

Appendix D: To Prevent Mass Killings, Prevent Suicides

There is no known way to completely prevent public mass shootings. However, we do know that 40 percent of public mass shooters commit suicide during their rampage, according to the Associated Press/USA Today/Northeastern University Mass Killing Database. This fact provides hope that some of these horrific crimes can be prevented by focusing specifically on suicide prevention.

Evidence-Based Approaches to Suicide Prevention

Although the common perception is that homicides and mass shootings predominate, about two-thirds of the nearly 40k gun deaths annually in the U.S. are suicides.¹ Reducing suicides will not only save the lives of loved ones in crisis, but may also avert some public mass shootings, the focus of this Playbook.

What can be done at the local level to prevent suicides? Research has shown that the risk a household member will commit suicide is increased threefold when there is a gun in the home.² That is not to say that responsible gun owners should give up their guns. However, lives could be saved by a public education campaign recommending that gun owners: (1) temporarily remove a firearm when a household member is in crisis, and (2) safely secure handguns and long guns bought for sport or protection, especially if there is a minor in the home.

As “communicator-in-chief,” you could advocate for these evidence-based approaches when appropriate, such as when a beloved community member has died by suicide, during national suicide awareness week, or on Veteran’s Day. You could initiate public education campaigns in partnership with community-based organizations, medical associations, gun owners, and mental health service providers in your community. For example, gun shops have worked in partnership with the National Shooting Sports Foundation to provide information about suicide to gun owners.³

You could join forces with other mayors to adopt measures to reduce veteran suicide.⁴ You could look for other innovative approaches your city could adopt. For example, recognizing that out-of-home gun storage can prevent suicide, Colorado has partnered with gun shops, businesses, law enforcement agencies, and public health departments to provide a network of places that offer voluntary, temporary gun storage.⁵

ERPO Laws Prevent Suicide and May Help Prevent Mass Shootings

In cases where a family member is concerned that a gun owner appears suicidal or at risk of harming others, Extreme Risk Protection Order (ERPO) laws (aka “Red Flag Laws”) give police a tool to remove guns temporarily. Researchers have found that Indiana’s ERPO law reduced suicides by 7.5%.⁶ To date, research has focused on suicide prevention, not mass murder. But there are documented cases where an ERPO was used to remove a gun from someone who planned to commit a mass shooting.⁷ If your state has passed an ERPO law, work with law enforcement and judicial officials to ensure the law is implemented effectively and that the public is aware of the law.

Key resource: Improving Implementation of ERPO Laws



Researchers at Northeastern University School of Law examined ERPO implementation challenges and made recommendations to improve ERPO laws.
https://www.phaionline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Extreme-Risk-Protection-Orders-Implementation-in-a-Social-Justice-Context.Final_.pdf

Safe Storage May Prevent School Shootings and Accidental Deaths

Securing guns is another evidence-based strategy for preventing suicides, and may prevent some mass murders, particularly school shootings. The majority of school shootings, like the Sandy Hook massacre, were committed using guns taken from a parent, grandparent, or neighbor.⁸ If these shooters had been unable to access a gun at home, some of these tragedies could have been prevented. Partnering with law enforcement officials, public health officials, gun owners, and other credible voices to promote the benefits of safe storage could potentially prevent a school shooting.

Urging gun owners to secure their guns if there are children in the home can also prevent accidental gun injuries and deaths. According to the Nationwide Children's Hospital, nearly 1,300 children die from guns every year and many more are seriously injured.⁹ The American Academy of Pediatrics advises the best way to prevent gun-related injuries to children is to remove guns from the home or store them properly.¹⁰

Endnotes

¹ Heath Druzen, *Majority Of U.S. Gun Deaths Are Suicides, But A New Poll Suggests Few Americans Know It*, WAMU, <https://wamu.org/story/19/10/02/the-majority-of-u-s-gun-deaths-are-suicides-but-a-new-poll-suggests-few-americans-know-it/> (last visited Jun 16, 2021).

² APHA Policy Statement (#20184): Reducing Suicides by Firearms, (2018), <https://www.apha.org/policies-and-advocacy/public-health-policy-statements/policy-database/2019/01/28/reducing-suicides-by-firearms> (last visited Jun 16, 2021).

³ NSSF & AMERICAN FOUNDATION FOR SUICIDE PREVENTION, *Suicide Prevention Program for Retailers and Ranges*, NSSF, <https://www.nssf.org/safety/suicide-prevention/> (last visited Jun 16, 2021); see also Harvard School of Public Health, Gun Shop Project, Means Matter (2012), <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/gun-shop-project/> (last visited Jun 16, 2021).

⁴ SAMHSA has partnered with Veterans Affairs (VA) to bring the *Governor's and Mayor's Challenges to Prevent Suicide Among Service Members, Veterans, and their Families* to states and communities across the Nation. <https://www.samhsa.gov/smvf-ta-center/mayors-governors-challenges>

⁵ COLORADO FIREARM SAFETY COALITION, *Gun Storage Map*, Colorado Firearm Safety Coalition (2019), <https://coloradofirearmsafetycoalition.org/gun-storage-map/> (last visited Jun 16, 2021).

⁶ Aaron J. Kivisto & Peter Lee Phalen, *Effects of Risk-Based Firearm Seizure Laws in Connecticut and Indiana on Suicide Rates, 1981–2015*, 69 PSYCHIATRIC SERVICES 855–862 (2018).

⁷ Garen J. Wintemute et al., *Extreme Risk Protection Orders Intended to Prevent Mass Shootings*, 171 ANNALS OF INTERNAL MEDICINE 655–658 (2019).

⁸ Tawnell D. Hobbs, *Most Guns Used in School Shootings Come From Home*, WALL STREET JOURNAL, April 5, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-school-shootings-most-guns-come-from-home-1522920600> (last visited Jun 16, 2021).

⁹ NATIONWIDE CHILDREN'S, "GUN SAFETY," <https://www.nationwidechildrens.org/research/areas-of-research/center-for-injury-research-and-policy/injury-topics/general/gun-safety> (last visited Jun 16, 2021).

¹⁰ AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS, "Guns in the Home," <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/safety-prevention/at-home/Pages/Handguns-in-the-Home.aspx> (last visited July 21, 2021).