



STATE BACKGROUND CHECK REQUIREMENTS AND SUICIDE

Loopholes in federal and state law make it easy for people who are a danger to themselves to get guns. But Everytown’s research shows that common-sense public safety laws can help reduce gun suicides and save lives. Simply put, background check laws make people safer: controlling for population, there are 48 percent fewer gun suicides in states that require background checks for private handgun sales than in states that do not.

METHODOLOGY

Everytown compared the number of people who committed suicide with guns and without guns over a five-year period (2008-12) in states that did or did not require background checks for unlicensed, “private” handgun sales.

Data were obtained from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Fatal Injury Reports on December 2, 2014.¹

RESULTS

Throughout the study period, 14 states and the District of Columbia required all gun buyers to undergo a background check before buying a handgun in an unlicensed sale, and 36 states did not.² During that period, the CDC recorded 27,749 gun suicides in the former group of states, and 69,257 in the latter. Adjusting for population, there were 48 percent fewer gun suicides in states that require background checks for all handgun sales than in states that do not. There was no similar difference in non-firearm suicide rates.

	Population (2008-2012 average)	Firearm suicides (2008-2012 total)	Firearm suicide rate per million residents (2008-2012 total)	Non-firearm suicides (2008-2012 total)	Non-firearm suicide rate per million residents (2008-2012 total)
Total	309,013,456	97,006	62.8	94,420	61.1
States that require a background check for private handgun sales (15)	134,244,366	27,749	41.3	40,749	60.7
States that do not require a background check for private handgun sales (36)	174,769,090	69,257	79.3	53,671	61.4
Difference			- 48%		-1.2%

DISCUSSION

These results are consistent with research that employed other methods. An early evaluation of the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act found that the implementation of the background check system was associated with a six percent reduction in suicide rates among people ages 55 and older, though the authors speculated this might also be related to changes in both waiting period and background check requirements.³ Another study found that state-level firearm purchase permit requirements and bans on firearm sales to minors were associated with lower rates of male suicide.⁴

Still, while over 18,000 Americans commit suicide with guns every year, little is understood about the characteristics of the firearms they use or the methods by which they acquire them. Limited data gathered by the Centers for Disease Control and the State of California suggest that young people who commit suicide with guns typically do so inside their homes with guns that belong to their friends, parents, or relatives.⁵ But the mechanism by which background checks affect overall suicide rates is not entirely clear.

It is plausible that background checks stop severely mentally ill people from obtaining firearms and committing acts of self-harm. People with severe mental illness are at a substantially increased risk of suicide,⁶ and partially as a result, they are federally prohibited from buying guns.⁷ The National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) has proven effective at stopping such gun sales. Since its inception, more than 50,000 gun sales to severely mentally ill people have been denied,⁸ particularly as states shore up their databases identifying prohibited, severely mentally ill people.⁹

It is also possible that background check requirements are associated with lower suicide rates due to an unobserved variable, such as the availability of firearms. A study of handgun purchasers in California found that merely acquiring a firearm was associated with a substantially elevated risk of suicide in the weeks following, lasting up to six years.¹⁰ And although estimates of household firearm prevalence are out-of-date and subject to reporting biases, there is evidence that Americans are more likely to commit suicide if they live in an area with a higher prevalence of household gun ownership.¹¹

