

Firearms & Suicide Prevention:

A module for Massachusetts BFS classes

As part of this BFS course, we will discuss a lot about safety in general for a firearm, but right now we are going to focus on something some of you may not have thought about. The risk between owning a firearm and suicide. This conversation is about ways that everyone can contribute to a safer environment for people who are at risk for suicide. We understand that this is a sensitive topic and that people in attendance today may have had personal experiences involving suicide. If you find you need to take a break, please do so. If you find you need to talk to someone at any time, you can call the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988 (service members and Veterans should press 1 to connect with the Veterans Crisis Line). Why don't we all put this number into our phone contacts right now? Additional resources can be found through Walk The Talk America [Walk the Talk America](#)



Protecting our families

involves more than
keeping them safe from
accident or attack.

Suicide is a complex issue with no single cause, which can be difficult for people to understand. Those who have been impacted often ask “why” and sometimes there is no answer. Suicide is often the result of a complex interaction of risk and protective factors at the individual, community and societal levels. Today we are going to talk about how having access to a firearm can play into increased risk for suicide. The goal of this is to increase awareness and start a conversation around suicide prevention among firearm owners. This is because historically the firearm community and the suicide prevention community were not talking to one another, and we want to change that to keep responsible firearms owners and their families safe.

Massachusetts

has the **second lowest firearm death rate** in the nation
(just 1/4 the U.S. rate).

56% of MA firearm deaths are **suicides***.



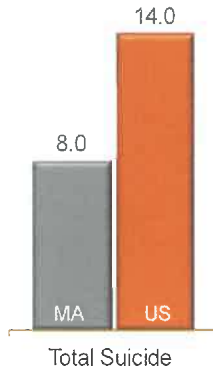
*Data year 2021

Source: Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control; 2021 Massachusetts Violent Death Reporting System, (MAVDRS) Massachusetts Department of Public Health

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MA and US Suicide Rates, 2021

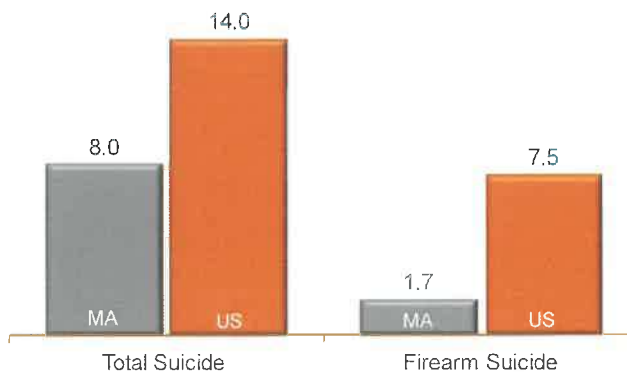


Suicide rates per 100,000 population

Source: Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control

MA has one of the lowest suicide rates in the nation even though the % of residents who have seriously considered or attempted suicide is on par with the US average (per National Survey on Drug Use and Health).

MA and US Suicide Rates, 2021



Suicide rates shown are per 100,000 population. For example, 8 per 100,000 means 8 suicides for every 100,000 residents.

Source: Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control

The state's lower suicide rate is driven by its lower firearm suicide rate. This is likely a result of the state's low gun ownership rate which is 1/4 the national rate.

Source: Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control

Putting time and distance between a suicidal person and a highly lethal method—especially a gun—can save a life.

But why?

“ If you really want to die, you will eventually find a way. ”

Some people do, but most don't.

Not everyone who becomes suicidal, acts on their thoughts or remains suicidal.

The next few slides may answer some questions that come up in this slide.

Pesticides and Sri Lanka

- Mid-1990s: Sri Lanka one of the highest suicide rates in the world. Pesticides leading method.
- Removed **only** the most highly humantoxic pesticides, not all pesticides.
- Suicide rates dropped 50% from 1996 to 2005- saving over 20,000 lives.
- Drop driven by decline in pesticide suicides.
- Suicides by other methods did not drop. Nor did nonfatal pesticide attempts.
- The *behavior* (trying to take one's life) didn't change. The *lethality* of that behavior changed.



