

With tighter handgun laws, U.S. would see fewer suicides by young people

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(HealthDay)—Hundreds of suicides could be prevented in the United States each year if the minimum age for buying a handgun was raised to 21 in the 33 states that have a minimum age of 18, according to a new study.

Suicide rates, especially among teens, have been rising in the United States. Guns have caused more than half of these deaths, the authors said in background notes.

For this study, researchers analyzed data on suicides by teens ages 13-20 in the 46 states that didn't change their handgun sales policies between 2001 and 2017.

A minimum age of 18 to buy a handgun was associated with 344 extra deaths on average among [young people](#) ages 18-20 during the study period.

However, a minimum age of 21 to buy a handgun was associated with an 18% lower rate of suicide

among those ages 18-20. This translated into nearly 2 fewer suicides per 100,000 people ages 18-20, according to the study.

The results were published July 22 in the *BMJ*.

Researchers also found increases in [suicide rates](#) in Missouri and South Carolina, which lowered the minimum age for handgun purchases, but no change in states that increased the minimum age to buy a handgun (West Virginia and Wyoming).

Changing "the age of handgun sales policies from 18 to 21 years across the country or in the 33 states without such policies might reduce deaths from suicide among adolescents," study author Julia Raifman and colleagues said in a journal news release. Raifman is an assistant professor at Boston University School of Public Health.

The authors added that in 2018, more than two-thirds of U.S. adults expressed support for more gun regulations.

But even if the minimum age to buy handguns is increased nationwide, that won't protect the many young people living in homes with guns, wrote the authors of an accompanying editorial.

Dr. Ann John, of Swansea University Medical School in England, and colleagues pointed out that most guns used by people who die from [suicide](#) have been in their homes for years. They added there are guns in 1 in 3 U.S. homes with children, and the guns are not locked up in half of those homes.

So while increasing the minimum age to buy handguns "will likely prevent at least some suicides in young people," additional efforts to reduce young people's access to guns in homes are also needed, John and the editorial authors wrote. "Sales laws alone might make us feel better but are unlikely to save many lives," they said.

More information: The American Academy of Pediatrics outlines what parents can do to [prevent suicide](#).

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