

# Trigger Warning

BY

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The stats are clear: the gun debate should be one mostly about how to prevent gun suicides.

Across the political spectrum, discussions about gun control tend to overlook a basic truth: for nearly a century, more Americans have died annually from gun suicides than gun homicides. In recent years, gun suicides have outnumbered gun homicides two to one.

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Mortality rates for firearm homicide and suicide, 1981–2012. Source: “The Epidemiology of Firearm Violence in the Twenty-First Century United States”

In 2014 alone, there were 21,334 gun suicide deaths. That’s 58 per day — or the equivalent of one Las Vegas shooting every day for an entire year.

Yet if you only watch or read the news, you would think the majority of deaths involving guns in America are from mass shootings. Because major debates only happen in the wake of mass shootings, we get a skewed conversation that zeroes in on these very tragic but still very rare events (they account for less than 1 percent of gun deaths each year). As a result, centrist liberals usually end up pushing for gun control measures like magazine size caps, “assault weapon” restrictions, or, most recently, bump stock bans that would ultimately do little to prevent the majority of gun fatalities in America.

In the instances that the discussion moves away from mass shootings, both the Right and the Left often focus on unrealistic situations of self-defense (i.e. justifiable homicide). On the Right, some conservatives feel that they need to stockpile firearms in order to defend themselves against hypothetical (often highly racialized) enemies: “terrorists,” “Black Lives Matter,” “antifa.” On the Left, some radicals feel that they need to own firearms in order to defend themselves against fascists and/or the state.

But the reality is this: for every person killed in self defense with a gun, 79 to 116 people die by suicide with a gun. And for every person killed in a mass shooting, 308 to 4,217 people die by suicide with a gun.

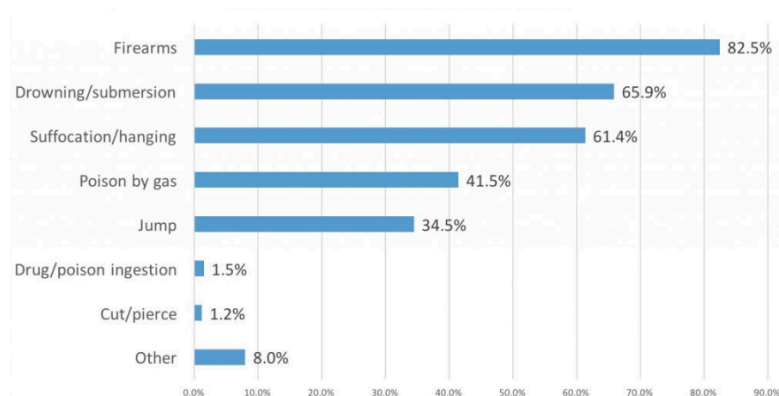
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Sources: CDC, *Mother Jones*, FBI

## How to Limit Access

Suicide is a complex public health issue with multiple upstream and downstream determinants. On the upstream side, programs like universal mental health care and universal basic income would help address ideation before the risk of suicide was imminent.

But suicide is overwhelmingly an impulsive act, usually deliberated on for less than an hour. The difference between an attempt and a death is the means used for suicide. And the most lethal means? Guns.



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Case fatalities rates (%) by suicide method. Source: “Suicide acts in 8 states: incidence and case fatality rates by demographics and method”

The easiest way to reduce firearm fatalities, then, is to make it harder to quickly obtain guns. There are a few methods to do that.

We could, for instance, institute mandatory waiting periods and trigger locks at home. Something as simple as requiring an additional license or permit has been shown to bring down firearm suicide rates by 15 percent.

Finally, because individual, private ownership enables ready access, collective ownership like secure storage — which requires multiple people to unlock — would effectively neutralize the issue of

impulsive access. A study of the Israeli army found that changing protocol so soldiers had to leave their weapons on base instead of bringing them home for the weekend lowered the suicide rate by nearly 40 percent.

But won't suicidal people just find another way? Yes, to a certain extent. But fewer people would die because the means would be less lethal. This dynamic was seen in the late 1960s when the United Kingdom switched its gas supply from coal, with carbon monoxide, to natural gas, which was nearly free of carbon monoxide. Suicides from carbon monoxide poisoning dropped 30 percent in a few years, and the overall suicide rate decreased as well. Researchers found a similar result in Japan.

Because firearm suicides happen only once at a time and are distributed across the country, the media and the public rarely engage with their bewildering scale. Just as it may be easier to focus on a specific, acute instance of appalling labor injustice rather than the much larger scope of capitalism's plunder, the focus on mass shootings instead of suicides means the quieter, but larger issue gets less attention even when the solutions to it are more practical and have already proven effective.

After a mass shooting, gun manufacturer stock prices tend to rise as people rush out to buy guns in a panic, fearing gun control legislation that has so far never come. The tragedy of this vicious cycle? There is so much fear of becoming a very rare statistic that Americans stockpile the one thing that may turn them into a very common statistic.

#### CONTRIBUTORS

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Gun Control / Gun Violence / Las Vegas Shooting