

# Law Enforcement Agencies' Perceptions of the Benefits of and Barriers to Temporary Firearm Storage to Prevent Suicide

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**Objectives.** To examine the perceived benefits of and barriers to law enforcement agencies providing increased access to voluntary and temporary firearm storage.

**Methods.** We surveyed 448 police chiefs and sheriffs in 8 US Mountain West states about firearm storage practices, benefits of and barriers to storage, and related attitudes and beliefs. Data collection occurred during the spring and summer of 2016.

**Results.** Nearly three quarters of agencies reported that they are already providing storage and perceive relatively few barriers in doing so. Agency characteristics were not associated with current provision of firearm storage. Among the barriers identified included state laws, limited space, training needs, and community perceptions. Benefits of storage included being perceived positively by the community and supporting health care workers.

**Conclusions.** Engaging with law enforcement agencies in suicide prevention efforts and addressing their perceived barriers to providing temporary firearm storage have promise as part of a comprehensive suicide prevention approach. (*Am J Public Health.* 2019;109:285–288. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2018.304802)

In 2016 suicide claimed 44 965 lives in the United States, a rate of 13.9 per 100 000 population. Firearms were responsible for more than half of those deaths.<sup>1</sup> In the Mountain West region, age-adjusted rates ranged from 17.6 (Arizona) to 26.0 (Montana) per 100 000, among the highest in the country.<sup>1</sup> Given the lethality of firearms, multiple health groups recommend safe storage of firearms as a critical aspect of suicide prevention.<sup>2,3</sup> So-called “means safety” strategies are among the few evidence-based approaches to preventing suicide.<sup>4</sup> As applied to firearms, this would be storing firearms safely, ideally outside the home, so that they are inaccessible to family members at risk for suicide.

Medical professionals seeking to advise patients on suicide prevention and loved ones worried about a family member need resources in the community that are available to temporarily store firearms.<sup>5</sup> In addition to gun shops and shooting ranges, law enforcement agencies may store firearms for reasons unrelated to suicide and could leverage that infrastructure to voluntarily store firearms for

suicide prevention.<sup>6,7</sup> However, questions remain as to why law enforcement agencies do or do not offer voluntary firearm storage.

We examined law enforcement agencies as potential community resources for temporary, voluntary storage of firearms. Specifically, we sought to understand the perceived benefits of and barriers to offering temporary storage options to assist in suicide prevention.

## METHODS

We conducted a survey of law enforcement agencies in 8 Mountain West states

(Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming) with high rates of suicide and gun ownership. Details on survey methods and the development of the survey questionnaire are available elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> During 2016, we mailed a questionnaire to all 854 sheriff and police agencies in the 8 states. Participants could respond with a postage-paid self-addressed envelope or online via a link. We sent 3 mailings, and the final one was sent via priority mail. Police chiefs and sheriffs were asked about their agencies' storage practices, willingness to provide storage, and potential benefits of and barriers to providing temporary, voluntary storage.

We conducted analyses in SAS version 9.4 (SAS Institute Inc, Cary, NC) using weighted survey procedures to represent agencies in the region. We calculated weights by adjusting for strata-specific nonresponse according to type of agency (police vs sheriff) and state. There were no differences in numbers of respondents and nonrespondents by agency type or state. We used Rao–Scott  $\chi^2$  tests for categorical comparisons, and we present 95% confidence intervals.

## RESULTS

A total of 448 law enforcement agencies completed the survey (306 police

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**TABLE 1—Law Enforcement Agency Characteristics and Benefits and Barriers According to Provision of Temporary Firearm Storage: 8 US Mountain West States, 2016**

