

People who purchased guns during buying surge more likely to have suicidal thoughts

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Michael Anestis, executive director, New Jersey Gun Violence Research Center at Rutgers and an associate professor at Rutgers School of Public Health. Credit: Raymond Clinkscale, Rutgers School of Public Health

People who purchased firearms during the 2020–2021 purchasing

surge—particularly first-time buyers—were more likely to have thoughts of suicide, according to a Rutgers study.

The study appears in *JAMA Network Open*.

The researchers surveyed 6,404 adults from New Jersey, Minnesota and Mississippi and found that surge purchasers were more likely than other firearm owners and non-firearm owners to report suicidal thoughts during their lifetime, the previous year and previous month. Although firearm access is associated with a risk for suicide, the study found that first-time firearm owners who purchased a gun during this period were more likely than established firearm owners to report lifetime and past-year suicidal ideation.

According to the study, about 6 percent of U.S. residents purchased a firearm between March 2020 and mid-July 2020. Of these, 34 percent were first-time buyers, a rate higher than typical. The states in the study were chosen due to their difference in geography, demographics, political climate, firearm ownership rates, firearm purchasing laws, gun violence rates and culture.

This unprecedented surge in firearm sales over the last year throughout the United States was fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the contentious election season and the racial justice movement after the death of George Floyd.

The Rutgers study found that 56 percent of surge purchasers have experienced lifetime suicidal thoughts compared to 32 percent of non-firearm owners and 28 percent of other firearm owners. Over the past year, 42 percent of surge purchasers reported suicidal thoughts versus 23 percent of non-firearm owners and 18 percent of other firearm owners. Also, 20 percent of surge purchasers reported suicidal thoughts in the past month compared to 11 percent of non-firearm owners and 7 percent

of other firearm owners. Almost 40 percent of these buyers store at least one firearm unlocked.

Surge purchasers were more likely than other firearm owners to use locking devices (36 percent vs. 26 percent), but less likely to store firearms unloaded in a closet or drawer (22 percent vs 30 percent). Among surge purchasers, first-time firearm owners were less likely than established firearm owners to use gun safes (39 percent vs. 52 percent) or store loaded firearms hidden in a closet or drawer (11 percent vs. 18 percent). In contrast, first-time firearm owners were more likely to use locking devices (42 percent vs. 29 percent).

"These findings highlight that individuals who made the decision to become firearm owners during the purchasing surge exhibit a higher risk for suicidal thoughts than typical firearm owners," said lead author Michael Anestis, executive director, New Jersey Gun Violence Research Center at Rutgers and an associate professor at Rutgers School of Public Health. "The fact that [suicidal thoughts](#) were particularly common among surge purchasers who became first time firearm owners is an important consideration given data demonstrating an elevated suicide rate in the months following the first acquisition of a firearm."

The study illustrates the need to implement policies and interventions that increase safety among firearm purchasers, such as safe firearm storage and temporary storage of firearms away from home during times of stress, as well as policies that promote different forms of protection, such as home alarm systems.

"This approach needs to be supplemented with practical tools such as information on different options for safe firearm storage, incentives for both retailer and consumer to purchase safe storage equipment and information on where firearm owners can legally and temporarily store firearms outside the home," Anestis said. He also called for better

legislation on safe storage, waiting periods and mandating of suicide risk screening questions during [firearm](#) purchases.

More information: *JAMA Network Open* (2021). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2021.32111](#)

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