

Veteran Lethal Means Safety for Suicide Prevention

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April 17, 2024



Mountain Plains (HHS Region 8)

MHTTC

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network
Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

Disclaimer and Funding Statement

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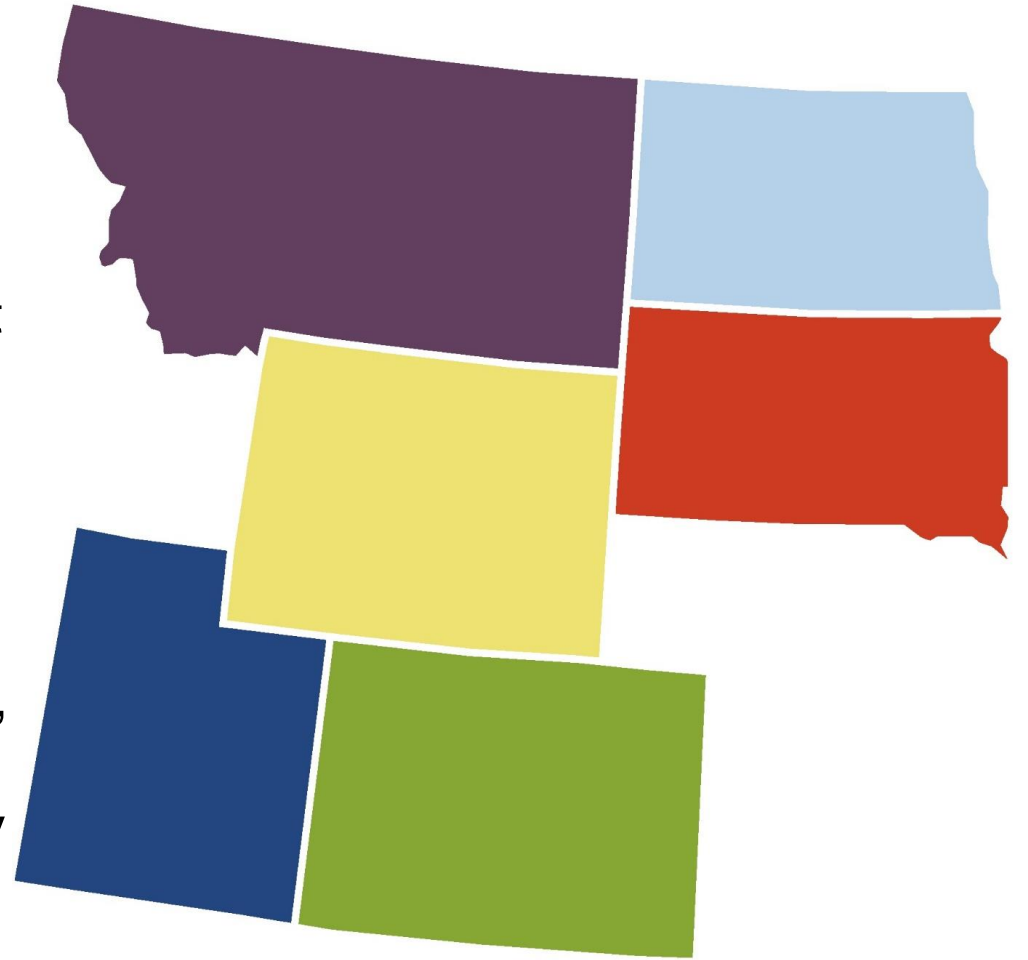
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The Mountain Plains Mental Health Technology Transfer Center

The Mountain Plains Mental Health Technology Transfer Center (Mountain Plains MHTTC) provides training and technical assistance to individuals who serve persons with mental health concerns throughout Region 8 (Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah and Wyoming).

We belong to the Technology Transfer Center (TTC) Network, a national network of training and technical assistance centers serving the needs of mental health, substance use and prevention providers. The work of the TTC Network is under a cooperative agreement by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration (SAMHSA).



Land Acknowledgement Statement

Today, the University of North Dakota rests on the ancestral lands of the Pembina and Red Lake Bands of Ojibwe and the Dakota Oyate - presently existing as composite parts of the Red Lake, Turtle Mountain, White Earth Bands, and the Dakota Tribes of Minnesota and North Dakota. We acknowledge the people who resided here for generations and recognize that the spirit of the Ojibwe and Oyate people permeates this land. As a university community, we will continue to build upon our relations with the First Nations of the State of North Dakota - the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara Nation, Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate Nation, Spirit Lake Nation, Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, and Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians.



