

# The Risk of Guns on Suicide

Eleanor Poole<sup>1</sup> and Ellie Xu<sup>#</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Charlotte Latin School, Charlotte, NC, USA

<sup>#</sup>Advisor

## ABSTRACT

Suicide is one of the leading causes of death in America. Every day, about 125 Americans take their own lives. Firearms play a vital role in this statistic, as around 60% of deaths by suicide involve the use of firearms. Evidence suggests that higher rates of suicides by firearm are related to fewer state gun laws. Given that nearly 50% of suicidal attempts are done impulsively with little planning, easy access to firearms can pose as a danger to individuals who are experiencing frequent suicidal thoughts. This is particularly true, as 90% of individuals who attempt suicide using a firearm ultimately die. The present paper discusses access to firearms and its risk on suicide.

## Suicide

Suicide leads to the deaths of more than one hundred Americans every day (1). This tragic statistic raises an important question: how can we stop this horrific reality? The complexity of suicide makes this a challenging question to tackle; however, prior studies have discovered that certain measures can be taken to reduce individuals' risk of attempting suicide. This paper will explore the findings behind one risk in particular: gun ownership.

## Firearms

Prior work has found that owning firearms within homes significantly increases the risk of suicide for all household members (1). In America, the right to bear arms is a controversial topic, and is regulated on a state-by-state basis. Currently, America has over 393 million guns, leading it to have more guns than people (2). Some states (like Mississippi) have limited gun laws, making it legal for anyone to carry a firearm even without a background check (3). However, other states (such as California) uphold over 100 gun laws that restrict the use of certain firearms (3). These differences in state laws may contribute to differences in suicide rates between states. Generally, it appears that states with few gun restrictions have higher suicide rates than those with more gun restrictions (3). For example, while Mississippi has 2 gun laws and 9.87 gun-related suicides (per 100,000 people), California has 107 gun laws and 3.9 gun-related suicides (per 100,000 people) (3). The number of gun laws thus appears to be related to the number of gun-related suicides.

## Gun Related Suicide

Gun suicides take the lives of nearly 23,000 individuals each year, averaging around 64 people per day (4). This means around 60% of all suicides in the United States are by firearm. However firearms account for only 5% of all suicide attempts in America. How can this be? The lethality of firearms causes nearly 90% of all firearm suicide attempts to be fatal. So, while firearms are not a large portion of total suicide attempts, the fatality rate causes suicide by firearm to be the most deadly.

## Impulsivity of Suicide

Often, it is assumed that suicide is inevitable: it is believed that someone who has a desire to die will find a way to do so. However, this assumption is far from true. Suicide is often driven by impulsivity. Immediate stressors, such as relationship problems, job pressure, and financial concerns, can all drive someone to impulsively kill themselves. One study found that nearly 50% of people who survive a suicide attempt reported that the entire process, from the first suicidal thought to the attempt itself, took no more than ten minutes (1). When an individual with suicidal thoughts has access to a firearm, the likelihood of a fatal suicide attempt becomes much more likely because they have the ability to act on their impulses in response to immediate stressors. Thus, accessibility to such firearms can be dangerous for individuals who are having thoughts of killing themselves.

## Lethality of Suicide

Suicide by firearm is even more terrifying when one considers that 90% of people who attempt suicide and live ultimately never die by suicide (1). This evidence suggests that if people who died by gun suicide did not have easy access to lethal means, a large number could still be alive. Attempting suicide with a firearm strips individuals of a second chance.

## Recommendations

Owning a gun should be carefully considered based on who you surround yourself with and their mental state. Given the risk of impulsive suicides and the fatality rate of firearms, keeping your gun locked up is a wise decision. This can be done using trigger locks, gun cases, gun safes or security cases. Most importantly storing guns should mean having them locked and unloaded in a safe, separate from the ammunition. Having a gun inside a home increases the likelihood of suicide for all residents inside that home. If that gun is locked up, the risk is reduced.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor for the valuable insight provided to me on this topic.

## References

1. Seupel, Celia. "Blocking the Paths to Suicide." The New York Times, March 9, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/10/health/blocking-the-paths-to-suicide.html>.
2. Ingraham, Christopher. "There are more guns than people..." The Washington Post, June 19, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2018/06/19/there-are-more-guns-than-people-in-the-united-states-according-to-a-new-study-of-global-firearm-ownership/>.
3. Siegel, Michael. "State Firearm Laws." About the State Firearms Laws Database, 1999-2020. <https://www.statefirearmlaws.org/state-state-firearm-law-data>.
4. "The Truth about Suicide and Guns." *Brady*, <https://www.bradyunited.org/reports/suicide-prevention-report-2018>.