

Guns in homes strongly associated with higher rates of suicide

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In the first nationally representative study to examine the relationship between survey measures of household firearm ownership and state level rates of suicide in the U.S., researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH) found that suicide rates among children, women and men of all ages are higher in states where more households have guns. The study appears in the April 2007 issue of *The Journal of Trauma*.

"We found that where there are more guns, there are more suicides," said Matthew Miller, Assistant Professor of Health Policy and Management at HSPH and lead author of the study.

Suicide ranks as one of the 15 leading causes of death in the U.S.; among persons less than 45 years old, it is one of the top three causes of death. In 2004, more than half of the 32,439 Americans who committed suicide used a firearm.

Miller and his colleagues Steven Lippmann, David Hemenway and Deborah Azrael, used survey data to estimate rates of household firearm ownership in each of the 50 states and examined whether rates of suicide were related to rates of household gun ownership. They controlled for measures of poverty, urbanization, unemployment, drug and alcohol dependence and abuse, and mental illness. The researchers found that states with higher rates of household firearm ownership had significantly higher rates of suicide by children, women and men. In the 15 states with the highest levels of household gun ownership, twice as many people committed suicide compared with the six states with the lowest levels, even though the population in both groups was about the same.

The association between firearm ownership and suicide was due to higher gun-related suicides; non-gun-related suicide rates were not significantly associated with rates of firearm ownership. Also, suicide attempts using firearms, which constitute just 5% of all fatal and non-fatal attempts, are

highly lethal--more than 90% of all suicidal acts by firearm are fatal. By comparison, individuals who use drugs to attempt suicide, which constitute 75% of all attempts, die in the attempt less than 3% of the time.

The researchers recommend that firearm owners take steps to make their homes safer. "Removing all firearms from one's home is one of the most effective and straightforward steps that household decision-makers can take to reduce the risk of suicide," says Miller. "Removing firearms may be especially effective in reducing the risk of suicide among adolescents and other potentially impulsive members of their home. Short of removing all firearms, the next best thing is to make sure that all guns in homes are very securely locked up and stored separately from secured ammunition. In a nation where more than half of all suicides are gun suicides and where more than one in three homes have firearms, one cannot talk about suicide without talking about guns," he adds.

The bottom line, says Miller, is that "people are less likely to die from attempting suicide when they don't have access to guns in homes."

Source: Harvard School of Public Health

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