

Law enforcement and gun retailers are resources for safe gun storage

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Carol Runyan, Colorado School of Public Health at CU Anschutz. Credit: University of Colorado Anschutz

Law enforcement agencies and gun retailers can be resources to concerned families for storing guns to prevent suicide, according to a new study from the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus. It is the first to examine the extent to which these organizations are willing to offer voluntary, temporary storage - especially when a household member is in crisis - according to surveys conducted in eight mountain west states.

"Most people, including [health](#) providers, may not know what safe outside-the-home [storage](#) is available and what their options are," said Carol Runyan, lead investigator and professor of epidemiology at the Colorado School of Public Health at CU Anschutz. "A suicide attempt by a gun is almost always fatal, and often the time between contemplating suicide by gun and acting is short. If medical advice to an at-risk patient is to remove [guns](#) from the household, where exactly should they be stored and where are those resources available?"

Researchers from the Colorado School of Public Health and the CU School of Medicine sought to

understand how, and under what circumstances, [law enforcement agencies](#) (LEAs) and retailers could be partners to gun-owning families and health care providers, particularly when concerned about the mental health of a household member, by safely and temporarily providing gun storage. They surveyed law enforcement agencies and gun retailers in Colorado, Arizona, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming to gauge their willingness to provide storage under various conditions to both gun owners and non-owners.

"Friends don't let friends drive drunk," Runyan said. "When a friend who has guns is going through a tough time, we should ask them about safe storage. It's not about taking away guns or their gun rights, it's about trying to be safe and looking out for each other."

According to the Centers for Disease Control, gun ownership and gun-related suicides are more prevalent in these states than in the US overall, and that of 44,193 US suicides in 2015, half involved guns.

"It's not about taking guns away from people, it's about safe storage, especially in a home with a person in crisis," Runyan said. "A gun that is easily accessible to a person in crisis increases the chance that a person is going to die."

Law enforcement agencies already store guns under circumstances such as domestic abuse or confiscations, she said, but other resources might not be well known to the public.

Study authors received responses from 448 LEAs and 95 retailers to questioners sent beginning in April 2016. Three-fourths of LEAs indicated they would provide temporary storage compared to half of retail respondents. LEAs were most willing to provide storage when a gun owner was concerned about the mental health of a family member, as

were about two thirds of retailers. Retailers were also willing to consider storage requests from a gun owner during a time of travel or when hosting family visitors.

Most, (97.3%) of LEAs were very or somewhat likely to recommend not having guns in the home when someone is in crisis - something Runyan said people working to prevent suicide agree with. Researchers excluded prisons, jails, airport police, conservation law enforcement, campus police, state police/highway patrols and tribal police from their sample.

Retailers, excluding pawn shops and large chain stores, recommended storage with a LEA (54.6%), in the gun store (61.4%) or with family and friends (67%). Of all surveyed, about two-thirds of LEAs and half the retailers reported having received requests for storage services in the previous year.

Runyan said storing guns in another household presented the risk that the gun might not be stored properly or might still be available to the individual experiencing a health crisis, indicating this option should be used cautiously.

Runyan said, "We have crime shows on TV that focus on homicide all the time, but not suicide. The general public may not be aware what a problem suicide is, and in this region suicide by gun is a higher problem than the country overall."

Runyan and her colleagues at CU Anschutz in Aurora, Colo., are working to produce more studies regarding lethal means counseling by [health care providers](#) and the connection to community resources for suicide prevention. According to their report, options for temporary, voluntary storage of guns away from the home are an important piece to inform future [public health](#) initiatives for suicide prevention.

The study, "Law enforcement and gun retailers as partners for safely storing guns to prevent [suicide](#) - a study in eight mountain west states," was published last week in the September issue of the *American Journal of Public Health*.

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