack of a murder-suicide during the first half of the year is in no way an indicator of whether or not there will be any reports of murder-suicide in the second half of the year.

State	Number of Murder-Suicide Events in the First Half of 2014	Number of People Dead from Murder-Suicide Events in the First Half of 2014
Alabama	4	8
Alaska	0	0
Arizona	8	17
Arkansas	3	9
California	27	61
Colorado	7	15
Connecticut	3	6
Delaware	2	4
District of Columbia	0	0
Florida	20	49
Georgia	16	34
Hawaii	0	0
Idaho	0	0
Illinois	5	12
Indiana	7	15
Iowa	2	5
Kansas	2	4
Kentucky	6	12
Louisiana	9	20
Maine	0	0
Maryland	8	18
Massachusetts	2	4
Michigan	5	10
Minnesota	3	6
Mississippi	2	4
Missouri	4	8
Montana	4	8
Nebraska	1	2
Nevada	2	7

State	Number of Murder-Suicide Events in the First Half of 2014	Number of People Dead from Murder-Suicide Events in the First Half of 2014
New Hampshire	2	4
New Jersey	3	6
New Mexico	1	2
New York	8	17
North Carolina	10	21
North Dakota	0	0
Ohio	10	22
Oklahoma	3	7
Oregon	5	10
Pennsylvania	12	24
Rhode Island	1	2
South Carolina	5	12
South Dakota	1	2
Tennessee	10	20
Texas	34	74
Utah	3	10
Vermont	1	2
Virginia	7	16
Washington	6	12
West Virginia	2	4
Wisconsin	5	10
Wyoming	1	2
<b>U.S. Total</b>	<b>282</b>	<b>617</b>

## ENDNOTES

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