| Variable  | Provide Storage (n = 335), % (95% CI) | Do Not Provide Storage (n = 109), % (95% CI) | P      |
|---|---------------------------------------|--|--------|
| <b>Agency characteristics</b>   |                                       |  |        |
| No. of sworn personnel  |                                       |  | .55    |
| < 10  | 78.5 (73.7, 83.2)                     | 21.5 (16.8, 26.3)                            |        |
| 10–99   | 74.7 (71.0, 78.4)                     | 25.3 (21.6, 29.0)                            |        |
| > 100   | 71.7 (63.7, 79.7)                     | 28.3 (20.3, 36.3)                            |        |
| Type of agency  |                                       |  | .19    |
| Police department   | 77.3 (74.1, 80.5)                     | 22.7 (19.5, 25.9)                            |        |
| Sheriff department  | 71.8 (66.8, 76.8)                     | 28.2 (23.2, 33.2)                            |        |
| Crisis intervention team  |                                       |  | .04    |
| Yes   | 81.1 (76.9, 85.4)                     | 18.9 (14.6, 23.1)                            |        |
| No  | 72.1 (68.5, 75.6)                     | 27.9 (24.4, 31.5)                            |        |
| State   |                                       |  | < .001 |
| Arizona   | 74.0 (67.2, 80.9)                     | 26.0 (19.1, 32.8)                            |        |
| Colorado  | 59.0 (53.0, 65.1)                     | 41.0 (34.9, 47.0)                            |        |
| Idaho   | 80.5 (72.3, 88.6)                     | 19.5 (11.4, 27.7)                            |        |
| Montana   | 85.0 (78.9, 91.1)                     | 15.0 (8.9, 21.1)                             |        |
| Nevada  | 91.0 (76.9, 100.0)                    | 9.0 (0.0, 23.1)                              |        |
| New Mexico  | 66.2 (56.7, 75.7)                     | 33.8 (24.3, 43.3)                            |        |
| Utah  | 93.4 (89.3, 97.8)                     | 6.5 (2.2, 10.7)                              |        |
| Wyoming   | 82.2 (72.8, 91.7)                     | 17.8 (8.3, 27.2)                             |        |
| <b>Benefits and barriers</b>  |                                       |  |        |
| Community perceptions and relationships (moderate/major benefit)        |                                       |  |        |
| Chance to be seen as a positive member of the community                 | 75.5 (72.3, 78.8)                     | 52.2 (45.5, 58.9)                            | < .001 |
| Opportunity to help improve community safety                            | 90.7 (88.6, 92.8)                     | 65.4 (59.0, 71.7)                            | < .001 |
| Opportunity to work with health care providers in the community         | 77.2 (74.1, 80.4)                     | 52.2 (45.5, 58.8)                            | < .001 |
| Logistical concerns (moderate/major barrier)                            |                                       |  |        |
| Personnel time  | 28.9 (25.4, 32.4)                     | 55.3 (48.7, 61.8)                            | < .001 |
| Cost to agency of providing storage                                     | 44.3 (40.5, 48.1)                     | 57.2 (50.6, 63.7)                            | .02    |
| Logistics of gun drop off/pick up                                       | 25.8 (22.5, 29.2)                     | 56.9 (50.4, 63.4)                            | < .001 |
| Staff training (somewhat/very hard)                                     | 47.7 (43.9, 51.6)                     | 24.5 (17.9, 31.0)                            | < .001 |
| Physical space constraints (moderate/major barrier)                     |                                       |  |        |
| Having enough space to adequately store guns                            | 45.4 (41.6, 49.1)                     | 79.1 (73.8, 84.3)                            | < .001 |
| Liability concerns (moderate/major barrier)                             |                                       |  |        |
| Potential legal liability while storing guns                            | 30.4 (27.0, 33.9)                     | 71.3 (65.4, 77.1)                            | < .001 |
| Potential legal liability when returning guns                           | 38.4 (34.8, 42.0)                     | 74.3 (68.6, 80.0)                            | < .001 |
| Concern about being able to determine whether it is safe to return guns | 41.0 (37.4, 44.7)                     | 69.1 (63.0, 75.2)                            | < .001 |
| Community perceptions (moderate/major barrier)                          |                                       |  |        |
| Community distrust of a law enforcement agency storing guns             | 50.0 (46.3, 53.8)                     | 61.5 (55.1, 68.0)                            | .04    |
| Legislation (making it somewhat/much more difficult to provide storage) |                                       |  |        |
| Federal laws  | 10.3 (8.0, 12.7)                      | 14.9 (9.5, 20.4)                             | .25    |
| State laws  | 9.7 (7.6, 11.9)                       | 25.3 (19.2, 31.4)                            | < .001 |

*Continued*

TABLE 1—Continued

| Variable  | Provide Storage (n = 335), % (95% CI) | Do Not Provide Storage (n = 109), % (95% CI) | P     |
|---|---------------------------------------|--|-------|
| <b>Beliefs about preventability, importance, and acceptability of suicide prevention (agree/strongly agree)</b> |                                       |  |       |
| Suicide is an important problem in this community   | 93.3 (91.4, 95.2)                     | 89.8 (85.8, 93.8)                            | .24   |
| Our agency can be an important part of the effort to improve gun safety in this community                       | 95.6 (94.0, 97.1)                     | 86.4 (92.1, 90.8)                            | <.001 |
| If someone is suicidal they will find a way to end their life no matter what anyone tells them                  | 62.5 (58.9, 66.1)                     | 70.6 (84.6, 76.7)                            | .13   |
| It is important for law enforcement to talk to community members about safe storage of their guns at home       | 97.5 (96.3, 98.8)                     | 93.3 (89.9, 96.7)                            | .046  |
| Talking about safe gun storage is acceptable to most people in this community                                   | 95.5 (93.9, 97.1)                     | 95.2 (92.4, 98.1)                            | .93   |
| Overall, our personnel have adequate training in how to discuss safe gun storage with community members         | 91.1 (89.0, 93.1)                     | 87.8 (83.5, 92.2)                            | .32   |
| Talking about suicide prevention with community members is something that is a good idea for our agency         | 96.9 (95.7, 98.1)                     | 94.3 (91.1, 97.4)                            | .21   |

Note. CI = confidence interval.

departments and 142 sheriff's departments), for a response rate of 52%. Most completed the survey by mail (n = 407). Overall, 335 agencies (74.8%) reported that they had provided temporary storage of firearms in the preceding year. One agency did not respond to this question, and 3 agencies did not know whether they provided storage (and were excluded from further analysis).

