

Commentary

Suicides show gun availability is an issue, too

Easy access increases likelihood of permanent 'solution' to troubled person's temporary problem

The image of firearms and death is frozen in our minds as homicidal attacks in places like Columbine High School, the day-trader rooms of Atlanta and the streets of urban American.

Few people realize that far more people — 30 percent more — die from self-inflicted gunshots than from homicide: 17,566 gun-related suicides in 1997 vs. 13,522 murders with firearms. Sixty percent of those who committed suicide that year did so with a firearm.

Of those, many are young: Among 15-to-24-year-olds, suicide is the third-leading cause of death.

In fact, any given teenager sitting in a high school classroom today is far more likely to end his or her own life with a firearm than to be killed by a fellow student or intruder into the school.

When we talk about people taking their own lives, we are not referring to doctor-assisted suicide done under highly con-

trolled conditions after extensive thought and counseling.

We're talking about impulsive behavior in times of great stress — times when people young and old believe their problems can only get worse, not better; where hope is temporarily extinguished, not even a faint glimmer remaining.

For many of these people, the availability of a firearm offers a permanent solution to what may well be a temporary problem. The lethality of a firearm — approximately 90 percent of suicide attempts with firearms are successful — virtually eliminates the potential for rescue and survival.

Nationwide, Oregon ranks 10th overall in firearm suicides.

In 1996 there were 520 suicides in Oregon, about 324 committed with firearms. The numbers for young people are particularly disturbing, as 69 people ages 15 to 24 took their own lives, including 49 who used a firearm.

That is the equivalent of two high school classrooms of Oregon students dying in a single year — and it happens

every year.

Even more tragically, 56 percent of suicides were firearm-related in 1986; by 1996, the number had increased to 71 percent.



IN OUR OPINION

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These trends for firearm suicide are a troubling message that we cannot ignore.

Suicide is a telling barometer of the overall mental health and well-being of a population. High suicide rates, particularly among young people who should be the most optimistic and hopeful, are a warning sign.

Surgeon General David Satcher has declared suicide a serious public health problem and identified easy access to firearms as a risk factor. In fact, the research clearly indicates that access to a firearm increases the risk of suicide substantially.

Suicide can be prevented. We need comprehensive prevention programs so that those contemplating suicide can be given a second chance.

One important step is to limit easy access to highly lethal means. This is sound public health policy that emphasizes prevention.

Some might argue that if a firearm is not available, suicidal people will just find other ways to kill themselves, but the science simply does not support that.

Reducing the number of firearms in circulation is one important part of the suicide-prevention equation.

Every mental health and suicide prevention organization should join with those working in communities to reduce the availability of firearms.

While many of those at the front line on this issue are concerned with homicide, the fruits of their labor will give many thousands of troubled Americans a second chance at life.



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