

Addressing the next crisis, now.

As we face a public health crisis coupled with severe economic stress, factors known to escalate the risk indicators for suicide are quietly rising dramatically. We have the opportunity to both diminish that risk and benefit the public at the same time.

Give me 60 seconds:

The escalating factors: Studies consistently show unemployment rates and suicide rates going up together¹, and a direct link between physical isolation and suicides². While increasing suicide rates have been a particular issue among remote rural farm workers³ over the last several years, we are entering a time with increased isolation, increased unemployment, uncertain futures, and access to highly lethal weapons for many. More than 60% of all gun deaths in the US are suicides⁴, and major suicide risk factors (financial stress, unemployment, social isolation, access to lethal means, and lack of consistent access to mental health care)⁵ are all increasing at once.

What we can do this week:

1. Initiate a voluntary gun buy-back program. The citizen gets cash during an uncertain economy, and the state is inherently safer with fewer guns sold illegally. The citizen feels he is doing something positive for the public good in the midst of a fight with an intangible foe, his economic situation is temporarily improved, and the risk of suicide goes down with every gun taken off the street.
2. Couple this with a public mental health initiative that directly focuses on the kinds of issues that have dogged family farmers for years and now may appear in any neighborhood.⁶ Actively talk about stress management and mental health care for the public as part of getting through this year. It's part of our mutual survival plan.

The voluntary gun buy-back could be, for the price of each gun, a cheap win that enhances public safety for the citizens and the police force. And each discussion with the sellers could help identify what mental health needs are rising among their neighbors. Every interaction provides another opportunity for outreach and care for the community's wellbeing.

Thank you for your consideration and leadership.
Kevin Loney, Wilmington, DE.

Footnotes:

(1) See, for example, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4677456/>

(2) See <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/sosmap/suicide-mortality/suicide.htm>.

The states with the lowest population density rate the highest in terms of suicides per capita, and the most densely populated states have the lowest per capita suicide rates.

(3) Attempting to address this, the Seeding Rural Resilience Act (HR 4820) sponsored by Senators Tester and Grassley focuses on the mental health issues of ranchers and farmers.

(4) "More than sixty percent of all gun deaths in the U.S. are suicides, and half of all suicides in the U.S. are a result of firearms." See <https://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/johns-hopkins-center-for-gun-policy-and-research/research/guns-and-suicide/>

(5) See <https://www.sprc.org/about-suicide/risk-protective-factors>. Access to mental health care is impacted by health care coverage, which goes down as unemployment rises.

(6) For one example of how farmers have reached out to each other about suicide, see this corn maze in Wisconsin: <https://www.facebook.com/govinsfarm/photos/a.365342318238/10156275150123239/?type=3&theater>