



Gun Suicides Among Former and Current Military Members

A Summary of Key Challenges and Solutions

By Eugenio Weigend and Marissa Edmund March 10, 2022

Suicides are a major public health problem in the United States. From 2015 to 2019, close to 232,180 people died of suicide in the country.¹ Firearms play a major role in these deaths. During that same period, half of people who died by suicide used a gun, putting firearms as the main mechanism of suicide deaths in the country.²

One group that presents a unique risk is former and current military members. As with the overall population, suicides among current and former members of the military are far more likely to involve a firearm than any other means.

This summary examines key challenges and policy solutions that can help prevent gun suicides among military members.

By the numbers: Former or current military members and gun suicide

- In 2019, 4,332 former or current military members died by suicide.³
- Current or former military members represent 1 in every 6 gun suicides among young Americans.
- An analysis of gun suicide data from 41 states and the District of Columbia found that former or current military members accounted for roughly 23 percent of gun suicide deaths in 2019.⁴

Risk factors and circumstances surrounding gun suicides among current or former military members

- Higher levels of gun ownership tend to present higher rates of gun suicide.⁵
- Nearly 50 percent of current or former military members own a gun,⁶ compared with about 22 percent for the rest of the population.⁷
- In 2019, close to 72 percent of suicides among current or former military members were perpetrated with a gun.⁸
- Other factors, such as physical health problems, are also associated with gun suicides among military members.



Read the full report:
["Gun Suicides Among Former and Current Military Members"](#)

Policy recommendations

- **Increase public awareness about the role of firearms:** Many veterans are unaware that having a gun in the home is a suicide risk factor. It is fundamental to increase public awareness about this risk.
- **Prioritize timely physical and mental health services:** Veterans' injuries can have lasting, adverse effects on their mental health. Both physical and mental health services are necessary to ensure that veterans are safe and healthy.
- **Disrupt access to guns for those in crisis by facilitating voluntary relinquishment of firearms and encouraging safe storage practices among veterans:** It is important to encourage and allow at-risk veterans to temporarily transfer or store their firearms away from home in moments of crisis.
- **Pass laws that allow extreme risk protection orders (ERPOs):** These laws are effective at preventing gun suicides; research shows that for every 10 to 20 ERPOs issued, a life is saved.⁹
- **Pass waiting period laws:** Waiting periods can help reduce the risk of gun suicide by requiring a certain period of time to pass between the purchase of a gun and the actual acquisition of the firearm.

Endnotes

- 1 Center for American Progress analysis of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Injury Prevention & Control: Fatal Injury and Violence Data," available at <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/fatal.html> (last accessed December 2021).
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 In 2019, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs reported 6,261 suicides among veterans. The same report indicated that in close to 69 percent of those incidents, victims used a firearm. See U.S. Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, "2021 National Veteran Suicide Prevention: Annual Report" (Washington: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 2021), available at https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2021/2021-National-Veteran-Suicide-Prevention-Annual-Report-FINAL-9-8-21.pdf?utm_source=The+Trace+mailing+list&utm_campaign=cb8e026f22-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_09_24_04_06_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_f76c3ff31c-cb8e026f22-50219081.
- 4 These states are Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Georgia, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming. See Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Violence Prevention: National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDARS)," available at <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/datasources/nvdrs/index.html> (last accessed January 2022).
- 5 Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence, "Firearm Suicide," available at <https://efsgv.org/firearm-suicide/> (last accessed January 2022); Anita Knopov and others, "Household Gun Ownership and Youth Suicide Rates at the State Level, 2005–2015," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 56 (3) (2019): 335–342, available at [https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797\(18\)32383-3/abstract](https://www.ajpmonline.org/article/S0749-3797(18)32383-3/abstract); Matthew Miller and others, "Household firearm ownership and rates of suicide across the 50 United States," *The Journal of Trauma* 62 (4) (2007): 1029–1034, available at <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17426563/>.
- 6 Emily C. Cleveland and others, "Firearm ownership among American veterans: findings from the 2015 National Firearm Survey," *Injury Epidemiology* 33 (2017), available at <https://injejournal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s40621-017-0130-y>.
- 7 Deborah Azrael and others, "The Stock and Flow of U.S. Firearms: Results from the 2015 National Firearms Survey," *The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 3 (5) (2017): 38–57, available at https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7758/rsf.2017.3.5.02#metadata_info_tab_contents.
- 8 Center for American Progress analysis of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Violence Prevention: National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDARS)."
- 9 Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence, "Data behind Extreme Risk Protective Order Policies" (Washington: 2017), available at <http://efsgv.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/CT-Risk-Warrant-Data-One-pager-ERPO-9-15-17-FINAL.pdf>.