The MHTTC Network uses affirming, respectful and recovery-oriented language in all activities. That language is:

**STRENGTHS-BASED
AND HOPEFUL**

**INCLUSIVE AND
ACCEPTING OF
DIVERSE CULTURES,
GENDERS,
PERSPECTIVES,
AND EXPERIENCES**

**HEALING-CENTERED AND
TRAUMA-RESPONSIVE**

**INVITING TO INDIVIDUALS
PARTICIPATING IN THEIR
OWN JOURNEYS**

**PERSON-FIRST AND
FREE OF LABELS**

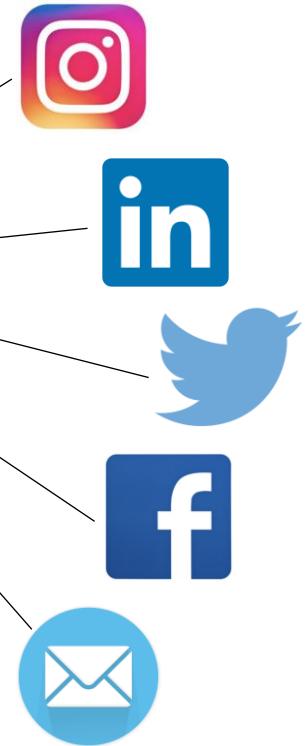
**NON-JUDGMENTAL AND
AVOIDING ASSUMPTIONS**

**RESPECTFUL, CLEAR
AND UNDERSTANDABLE**

**CONSISTENT WITH
OUR ACTIONS,
POLICIES, AND PRODUCTS**

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Veteran Lethal Means Safety for Suicide Prevention

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With Credit To: CALM America, Elaine Frank

Disclaimer



Any views expressed are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Veterans Affairs.

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ND HOPES is led by the University of North Dakota and NORC at the University of Chicago and made possible by the CE22-2204 Cooperative Agreement, award #5 NU50CE002603-02-00 from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The contents of this presentation are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Before We Begin

- Suicide is an intense topic for some people.
 - If you need to take a break, or step out, please do so.
 - Immediate Resources:
 - National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988
 - Service members and Veterans: Press 1 to connect with the Veterans Crisis Line.

Project Goals

- Reduce suicide attempts and deaths by 10% over 5 years
- Strengthen multisectoral partnerships
- Increase access to and utilization of timely surveillance data
- Implement strategies and approaches that will fill the gaps

ND HOPES counties include

Divide, McKenzie, Williams, Adams, Billings, Bowman, Dunn, Golden Valley, Hettinger, Slope, Stark, Burleigh, Emmons, Grant, Kidder, Mclean, Mercer, Morton, Oliver, Sheridan, Sioux



Objectives

By participating in this training, you will be able to:

- Understand the importance of lethal means safety when it comes to suicide.
- Utilize lethal means safety counseling basics with your clients.
- Basic understanding of Safe Storage Practices for Firearms
- Identify training and resources available to you

Very Special Thanks

- CALM America www.calmamerica.org
- VA Rocky Mountain MIRECC [Lethal Means Safety Counseling - MIRECC / CoE \(va.gov\)](http://www.va.gov)

