

Guns and Suicide

Guns claimed nearly 40,000 lives in the United States in 2019 and that number is likely to rise significantly in 2020. Yet unknown to most people is the fact that the most common type of gun death in our nation is suicide, not homicide. Equally unknown, and just as misunderstood, is the fact that the vast majority of suicides are preventable. People who use a gun to kill themselves aren't necessarily more suicidal than those who use other means, they just have the tragic misfortune of having the most lethal means available to them in their time of depression and turmoil. Below are key facts regarding suicide and firearms.

In 2019 (the latest year for which complete national data is available) there were 47,511 suicides in the United States: 130 suicides per day; one suicide every 11.1 minutes. Of these 47,511 deaths, a firearm was used in more than half (50.4 percent). In 2019, the overall suicide rate was 14.47 per 100,00 and the firearm suicide rate was 7.29 per 100,000.

- Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States. Homicide is the 16th.¹
- Three out of five people who die from gunshot wounds take their own lives.²
- In 2019, the number of gun deaths by suicide in the United States was 23,941, whereas suicide by suffocation resulted in 13,563 deaths and suicide by poisoning resulted in 6,125 deaths.³

A common argument is that a suicidal person will find a way to kill themselves no matter what — and a gun just happened to be available. However, the Harvard School of Public Health notes that “virtually every other method is less lethal than a firearm so there’s greater chance the person won’t die in their attempt...With a firearm, once the trigger is pulled, there’s no turning back.”⁴

- Approximately 85 percent of suicide attempts with a firearm are fatal. Many of the other most widely used suicide attempt methods have case fatality rates below five percent.⁵
- “Guns are more lethal than other suicide means. They’re quick. And they’re irreversible.”⁶
- “Less than one percent of nonfatal attempts are with a gun.”⁷
- Guns, unlike other methods, require less preparation and planning. Nearly half (48 percent) of suicide attempt patients reported less than 20 minutes elapsed from first thought of suicide to actual attempt.⁸
- “Attempters who take pills or inhale car exhaust or use razors have some time to reconsider mid-attempt and summon help or be rescued. The method itself often fails, even in the absence of a rescue.”⁹

Every study that has examined the issue to date has found that within the United States, access to firearms is associated with increased suicide risk.¹⁰

- “Merely having a gun in one’s home increases the likelihood that someone living there will commit suicide by a factor of 2 to 10.”¹¹
- One study of firearm suicides among youths ages 17 and under found that 82 percent used a firearm belonging to a family member, usually a parent.¹²
- States with higher rates of gun ownership tend to have higher rates of overall suicide than states with less gun ownership.¹³
- One analysis found that, in total, there were almost twice as many suicides among people living in high-gun states as there were in low-gun states even though non-firearm suicides were about equal.¹⁴

For middle-aged adults, the suicide rate is increasing. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data show that in 2019, 23,775 suicides were reported for individuals ages 35 to 64. Of these, 11,069 were committed with a firearm.¹⁵

- From 1999 to 2019, the suicide rate for men aged 35 to 64 increased 35.9 percent. For women in that age group the rate increased 48.1 percent.¹⁶
- In 2019, firearms, followed by suffocation, were the most common mechanisms for men who committed suicide. That same year, firearms, followed by poisoning, were the most common mechanisms for women.¹⁷
- In 2019, suicide rates were highest among those aged 55 to 59 (20.90 per 100,000).¹⁸

Suicides in the U.S. military (Active and Reserve) totaled 582 in 2020.¹⁹

- A June 2021 report found that since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, more than four times as many active duty service members and veterans died from suicide than died during military operations — 30,177 suicides compared to 7,057 military operations deaths.²⁰
- From 2019 to 2020, suicides among active duty and reserve members of the military increased nearly 16 percent — from 503 in 2019 to 582 in 2020. Military officials have cited the COVID pandemic as one of the factors behind the increase in suicides.²¹
- Veterans with substance use disorders who die by suicide are more likely to use violent means (such as a firearm) than nonviolent means (such as an overdose). “In a study of more than 5,000 Veterans Affairs patients with substance use disorders, researchers found that despite having access to potentially lethal substances, 70 percent of those who died by suicide used violent means.”²²
- Service members most frequently used firearms to end their lives (49.13 percent used non-military issued firearms).²³
- The rate of suicide among women who have served in the military is triple that of their civilian counterparts.²⁴
- One article noted that two thirds of Army suicides happen not on deployment, but at home, most often on bases with high operations tempos. Fort Drum, in upstate New York, was an exception. The reason cited: “New York has restrictive gun laws, so, it’s not so easy to get drunk, get a gun and shoot yourself.”²⁵