1. "Fatal Injury Reports," Injury Prevention & Control: Data & Statistics (WISQARS), last accessed January 7, 2015, available at <http://1.usa.gov/1pXBux>.
2. We analyzed data for states that required background checks for all handgun sales during the period 2008-12. Since then, Colorado, Delaware, and Washington adopted these laws as well.
3. Ludwig J and P Cook. "Homicide and suicide rates associated with implementation of the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act." *JAMA*, 2000 Aug 2;284 (5):585-91.
4. Katherine Hempstead and Antonio Rodriguez, "Gun Control and Suicide: The Impact of State Firearm Regulations, 1995-2004," *Health Policy* 101, no. 1 (June 2011): last accessed January 6, 2015, available at <http://bit.ly/1AARcUg>.
5. Renee M. Johnson et al., "Who are the Owners of Firearms Used in Adolescent Suicides?" *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 40, no. 6 (December 2010); and Mona A. Wright et al., "Gun Suicide by Young People in California: Descriptive Epidemiology and Gun Ownership," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 43 (2008).
6. J. T. Cavanagh et al., "Psychological Autopsy Studies of Suicide: A Systematic Review," *Psychological Medicine* 33, no. 5 (July 2003): 947.
7. 18 U.S.C. § 922(g)(4). According to the ATF, "any person who has been 'adjudicated as a mental defective' or 'committed to a mental institution' is prohibited under Federal law from shipping, transporting, receiving, or possessing any firearm or ammunition," under federal law. See <http://1.usa.gov/1Bv86DR>.
8. As of November 30, 2014, the FBI had denied 16,261 background checks due to mental illness (<http://1.usa.gov/1HpenTi>), and of the 1,131,466 denials by state and local agencies between 2009-12, between 3.4 and 5.4 percent of were for mental health criteria (<http://1.usa.gov/179yzf3>). In total, over 50,000 gun sales to severely mentally ill people have been blocked by the background check system.
9. Everytown for Gun Safety, *Closing the Gaps: Strengthening the Background Check System to Keep Guns Away from the Dangerously Mentally Ill* (May 2014) available at <http://bit.ly/1pFahAj>.
10. Wintemute GJ, Parham CA, Beaumont JJ, Wright MA, Drake C. "Mortality among Recent Purchasers of Handguns." *The New England Journal of Medicine* 1999 341(21):1583-1589.
11. Miller M, Lippman SJ, Azrael D, and D Hemenway. "Household Firearm Ownership and Rates of Suicide Across the 50 United States." *The Journal of Trauma Injury, Infection, and Critical Care* 62(4). April 2007: 1029-35; and Miller M, Azrael D, Hepburn L, Hemenway D, and SJ Lippman. "The association between changes in household firearm ownership and rates of suicides in the United States 1981-2002." *Injury Prevention* (12). 2006: 178-82.