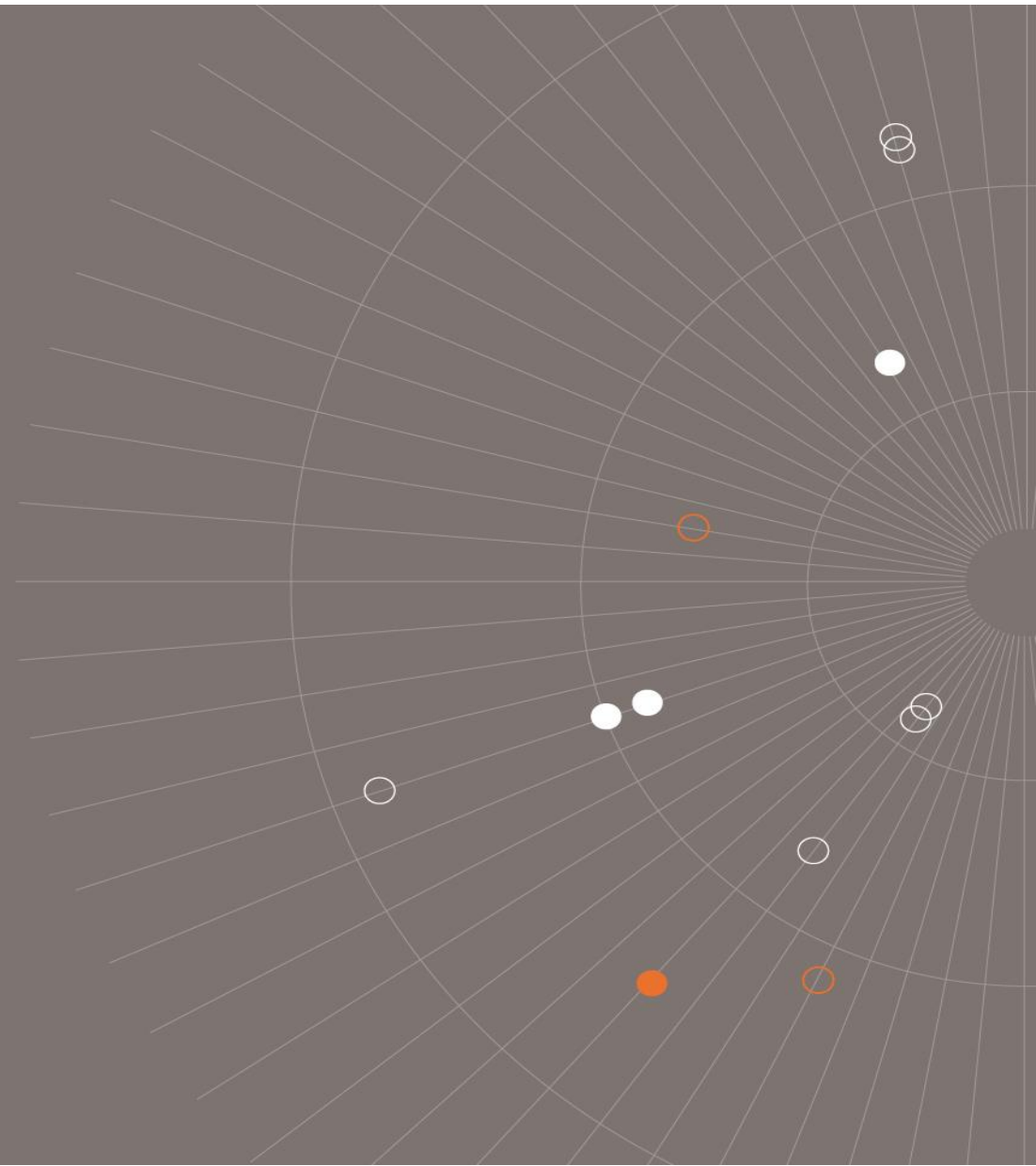
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Facts About Suicide



Suicide is a Serious Public Health Problem



Over

48,000

people died by
suicide in 2021



1 death every

11 minutes

Many adults think about
suicide or attempt suicide

12.3 million

Seriously thought about suicide

3.5 million

Made a plan for suicide

1.7 million

Attempted suicide

[Facts About Suicide](#) | [Suicide](#) | [CDC](#)

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Suicide is a Complex Issue with No Single Cause

- Suicide is often the result of a complex interaction of risk and protective factors at the individual, community, and societal levels.
- Risk factors are characteristics that are associated with an increased likelihood of suicidal behaviors. Protective factors can help offset risk factors.
- To prevent suicide, we must maximize protective factors while minimizing risk factors at all levels, throughout communities nationwide.