Additional stats: The UK used a coal gas with high percentage of carbon monoxide domestically up until the late 1950s. Following WWII- increases in suicide, and ALMOST HALF, were a result of carbon monoxide poisoning (usually because of sticking their head in a gas oven). In 1958- began changing over their gas supply to a nontoxic natural gas. As the supply of coal gas reduced, there was a parallel reduction in suicide deaths involving carbon monoxide. There was a small increase in suicide by other methods, but overall, the suicide rate decreased by a 1/3 because of minimizing access to this previously easily accessible means.

With this information we are not advocating for reduction in access to firearms, just stating when people are at increase risk we can reduce

access. They did not remove Pesticides from Sri Lanka or stoves from the UK.

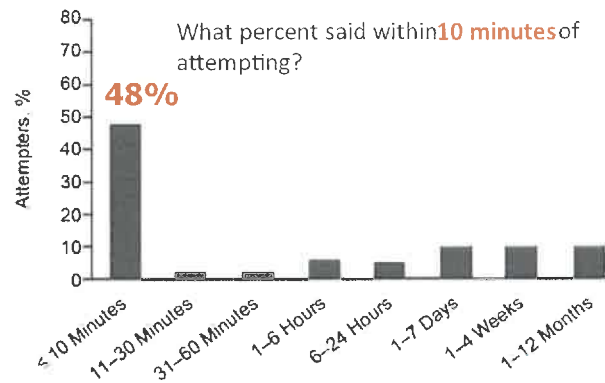
Why Means Matter

1. The acute phase, when someone is at highest risk, of a suicidal crisis is often brief.
2. Precisely what we value about guns —their speed, accuracy, power, simplicity—makes them more deadly than other methods. Other means are less likely to be lethal.
3. >90% of those who attempt and survive—even people making very serious attempts--do not go on to die by suicide

FAQ for #3: The reason why 90% of people who attempt do not go on to die by suicide, is because they often receive some form of intervention which can help address the issues that lead them to think about suicide in the first place.

Suicidal Crises

People seen in the hospital following a suicide attempt were asked when they had *first* started thinking about making that attempt.



This doesn't mean attempts come out of the blue. Most people who become suicidal have struggled with ongoing concerns. But the movement from distress to suicidal idea to attempt can be rapid and unpredictable.

Deisenhammer 2009

Protecting One Another

- Having access to a firearm during a suicidal crisis increases the odds that an attempt will prove fatal.
- We can protect one another. **Be alert to signs of suicide in friends and family.**
- If someone is at risk, help **keep guns from them** until they recover.

Some of the ways we know someone may be suicidal is that they are 1. Threatening to hurt or kill themselves 2. looking for way to kill themselves; seeking access to pills, firearms or other means 3. talking or writing about suicide or death. Anyone who is making a comment about hurting themselves or someone else, **MUST** be taken seriously.

Warning signs may include not taking care of personal hygiene, lack of involvement in things they normally attend (work, school, social events), recent change in medical status, feeling they may be a burden to their loved ones.

Who's at Risk for Suicide?

- **Anyone**
- People experiencing **depression, substance use, or other mental health concerns**, especially if they're also facing a painful crisis like a relationship break-up, arrest, trouble at work, or financial crisis—problems that make you feel hopeless and trapped.
- We know our loved ones and if they are not acting like “themselves” we should be checking in, to see how they are doing.
- Middle-aged and older white men have the highest suicide rates.
- **Teens at home?** Adolescents who become suicidal may show few or no warning signs.
- A wise precaution: **store all guns locked** and make sure the person at risk doesn't know where the keys or combination are.

Please note: a risk factor (listed above in point #2) or a potentially protective (sense, of connectedness, problem solving skills, sense of mission and purpose, physical health, employment, social and emotional well-being) factor does mean someone is thinking about suicide or protected from dying by suicide. However just because someone has a risk factor doesn't mean someone is suicidal, but it is a time to stop and think about asking them about suicidal thoughts .