The Harvard School of Public Health created the Means Matter Campaign because “means reduction” has been proven to reduce suicide rates.²⁶

- When lethal means are made less available or less deadly (“means reduction”), suicide rates by that method decline, and frequently suicide rates *overall* decline. This has been demonstrated in a number of areas in the context of suicide: bridge barriers, detoxification of domestic gas, pesticides, medication packaging, and others.²⁷
- Firearm owners are not more suicidal than non-firearm owners; rather, their suicide attempts are more likely to be fatal because of guns’ heightened lethality.²⁸
- Nine out of 10 people who attempt suicide and survive will not go on to die by suicide at a later date.²⁹
- A lethal weapon available to a person in the depths of despair can end a life in an instant. Firearms are used in five out of 10 suicides in the U.S. Removing lethal means from a vulnerable person, especially a youth, can save a life.³⁰
- Some law enforcement departments (not all) will accept firearms from a home where there is a suicide concern. Some offer temporary storage, some offer permanent disposal options, and some offer both.³¹

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- ¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS), August 17, 2021, www.cdc.gov/ncipc/wisqars.
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- ³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS), August 17, 2021, www.cdc.gov/ncipc/wisqars.
- ⁴ *Means Matter*, Harvard School of Public Health, <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/>.
- ⁵ *Means Matter*, Harvard School of Public Health, <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/>.
- ⁶ *Means Matter*, Harvard School of Public Health, <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/>.
- ⁷ *Means Matter*, Harvard School of Public Health, <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/>.
- ⁸ *Means Matter*, Harvard School of Public Health, <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/>.
- ⁹ *Means Matter*, Harvard School of Public Health, <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/>.
- ¹⁰ *Means Matter*, Harvard School of Public Health, <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/>.
- ¹¹ "The gun toll we're ignoring: suicide," *The Boston Globe*, January 20, 2013.
- ¹² *Means Matter*, Harvard School of Public Health, <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/>.
- ¹³ "To reduce suicide rates, new focus turns to guns," *The New York Times*, February 13, 2013.
- ¹⁴ "The gun toll we're ignoring: suicide," *The Boston Globe*, January 20, 2013.
- ¹⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS), August 17, 2021, www.cdc.gov/ncipc/wisqars.
- ¹⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS), August 17, 2021, www.cdc.gov/ncipc/wisqars.
- ¹⁷ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS), August 17, 2021, www.cdc.gov/ncipc/wisqars.
- ¹⁸ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS), August 17, 2021, www.cdc.gov/ncipc/wisqars.
- ¹⁹ *Department of Defense (DoD) Quarterly Suicide Report (QSR) 1st Quarter, CY 2021*, Defense Suicide Prevention Office, Department of Defense.
- ²⁰ "Since 9/11, Military Suicides Are 4 Times Higher Than Deaths in War Operations," *npr.org*, June 24, 2021.
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- ²² "Violence, Not Overdose, the Likely Method of Suicide in Veterans With Substance Use Disorders," *ScienceDaily*, July 12, 2010.
- ²³ Calendar Year 2011 Annual Report, Department of Defense Suicide Event Report.
- ²⁴ "Challenges for Service Women," *The New York Times*, March 20, 2012.
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- ²⁷ *Means Matter*, Harvard School of Public Health, <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/>.
- ²⁸ *Means Matter*, Harvard School of Public Health, <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/>.
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- ³⁰ *Means Matter*, Harvard School of Public Health, <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/>.
- ³¹ *Means Matter*, Harvard School of Public Health, <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/>.