Risk and Protective Factors

Risk

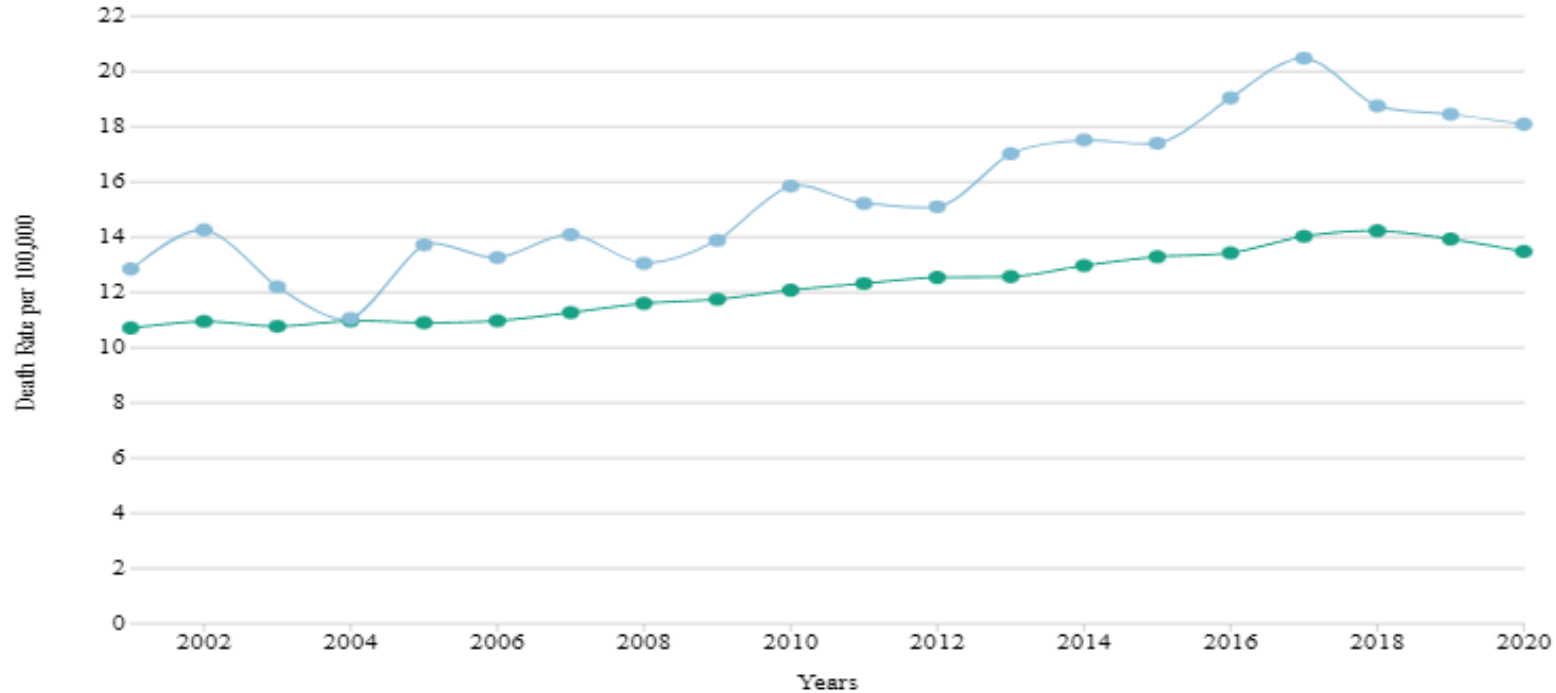
- Prior suicide attempt
- Mental health issues
- Substance abuse
- **Access to lethal means**
- Recent loss
- Legal or financial challenges
- Relationship issues
- Unemployment
- Homelessness

Protective

- Access to mental health care
- Sense of connectedness
- Problem-solving skills
- Sense of spirituality
- Mission or purpose
- Physical health
- Employment
- Social and emotional well-being