Storage Options

- If a household member is at risk of suicide, you could **store guns away from home** (e.g., with another licensed gunowner you trust, in accordance with state law) **until risk has passed**.
- **Change the locks** and make sure they can't find the keys/combination. Or disassemble the guns and store the slide or firing pin elsewhere.
- Another option: **don't keep ammunition at home until the risk has passed**.
- Hiding guns isn't recommended. Family members tend to know one another's hiding places.
- Additionally offering to **hold onto a gun maybe an option, in accordance with MA law**.

Many of you may have questions about “when it passes” what does that mean, we will talk about ways of accessing professional help later in the slides. Just a reminder you don't have to be a mental health provider to help someone.

It is a good idea to talk with members of your household and the firearm owner about what they would want to do, if they are concerned about someone who has access to their firearm. This is why it is recommended to plan BEFORE a crisis happens. This is a discussion between the firearm owner and the person holding onto the firearm. It really is about the comfort level of each person. There is no right or wrong answer to this question.



What if It's You at Risk?

- If you feel yourself **at increased risk, take precautions before things get to a crisis.**
- Any strategy that builds some time between you and a gun in a suicidal crisis will keep you safer.
- **Store your guns off-site temporarily or** ask someone you trust to hold onto a critical component like the cylinder, slide or firing pin. Or **store the keys** somewhere they're not available in a crisis (in accordance with MA state law).
- These are **temporary measures** until the crisis has passed.

See notes from slide #13 (storage options) around discussion with a person who may help safeguard your firearm

Getting Help

- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: **call or text 988, or visit the website to chat**, <https://988lifeline.org/chat/> (Press 1 to speak to Veteran's Line, Text 838255 or Chat at www.veteranocrisisline.net)
- **Massachusetts Behavioral Health Helpline**
 - 833-773-2445 or visit masshelpline.com for online chat
 - Available 24/7 for realtime support, initial clinical assessment, and connection to treatment in your community.
- If you tried treatment in the past and it wasn't helpful, remember the above services can offer a variety of resources and useful suggestions.

If you don't know where to start in developing the safe storage of your firearms during a crisis timeframe. Consider calling 988 for support. You can find additional resources on Walk the Talk America [Walk the Talk America](#)

How to order 988 cards <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/988-suicide-crisis-lifeline-wallet-card-image/pep22-08-03-001>

How to get 988 press 1 for the Veteran crisis line card. [Spread the Word \(veteranocrisisline.net\)](#), you can also contact your local VA Suicide Prevention Coordinator you can find their name and email group at, [Local Resources \(veteranocrisisline.net\)](#) or call your local VA and ask to speak with them.

Will Calling a Helpline Effect Your Gun Permit?

- Simply contacting a helpline for support and talking about suicidal feelings **does not disqualify you** from having a gun permit.
 - If a caller seems at imminent risk of harm,—e.g., they've said they're going to kill themselves right now and have the means and seem intent on carrying through—that changes things. **This happens in less than 2% of helpline calls.** In those scenarios, it is possible it could impact your gun permit status.
 - You can find the link imminent risk policy on [988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline | Mass.gov](#)
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- In accordance with the [imminent risk policy](#) established by the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, 988 call takers do not contact emergency services without a caller's permission unless a suicide attempt is in progress or likely to happen in a very short period
 - View policy and best practices at [988lifeline.org/best-practices](#)

For more information for this subject, please find a FAQ, Video, and this Presentation from the QR code below



[Firearms Safety Instructors Certification Program | Mass.gov](https://www.mass.gov/firearms-safety-instructors-certification-program)

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Gun owners can take voluntary steps to prevent suicide.

Together, we can protect our family, our friends, and our freedom.

Tom Brown, Firearm Instructor

Photo courtesy of Lukas Budimaier, Unsplash