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Commentary

Consensus statement on youth suicide by firearms

YOUTH SUICIDE BY FIREARMS TASK FORCE

The individuals listed below met in Lake Bluff, Illinois from November 13–15, 1996, to review and debate the following research and epidemiological findings pertaining to youth suicides in the U.S.A. and to arrive at agreement regarding a focus for future collaboration.

Research findings

We agreed that:

1. Youth suicide is a multidimensional and complex behavior, with many associated risk factors (Berman & Jobes, 1991; Brent & Perper, 1995; Lewinsohn et al., 1996; Marttunen et al., 1992).
2. Youth suicide is a major public health problem in America, with rates now surpassing those for the nation as a whole (Kachur et al., 1995).
3. Suicide is the third-leading cause of death among youth (ages 15–24) and second-leading cause of death for 15–19 year olds in the US (Kachur et al., 1995).
4. Epidemiological surveys indicate dramatic increases in suicidal behaviors particularly among young African American males, Native American males, and younger children (below the age of 14) (Kachur et al., 1995).
5. Firearms are the most common method of suicide by youth. This is true for both males and females, younger and older adolescents, and for all races (Kachur et al., 1995).
6. The increase in the rate of youth suicide (and the number of deaths by suicide) over the past four decades is largely related to the use of firearms as a method (Boyd & Moscicki, 1986; CDC, 1986; Kachur et al., 1995).
7. The most common location for the occurrence of firearm suicides by youth is the home (Brent et al., 1993).
8. There is a positive association between the accessibility and availability of firearms in the home and the risk for youth suicide (Brent et al., 1993; Kellerman et al., 1992).

9. The risk conferred by guns in the home is proportional to the accessibility (e.g., loaded and unsecured firearms) and the number of guns in the home (Brent et al., 1993; Kellerman et al., 1992).
10. Guns in the home, particularly loaded guns, are associated with increased risk for suicide by youth, both with and without identifiable mental health problems or suicidal risk factors (Brent et al., 1993).
11. If a gun is used to attempt suicide, a fatal outcome will result 78% to 90% of the time (Annest et al., 1995; Card, 1974)
12. Public policy initiatives that restrict access to guns (especially handguns) are associated with a reduction of firearm suicide and suicide overall, especially among youth (Carrington et al., 1994; Loftin et al., 1991; Sloan et al., 1990).

Objective

Therefore, in keeping with a public health preventive intervention approach and the proposed National Academy of Sciences Institute of Medicine's preventive intervention spectrum model, we believe that a significant proportion of suicides by firearms are preventable (Mrazek & Haggerty, 1994). It is vital to try to break the causal chain by separating vulnerable youth from this highly lethal method of suicide, i.e., firearms. To this end, we support the U.S. Public Health Service's *Healthy People 2000* Objectives 7.2 and 7.10 which refer to the safe storage of guns (Department of Health and Human Services, 1994).

Indicated interventions

Indicated intervention approaches focus on the education of parents or parental figures who are gun-owners as to:

(a) understanding the risk associated with gun ownership with respect to violent death and suicide; and
(b) the importance of gun safety, namely making a gun inoperable by and inaccessible to youth.

Professionals who come in contact with at-risk youth and their families must be educated to routinely ask about the presence and method of storage of firearms in the home, and to educate all families about safe storage practice for families who choose to keep guns. This can take place in the context of well-child care by primary care physicians, as well as by any professional who would come into contact with youth at risk for suicidal behavior

(e.g., child welfare, juvenile justice, educational professionals, mental health professionals, etc.).

Selective interventions

Pursuant to the achievement of firearms-secure homes, we support public health policy initiatives to develop, disseminate, and evaluate technologies that would decrease firearm operability by youth, thereby making it much more difficult for an adolescent to use a gun for a suicide. We support legislative initiatives and efforts to increase market demand for these new technologies.

We endorse training and education with respect to the risks associated with guns in the home; the need for safer storage of guns; and identification of risk factors for youth suicide for all parents, professionals who take care of youth at risk, and all firearms owners.