Goal: Minimize risk factors and boost protective factors

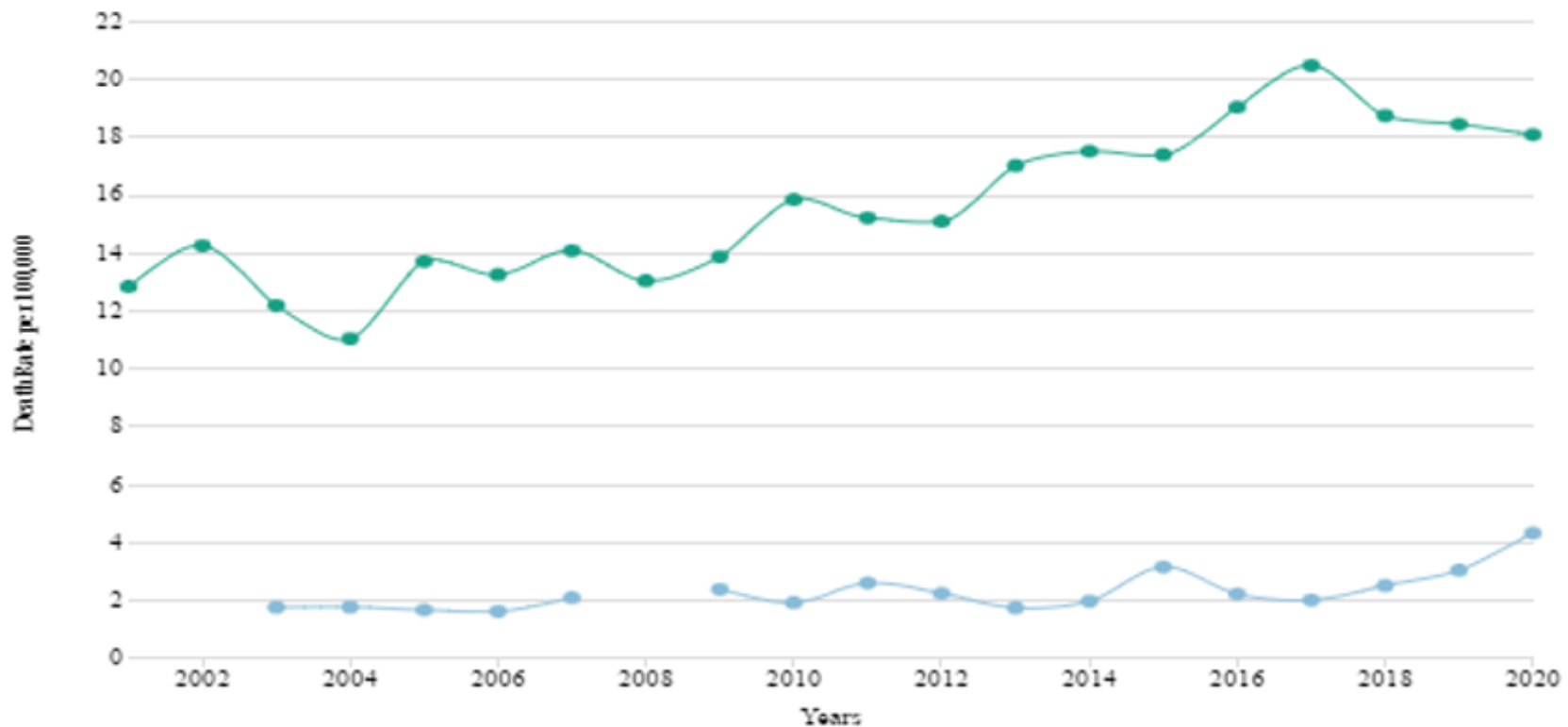
ND vs. US Suicide Rates



Source: CDC WISQARS

North Dakota
United States

ND Homicide vs. Suicide Rates



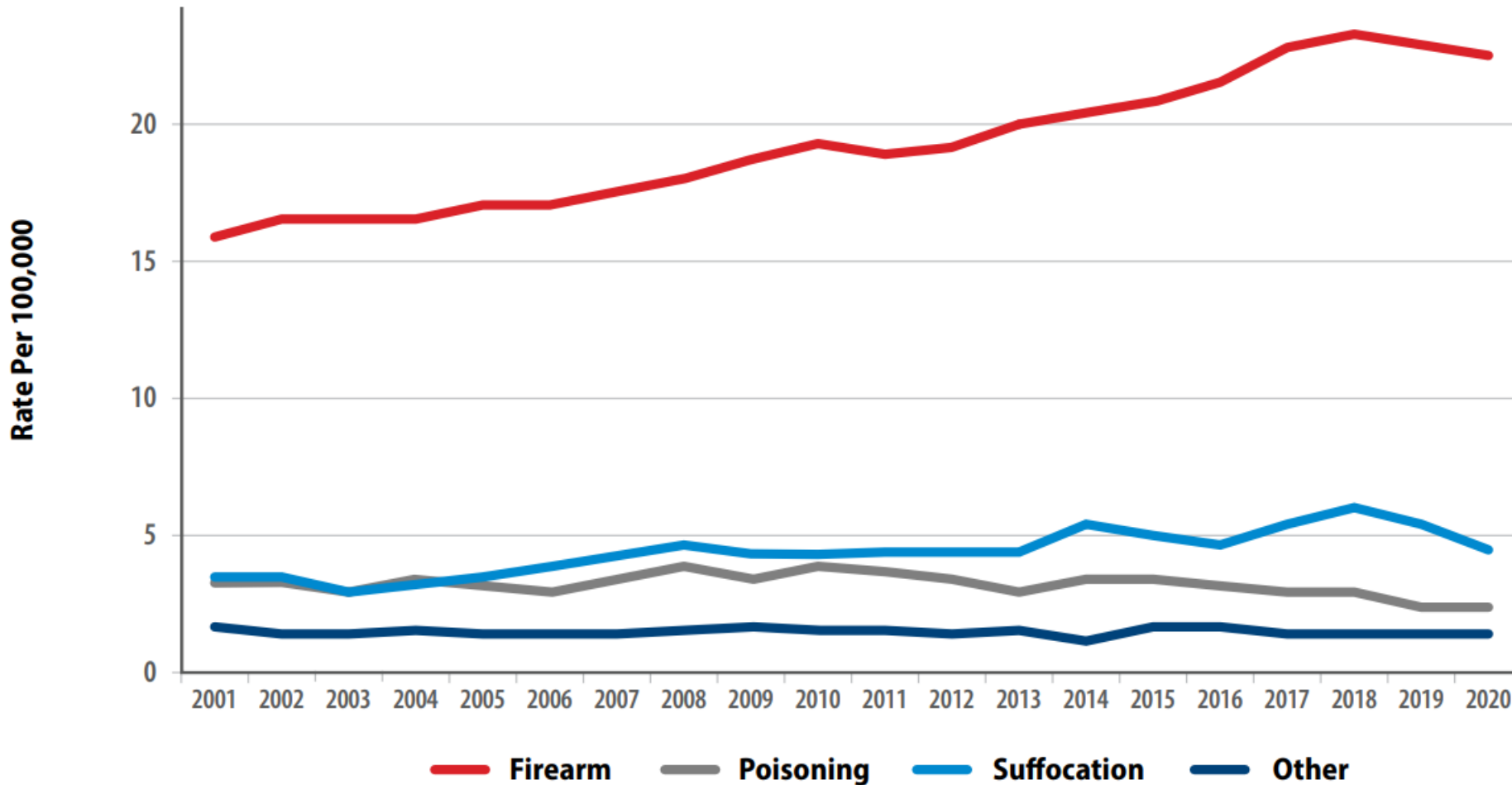
Source: CDC WISQARS

■ Homicide All Injury
■ Suicide All Injury

Veteran Suicide Methods

Firearms accounted for **70.2%** of male Veteran suicides in 2019 (up from 69.6% in 2018) and 49.8% of female Veteran suicides in 2019 (up from 41.1% in 2018)

[2022 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report, VA Suicide Prevention, Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, September 2022](#)



Access to Firearms

- 31.9% of adults own firearms (81.4 million Americans aged 18 or over)
- 56.2% of gun owners say they carry a handgun for self-defense in at least some circumstances
- Average gun owner owns 5 firearms (handguns most common)
- 42.2% of female and 57.8% are male
- One-third of Veterans store a firearm locked and unloaded.
- Many studies have found that firearm access is an independent risk factor for suicide

Cleveland et al, *Inj Epi.* 2017 Dec 19;4(1):33
Simonetti et al, *Am J Prev Med.* 2018 Oct;55(4):445-454
RAND: The relationship between firearm availability and suicide, 2018



Much of the focus in suicide prevention is on why a person attempts suicide. We seek to relieve the mental distress that leads to a suicide attempt.



But how a person attempts plays a crucial role in whether they live or die.

Lethal Means Safety (LMS)

- Limiting access to lethal means methods of suicide, such as firearms and toxic medications.
- LMS is one of the few population level interventions that has been shown to decrease suicide rates.

Yip et al, *Lancet*. Vol 379, Issue 9834, 2393-9, June 2012

Lethal Means Safety (LMS)

Steve is a 28 year old Veteran struggling with a painful breakup. Lately he has been missing work, withdrawing from friends, and drinking more. His roommate urged him to call 988 but he refused.

Two days later, he called his girlfriend, hoping to get back together, but she wouldn't speak to him. Feeling desperate, he went to the gun safe.....



Lethal Means Safety (LMS)

Steve is a 28 year old Veteran worker struggling with a painful breakup. Lately he has been missing work, withdrawing from friends, and drinking more. His roommate urged him to call 988 but he refused.

