

# Facts in Brief: Firearms and Suicide

## Why don't we talk about suicide?

People don't talk about depression and suicide because of the stigma. It is a topic that has a long history of being taboo—something that should just be forgotten and swept under the rug. And that's why people keep dying. Most people misunderstand suicide, so myths continue. The taboo prevents people from getting help.

There is no typical suicide victim. It happens to young and old, rich and poor. Fortunately, there are some risk factors for suicide.<sup>1</sup>

- Has attempted suicide in the past;
- Suffers from certain mental illnesses—retrospectively, 90% of suicide victims had a serious mental illness, most commonly depression;
- Experiences situational risk factors or stressful life events (e.g. death of a loved one, recent loss of employment);
- Has a genetic predisposition—individuals who attempt or complete suicide often have a family history of suicidal behaviors;
- Abuses alcohol or other drugs; and
- Has certain demographics (most suicides occur among males less than 40 years of age).

## Are there differences in suicide among women and men?

Three-fourths of all suicides are committed by white males. Women are more likely to attempt suicide while men are more likely to complete it. This is primarily due to the different methods with which men and women attempt suicide. Women attempt suicide using less lethal methods such as

through the ingestion of substances. However, when a woman completes a suicide, her choice of weapon is most frequently a firearm. Men are more likely to use violent and immediate methods such as firearms.<sup>2</sup>

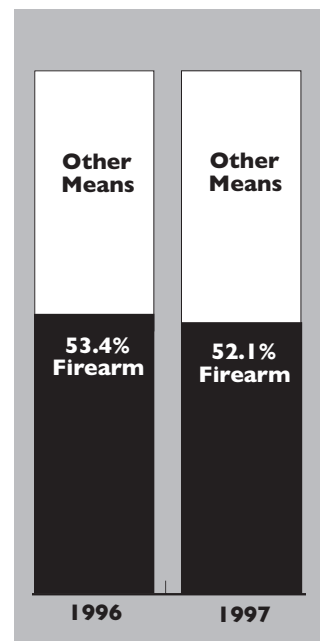
Suicide among teens is increasing. Nationally, the greatest increase in the rate of suicide is among African American male adolescents.<sup>3</sup>

## What is the most common tool used in suicide?

A firearm is the tool most frequently used in suicide by both men and women of all ages, and for boys and girls ages 10 to 14.<sup>4,5</sup>

## How many people commit suicide with firearms?

Firearm suicides have outnumbered firearm homicides in Minnesota, three to one from 1992 to 1996 (total suicides = 1,299 and total homicides = 469). During 1996 and 1997, 911 Minnesotans committed suicide. About half of those suicides were committed with a firearm.<sup>6</sup> The graph pictured right describes the proportion of suicides due to firearms.



### **How lethal are firearms when used to commit suicide?**

Firearms are a highly lethal tool for suicide. One study found that 92% of suicide attempts with firearms result in a fatality.<sup>7</sup>

### **What is the relationship between the presence of guns in the home and suicide?**

Research shows that residents of homes where a gun is present are five times more likely to experience a suicide than residents of homes where no guns are present.<sup>8</sup>

More than 90% of people who commit suicide with a firearm already have the gun in the house. Fewer than 10% of people who commit suicide buy a gun with the specific intent of killing themselves.<sup>9</sup> This means that guns are sometimes used for self-destructive purposes by their legal owner or a family member.

Although some gun owners reportedly keep a firearm in their home for “protection” or “self-defense,” this is not why guns are used. Only 2% of gun-related deaths in the home are the result of a homeowner shooting an intruder; while 3% are unintentional child shootings, 12% are the result of adult partners shooting one another, and 83% of gun-related deaths in the home are the result of a suicide.<sup>10</sup>

Nationally, two out of three youth suicides are by firearms. The youth primarily get the firearm from their own home. Safe storage for firearms is not enough for suicidal teens. Teens are resourceful and will try to find ways to gain access to the firearm. In the case of a suicidal teen or family member, firearms need to be removed from the home.

### **Will people substitute methods for committing suicide?**

The notion that “if they can’t get a gun, they will simply use another means to commit suicide is simply untrue.” According to the American Association of Suicidology, “People do not shift methods.” People who are contemplating suicide go back and

forth, thinking about life and death. They may not want to die, they just want the pain to stop. If they don’t have easy access to a means of death, they have to work much harder to end their lives.

### **Is suicide linked to alcohol use?**

The literature strongly suggests that alcohol is a contributing factor to a large number of suicides, for both men and women.<sup>11</sup> However, alcohol’s role in suicides is unclear.

Between 18% and 66% of suicide victims have alcohol in their blood at the time of death.<sup>12</sup>

Suicide victims who had been drinking (but not necessarily intoxicated) were 4.9 times more likely to have used firearms than those who had not been drinking.<sup>13</sup>

Suicide victims who were intoxicated (BAC greater than 0.1%) were 7.4 times more likely to have died by gunshot wounds than victims who had not been drinking.<sup>14</sup>

### **Why don’t we know more about firearm-related suicide and alcohol?**

There are two main reasons why little is known about the connection between alcohol and firearm-related suicide:

- ▶ Blood alcohol concentration (BAC) screening is not routine in medical treatment settings; and

- ▶ Researchers must go back to the autopsy report in firearm-related suicides to determine if alcohol was in the bloodstream. Again, BAC screening is not consistently done in all autopsies.

1 American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and American Association of Sociology.

2 Rosenberg, M. and Fenley, E. *Violence in America: A Public Health Approach*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1991. 136.

3 American Association of Suicidology.

4 Hoyert, et. al. *Deaths: Final Data for 1997*. Center for Disease Control and Prevention. National Vital Statistics Report. June 30, 1999. 47: 19. 71.

5 American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

6 Minnesota Health Statistics. Minnesota Department of Health.

7 Wintemute, et. al. *The Choice of Weapons in Firearm Suicides*. American Journal of Public Health. July, 1977. 78: 7. 284.

8 Cummings, et. al. *The Association between the Purchase of a Handgun and Homicide and Suicide*. American Journal of Public Health. June, 1997. 87: 6. 975.

9 American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

10 American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.

11 Caces, F. and Harford, T. *Time Series Analysis of Alcohol Consumption and Suicide Mortality in the United States, 1934-1987*. Journal of Studies on Alcohol. July, 1998. 59. 455-461.

12 Roizen, 1988.

13 Brent, et. al. *Alcohol, Firearms, and Suicide Among Youth: Temporal Trends in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, 1960 to 1983*. Journal of the American Medical Association. 1987. 257: 24. 3369-3372.

14 Brent, D., 1987.