Universal interventions

At the most universal level of intervention, we support models promoting community and parental responsibility for consistent supervision of adolescents; maintenance of alcohol and drug-free homes; and if there is a gun in the home, adherence to safe storage (i.e., inaccessible and inoperable firearms).

We endorse seeking partnerships and collaborations with organizations and agencies that have a shared stake in the issues of youth suicide and violence, such as religious organizations, youth service organizations, juvenile justice, child welfare, community service organizations.

Future directions

We support epidemiological research that would increase our knowledge about culturally-specific issues associated with youth suicide and firearms, such as those in specific ethnic groups (e.g., African American, Native American), or in rural areas. Product-based research is needed to develop technologies to increase the safety of firearms. A better understanding of the cognitions, attitudes, and motivations for gun ownership and safe storage behaviors is needed. There is a need to research the gender differences in youth suicide. There is a need to understand the causal sequences leading up to youth suicide by firearms. Studies of the influence of media portrayals of violence and firearms use are urgently needed. There is a need to rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of proposed preventive interventions for youth

suicide. There is a need to establish, support, and maintain surveillance and reporting systems of firearm-related suicides and suicidal behaviors.

Summary

Given the costs to American society and families wrought by youth suicide, we believe that immediate action needs to be taken. There is clear evidence that intervening in or preventing the immediate accessibility of a lethal weapon can save lives. We have identified the safe storage of guns as one preventive intervention approach that would result in a decrease in the number of youth suicides. We believe that a combination of indicated, selective and universal preventive interventions addressing this objective can successfully lead to a reduction in youth firearm suicides in our homes and communities. The achievement of this goal can only come about through the cooperation, coordination, and collaboration of concerned organizations at all levels of the community.

In agreement

Alan L. Berman, Ph.D., Executive Director
American Association of Suicidology
Washington, DC

David A. Brent, M.D.
Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic
University of Pittsburgh Medical Center
Pittsburgh, PA

Roger Brown, Ph.D., Dept. of Mental Health
American Medical Association
Chicago, IL

Katherine Kaufer Christoffel, M.D., M.P.H.
Director, Violent Injury Prevention Center
Children's Memorial Medical Center
Chicago, IL

Gregory T. Diaz, J.D.
Violence Policy Center
Washington, DC

Robert Walker
President, Handgun Control, Inc.
Washington, DC

Steve Hargarten, M.D., M.P.H.
Associate Director of Emergency Medicine
Department of Emergency Medicine
Medical College of Wisconsin

Cheryl King, Ph.D.,
President-Elect
American Association of Suicidology
Ann Arbor, MI

Markus Kreusi, M.D.
Director, Institute for Juvenile Research
University of Illinois at Chicago

Robert Kari Lee, D.P.H.
School of Nursing, Graduate School for
Biomedical Sciences, Univ. of Texas
Galveston, TX

Antoon Leenaars, Ph.D.
Past President, AAS; Editor,
Archives of Suicide Research
Windsor, ON (Canada)

Ernest Lissabet
President, American Firearms Association
Fairfax, VA

Ted R. Miller, Ph.D.
Director, Children's Safety Network
Economics and Insurance Resource Center
National Public Services Research Institute
Landover, MD

Lloyd Potter, Ph.D., M.P.H.
National Center for Injury Control and
Prevention Centers for Disease Control and
Prevention
Atlanta, GA

Morton M. Silverman, M.D., Editor
Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior
Chicago, IL

Elaine Sullivan, M.C., L.P.C., Director,
Survivors Division, AAS
Idaho Falls, ID

Matthew Miller, M.D., M.P.H.
Research Assoc., Harvard School of
Public Health
Boston, MA

Doug Painter
Vice President, National Shooting
Sports Foundation
Newtown, CT

Leanne Shimabukuro, Policy Analyst
Domestic Policy Council, The White
House
Washington, DC

Larry Stone, M.D., President
American Academy of Child and
Adolescent Psychiatry
San Antonio, TX

Neil Stanley, Staff Attorney
Children's Defense Fund
Washington, DC

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Address for correspondence: Youth Suicide by Firearms Task Force, c/o A. Berman, American Association of Suicidology, 4201 Connecticut Avenue, NW Suite 310, Washington, DC, 20008, USA