Two days later, he called his girlfriend, hoping to get back together, but she wouldn't speak to him. Feeling desperate, he went to the gun safe..... **but the guns were gone.**



Lethal Means Safety (LMS)

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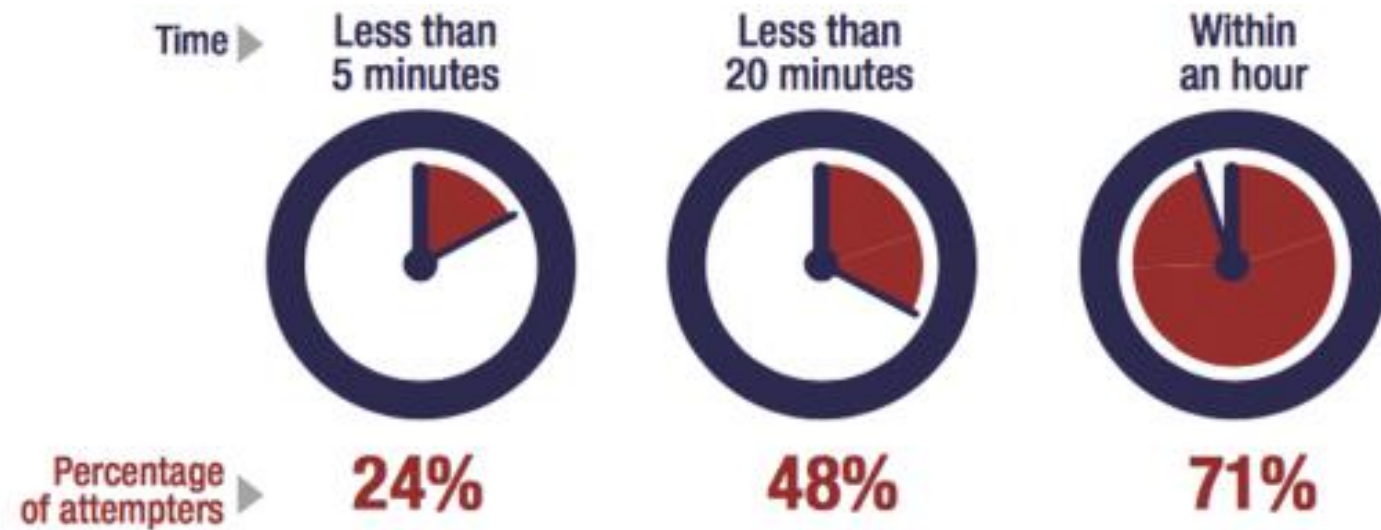
Two days later, he called his girlfriend, hoping to get back together, but she wouldn't speak to him. Feeling desperate, he went to the gun safe but the guns were gone.

- Frustrated, Steve drove to a friend's house to borrow a gun.
- By the time he got there he had calmed down.
- He was still miserable, but no longer acutely suicidal.



Suicidal Crises are Often Very Brief

- Building in time and space between a suicidal impulse and the action may offer enough time for crisis to pass.
- In a study of suicide attempt survivors, the time from decision to action:



Simon et al, *SLTB*. 2001; 32(supp):49-59

Why Means Matter

- Suicidal crises are often brief.
- Some methods, especially firearms, are far more lethal than others.
- 90% of those who attempt suicide and survive do not go on to die by suicide
- Many people who are suicidal are ambivalent

Putting time and distance between a suicidal person and a highly lethal means (especially a firearm) can save a life

Why Firearms Matter Most

- They are the leading method among Veterans
- They are highly lethal
- They are highly accessible in many homes
- They are fast and irreversible

What made the difference for Steve?



Steve's roommate called the Veteran's Crisis Line when Steve refused. The clinician reviewed treatment options and created a safety plan that involved his friends. **The clinician suggested that Steve store guns away from the home while he was in crisis.** The clinician helped Steve develop a plan for temporarily moving the firearms to the friend's house. The clinician gained Steve's trust by having a general knowledge about firearms.

Common Ground

- Whether you are a gun owner or not, suicide prevention is an area on which people find common ground.
- Firearm instructors and gun rights advocates have begun advising that if a family member may be at risk for suicide, it is wise to temporarily store guns away from the home or otherwise inaccessible to them until they have recovered.
- If you are unfamiliar with firearms, you should take a basic firearm safety class to increase your familiarity with firearms and how to handle/store them safely.

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Talking with Veterans about Firearms



Mental Health Stigma Among Veterans

- 42.9% of Veterans say they will be labeled as weak for seeking mental health care.
- Their careers will suffer if they seek help.
- The clinician will never understand them and what they have been through.