FIREARM AND NON-FIREARM SUICIDES, 2008-2012

	BACKGROUND CHECK REQUIRED FOR ALL HANDGUN SALES?	2008		2009		2010		2011		2012		2008-2012				
		FIREARM SUICIDES	NON-FIREARM SUICIDES	FIREARM SUICIDES	NON-FIREARM SUICIDES	FIREARM SUICIDES	NON-FIREARM SUICIDES	FIREARM SUICIDES	NON-FIREARM SUICIDES	FIREARM SUICIDES	NON-FIREARM SUICIDES	AVERAGE POPULATION	AVERAGE ANNUAL FIREARM SUICIDES	FIREARM SUICIDE RATE	AVERAGE ANNUAL NON-FIREARM SUICIDES	NON-FIREARM SUICIDE RATE
ALABAMA	NO	424	180	479	194	454	225	452	202	500	224	4,775,007	462	96.7	205	42.9
ALASKA	NO	116	53	79	64	107	57	99	44	98	70	710,053	100	140.6	58	81.1
ARIZONA	NO	540	432	605	455	620	473	674	486	663	493	6,407,096	620	96.8	468	73
ARKANSAS	NO	275	172	285	137	266	181	299	163	307	178	2,915,130	286	98.2	166	57
CALIFORNIA	YES	1,478	2,297	1,519	2,304	1,492	2,421	1,564	2,432	1,549	2,344	37,297,616	1,520	40.8	2,360	63.3
COLORADO	NO	387	416	454	487	427	438	443	470	533	519	5,039,796	449	89.1	466	92.5
CONNECTICUT	YES	109	206	93	223	110	243	111	259	111	257	3,572,439	107	29.9	238	66.5
DELAWARE	NO	41	68	38	69	43	63	46	59	46	79	899,715	43	47.6	68	75.1
DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA	YES	12	31	5	24	13	28	7	30	10	27	605,448	9	15.5	28	46.2
FLORIDA	NO	1,397	1,343	1,472	1,386	1,454	1,335	1,490	1,390	1,550	1,452	18,877,098	1,473	78	1,381	73.2
GEORGIA	NO	616	365	743	391	718	415	742	415	750	418	9,707,834	714	73.5	401	41.3
HAWAII	YES	28	105	36	139	37	170	42	139	43	147	1,361,244	37	27.3	140	102.8
IDAHO	NO	149	103	176	128	182	108	167	114	176	121	1,567,172	170	108.5	115	73.3
ILLINOIS	YES	438	760	402	775	442	736	461	765	490	802	12,819,722	447	34.8	768	59.9
INDIANA	NO	450	359	458	370	455	409	411	470	513	427	6,484,410	457	70.5	407	62.8
IOWA	YES	180	200	160	201	177	195	185	237	175	208	3,047,020	175	57.6	208	68.3
KANSAS	NO	185	152	200	182	210	191	233	161	297	205	2,849,769	225	79	178	62.5
KENTUCKY	NO	394	218	403	189	404	227	453	222	469	255	4,338,584	425	97.9	222	51.2
LOUISIANA	NO	351	181	328	162	385	172	377	196	375	192	4,527,587	363	80.2	181	39.9
MAINE	NO	103	78	106	91	95	91	113	122	112	97	1,328,961	106	79.6	96	72.1
MARYLAND	YES	263	244	252	299	222	280	242	316	272	311	5,782,803	250	43.3	290	50.1
MASSACHUSETTS	YES	118	391	89	441	138	460	116	469	151	453	6,557,159	122	18.7	443	67.5
MICHIGAN	YES	570	610	575	594	601	662	619	602	623	638	9,897,846	598	60.4	621	62.8
MINNESOTA	NO	289	307	281	303	280	326	322	361	310	346	5,311,780	296	55.8	329	61.9
MISSISSIPPI	NO	286	123	269	112	256	132	268	121	296	114	2,967,643	275	92.7	120	40.6
MISSOURI	NO	421	358	471	389	489	367	513	420	546	368	5,981,704	488	81.6	380	63.6
MONTANA	NO	132	71	136	83	141	86	152	80	153	80	990,581	143	144.2	80	80.8
NEBRASKA	YES	98	93	93	77	106	87	111	82	115	117	1,826,500	105	57.3	91	49.9
NEVADA	NO	291	237	295	210	289	258	272	244	274	250	2,702,230	284	105.2	240	88.7
NEW HAMPSHIRE	NO	85	94	82	84	102	94	75	123	98	104	1,317,634	88	67.1	100	75.7
NEW JERSEY	YES	175	440	173	384	187	532	181	508	160	523	8,792,595	175	19.9	477	54.3
NEW MEXICO	NO	195	224	192	184	204	209	221	199	230	212	2,053,620	208	101.5	206	100.1
NEW YORK	YES	429	980	422	995	459	1,088	505	1,153	516	1,192	19,395,291	466	24	1,082	55.8
NORTH CAROLINA	YES	669	493	678	496	707	467	728	485	709	577	9,538,848	698	73.2	504	52.8
NORTH DAKOTA	NO	55	31	50	40	56	50	51	55	63	42	676,268	55	81.3	44	64.5
OHIO	NO	684	728	590	586	724	715	726	739	784	758	11,536,719	702	60.8	705	61.1
OKLAHOMA	NO	346	229	363	204	376	242	440	253	411	259	3,747,843	387	103.3	237	63.3
OREGON	NO	319	253	345	299	376	309	343	313	367	357	3,835,232	350	91.3	306	79.8
PENNSYLVANIA	YES	770	769	825	806	762	814	883	864	819	828	12,697,461	812	63.9	816	64.3
RHODE ISLAND	YES	23	87	40	78	30	99	20	81	26	79	1,052,374	28	26.4	85	80.6
SOUTH CAROLINA	NO	343	222	377	242	392	245	426	232	433	240	4,628,232	394	85.2	236	51
SOUTH DAKOTA	NO	68	56	61	68	65	75	60	68	76	65	815,638	66	80.9	66	81.4
TENNESSEE	NO	609	364	574	373	585	358	591	364	626	352	6,350,562	597	94	362	57
TEXAS	NO	1,506	1,046	1,583	1,226	1,702	1,189	1,684	1,212	1,744	1,293	25,191,613	1,644	65.3	1,193	47.4
UTAH	NO	196	194	217	232	275	198	268	234	283	267	2,763,998	248	89.7	225	81.4
VERMONT	NO	44	50	59	28	66	40	70	50	50	37	625,396	58	92.4	41	65.6
VIRGINIA	NO	524	424	527	436	576	387	604	450	587	476	8,010,587	564	70.4	435	54.3
WASHINGTON	NO	439	450	470	451	464	493	495	526	529	509	6,734,199	479	71.2	486	72.1
WEST VIRGINIA	NO	172	89	178	75	210	69	200	106	198	128	1,850,589	192	103.5	93	50.5
WISCONSIN	NO	344	399	345	379	378	415	351	394	348	375	5,686,117	353	62.1	392	69
WYOMING	NO	87	37	82	29	83	48	84	48	102	69	562,695	88	155.7	46	82.1