



Frequently Asked Questions About Firearm Safe Storage

July 16, 2021

This fact sheet will be periodically updated to account for new policy developments. It was last updated on July 16, 2021. [Click here](#) to view other fact sheets in this series.

What is firearm safe storage?

Broadly speaking, safe storage refers to storing firearms and ammunition in a manner that minimizes the risk of unauthorized or accidental access to those items, particularly by children. Both the American Academy of Pediatrics and the National Shooting Sports Foundation recommend that guns be stored locked and unloaded and that ammunition be stored in a different locked location.¹

How do safe storage practices protect families and communities from gun violence?

Safe storage practices help prevent unauthorized access to firearms, which has implications for three particular aspects of gun violence and gun crime:

1) access to guns by children and teens, 2) gun theft, and 3) gun-related suicide.

Keeping children and families safe

In 2020, there were 369 unintentional shootings by children, 142 of which resulted in death.² This was a slight increase from 2018 and 2019, which saw 313 and 309 of these shootings, respectively.³ The stories of these shootings are uniquely heartbreaking. In February 2020, a 7-year-old girl accidentally shot her 11-year-old brother with a gun found in her home.⁴ The gun was in a drawer in a locked room; however, the 7-year-old knew where the key was located.⁵ In another tragedy, in January 2021, an 18-month-old toddler found their father's gun and accidentally shot and killed their 5-year-old sibling.⁶

Preventing children and unauthorized users from accessing firearms is also paramount in preventing school shootings: An analysis of 145 school shootings since 1999 found that 80 percent of the firearms used were taken from the student's home or the home of a family member or friend.⁷ These data indicate that easily accessible guns found in the home are a primary source of firearms used in school shootings and that safe storage measures can help reduce access to guns by children and other unauthorized users, putting an end to many preventable shootings.

Deterring theft

Both gun dealers and individual gun owners are targets for gun thieves. An estimated 200,000 to 400,000 firearms are stolen every year.⁸ And in an analysis of 23,000 stolen firearms recovered by police officers, the majority of these weapons were found to later be used in crimes such as murders, armed robberies, and kidnappings.⁹ In 2019, the FBI reported that more than \$116 million worth of firearms were stolen and that only 11.6 percent of these firearms were able to be recovered.¹⁰ A 2017 study found that the people most susceptible to gun theft are those who own a large number of guns, frequently carry guns outside of their homes, or do not practice safe storage methods in their home.¹¹

The evidence is clear: Securing firearms in locked cabinets prevents future violent crime and saves gun owners time and money reporting and replacing their stolen firearms.

Preventing suicide

Suicide is the 10th-leading cause of death in the United States and the second-leading cause of death for people between the ages of 10 and 34.¹²

Access to firearms plays a significant role in suicide attempts. Two-thirds of all firearm deaths in the United States are suicides.¹³ Additionally, half of all suicides are carried out with a firearm.¹⁴ The ease with which a firearm can be accessed, coupled with the lethality of the tool, creates a dangerous situation for individuals experiencing thoughts of suicide. Indeed, 90 percent of individuals who use a firearm to attempt suicide die, while only 4 percent of individuals who attempt suicide by a means other than a firearm die.¹⁵ Suicide is preventable. Minimizing access to guns would greatly reduce the rate of suicide.

Rates of suicide vary widely among race, gender, ethnicity, and age. The highest rates of suicide are among American Indian or Alaska Native people.¹⁶ Veterans and members of the LGBTQ community also see notably high rates of suicide.¹⁷ The National LGBTQ Task Force reports that 54 percent of multicultural transgender and gender-nonconforming people have attempted suicide—a rate that is six times the U.S. average.¹⁸ The task force attributes racism, transphobia, and homophobia to the disproportionate impact of suicide on transgender and gender-nonconforming people.¹⁹

If you or someone you know needs help, call the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at

1-877-273-8255

How can policymakers help encourage safe storage practices?

Safe storage laws have proven to be effective in reducing rates of accidental shootings, deterring theft, and preventing suicides. In fact, a 2015 study found that there was a 68 percent lower suicide rate in states that required privately owned guns to be locked in at least some circumstances, compared with states that did not codify this measure into law.²⁰ In addition, an analysis of available research by the RAND Corporation found that child access prevention (CAP) laws—which impose civil or criminal liability on individuals who fail to safely store firearms to keep them away from children—may help decrease gun suicides and unintentional shootings.²¹

Current federal law requires firearms manufacturers, importers, and dealers to make gun locks available at the point of sale.²² However, there is no law requiring that purchasers use this device, nor does the law apply to private gun sellers.²³ Fortunately, federal legislation has been introduced to require gun owners to store guns securely to prevent unauthorized access.²⁴

More progress has been made at the state level to help ensure that gun owners adopt safe storage practices. Eleven states have laws involving firearm locking devices at the point of sale by a dealer.²⁵ This includes either requiring the dealer to accompany a firearm with a gun lock or offer a gun lock at the point of sale.²⁶ Likewise, California, Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, and New York all have laws that require gun locks to meet certain quality standards or be approved.²⁷ Massachusetts is currently the only state to require that gun owners store their firearms locked when not in use.²⁸

In addition, many states have enacted CAP laws to incentivize safe storage and prevent guns from falling into the wrong hands, such as those of a child or an individual who is prohibited from possessing guns. Thirty states and the District of Columbia have enacted a version of a CAP law,²⁹ and research suggests that these laws can be effective at reducing gun-related shootings and unintentional shootings by minors.