(Sharp et al., 2015)

Talking with Veterans

- Change language used when working with a service member seeking help.
 - Avoiding language that defines someone by their condition or assumes that condition can't be managed or overcome
 - Avoiding language that makes judgments or assumes intention
 - Describing without downplaying or becoming overly graphic
 - Using updated, culturally appropriate terminology
- Utilizing testimonials from senior military leaders
- Let them tell you their story
 - Do not pry into it further
 - Do appreciate that they shared
 - Show love and acceptance

Alternatives to Stigmatizing Language¹

	Avoid language that defines someone by their condition or assumes their condition can't be managed or overcome.
✓ SAY	Instead of
A person with schizophrenia Diagnosed with	Schizophrenic Mentally disabled/Suffering from
	Avoid language that makes judgments or assumes intention.
✓ SAY	Instead of
Determined by a court to lack decision-making capacity or pose a threat to self or others Die by suicide Suicide attempt	Mentally defective/incompetent Commit suicide Failed suicide attempt
	Describe without downplaying or becoming overly graphic .
✓ SAY	Instead of
Suicidal statements or behaviors Non-suicidal self-harm	Suicide threats Self-mutilation
	Use updated, accurate terminology .
✓ SAY	Instead of
Mental disorder Psychiatric treatment facility Legal substances: substance misuse Illegal substances: substance use	Mental disease Mental institution Substance abuse

1. Deputy Secretary of Defense, (2022), U.S. Department of Defense, Review of Policies to Eliminate Stigmatizing Language Related to Mental Health. Memorandum for Senior Pentagon Leadership, Defense Agency and DOD Field Activity Directors.

PHCoE
PROVIDING HEALTH CARE TO OUR VETERANS

PRODUCED BY THE DEFENSE HEALTH AGENCY

Talking with Veterans about Firearms

- When talking with firearms owners about reducing access to prevent suicide, it is useful to have some knowledge of firearms.
- You may want to take an introductory firearms class
 - Typically found at local firearm retailers/ranges, online hunter safety, and Sheriff's Office.

Types of Firearms

Knowing the type of firearms your client has will determine the best type of safe storage method.

Revolvers

- Handgun
- Ammo manually inserted into rotating cylinder.
- Best Locking Device: Trigger Lock



Semi Automatic Pistols

- Handgun
- Ammo is automatically fed into the chamber from the magazine.
- Best Locking Device: Cable Lock



Types of Firearms

Knowing the type of firearms your client has will determine the best type of safe storage method.

Rifles

- Long range firearm
- Many kinds of rifles: single shot, pump action, semi-automatic, and black powder.
- Best Locking Device: Cable, Trigger, and Chamber Lock



Shotguns

- Short Range
- Shoot a spray of shots verse a single bullet.
- Many types: pump action, double barreled, semi automatic, and single shot.
- Best Locking Device: Cable, Trigger, and Chamber Lock

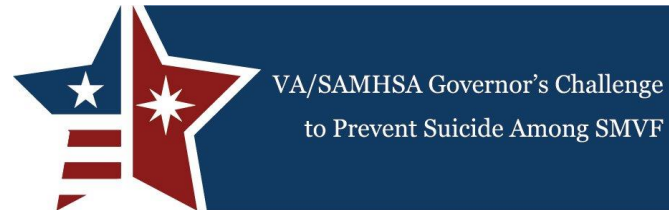


Safe Storage Practices

- Store all firearms Unloaded
 - Ammo stored separate
- Use an external locking device (Trigger, Chamber, Cable, Biometric, etc)
- Store firearms in a dedicated firearm safe
- Safe Storage needs to be integrated into clients Safety Plan
 - Will a friend or family member store the firearm when in crisis?
 - Is there a local retailer, gunsmith, etc. that can take the firearm?
 - Example language “Is there a gunsmith that can clean or make adjustments to your firearm during this time?”
- If firearms are remaining in the home, ensure they are safely stored.

Resources

- **VA**
 - [CALM](#)
 - [VA S.A.V.E](#)
 - [Safety Plan App](#)
- **[Suicide Prevention Resource Center](#)**
- **Governors Challenge**
 - [Data Dashboard](#)
 - [PsychArmor Trainings](#)
 - Military Culture Training
 - [Star Behavioral Health Training](#)
- **[National Shooting Sports Foundation](#)**
 - Firearm Safety Training
- **[ND HOPES](#)**
 - Veterans Resources
 - Gatekeeper Trainings



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Questions?

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