Table 1 presents agency characteristics according to responses to the following question: has your agency ever provided voluntary, temporary storage of guns on request (by voluntary, we mean that the gun owner requests to store the gun, without being forced to do so by a legal authority)? There were no significant differences in provision of temporary storage by agency size (number of sworn personnel) or type of agency (police vs sheriff). Agencies with a crisis intervention program, which provides officers with intensive training on mental health issues, were more likely to provide temporary gun storage. Utah and Montana were more likely than other states to provide temporary storage; Colorado and New Mexico were less likely to do so.

Overall, a majority of agencies reported moderate or major benefits to providing storage, including being seen as a positive member of the community, having an opportunity to improve safety, and having an opportunity to work with health care

providers. Agencies that provided storage were more likely than those that did not to view these elements as benefits (Table 1).

The most frequently reported barriers were lack of sufficient space to store guns (rated by 53.5% of agencies as a major or moderate barrier) and potential community distrust associated with law enforcement agencies storing guns (rated by 52.8% as a major or moderate barrier). Less commonly reported were logistical, legal, or liability concerns. Agencies that provided storage were significantly less likely than those that did not to report potential barriers resulting from logistical concerns about staff time, cost, drop off and pick up, and adequate space and liability concerns related to returning guns (Table 1). The exception was staff training, with those providing temporary storage more likely (in response to the question "How hard or easy would it be to train staff at your agency to properly manage voluntary, temporary storage when requests are made?") than those not offering storage to rate such training as a barrier. There were no differences in ratings of staff training as a barrier by agency size (data not shown).

Overall, 11.3% of respondents believed that federal laws made it somewhat or much more difficult to provide storage, with no difference according to whether an agency did or did not provide storage. However, those not providing storage were significantly

more likely to rate state laws as a barrier. Agencies in Colorado were significantly more likely to perceive state laws as a barrier than those in each of the other 7 states; 36.1% of Colorado agencies viewed state laws as a barrier, as compared with an average of 5.2% of agencies in the other 7 states ( $P = .011$ ; data not shown).

The vast majority of agencies perceive suicide as an important community problem and believe that it is appropriate for law enforcement to be engaged in suicide prevention (Table 1). Agencies providing storage were more likely to agree with the statements "Our agency can be an important part of the effort to improve gun safety in this community" and "It is important for law enforcement to talk to community members about safe storage of their guns at home." However, 62.5% of chiefs or sheriffs in agencies providing storage reported that they agreed with the statement "If someone is suicidal they will find a way to end their life no matter what anyone tells them," undermining the perception that suicide is preventable.

## DISCUSSION

Our findings suggest that although law enforcement agencies perceive structural barriers to providing temporary gun storage such as space limitations and legal liability,

most indicate that suicide prevention is consistent with the mission of law enforcement agencies to promote community safety and are willing to provide gun storage. The lower proportion of agencies in Colorado that reported providing storage may be related to a universal background check policy that includes temporary transfers (possession without ownership), a law not present in the other 7 states assessed.<sup>8</sup> We cannot determine from our study whether this Colorado law may have inadvertently increased the perception that law enforcement agencies are precluded from offering storage.

Our study focused on suicide prevention, but increasing access to firearm storage has implications for preventing homicides and unintentional injuries. Some states have passed policies referred to as “gun violence restraining orders.” These policies allow law enforcement agencies or families to request the temporary removal of firearms from individuals deemed to be at risk for harm to themselves or others.<sup>9–11</sup> Comprehensive approaches to preventing firearm injuries should consider the role of voluntary means safety strategies alongside such compulsory measures as they both require addressing structural and logistic barriers.

Although cross sectional, this is the first study of which we are aware to examine the views of law enforcement agencies about offering temporary, voluntary gun storage. It was limited to one high-risk region and may not generalize to states with different firearm regulations or firearm cultures. Future efforts should examine how to best overcome perceived barriers to voluntary firearm storage by engaging with law enforcement agencies in developing viable solutions and testing their implementation. It will be important to address the perception that suicide is not preventable and concerns about liability, particularly in locales where there is greater reluctance as a result of either state laws or community norms. Examination of practices and perceptions in other parts of the country may help uncover regional differences.

## PUBLIC HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

Engaging with law enforcement agencies in suicide prevention efforts and assisting in addressing their barriers to providing

temporary firearm storage have promise as part of a comprehensive suicide prevention approach. **AJPH**

## CONTRIBUTORS

A. Brooks-Russell and C. Runyan conceptualized the study. A. Brooks-Russell led the analysis. All of the authors contributed to interpreting the results and drafting the article.

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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

No conflicts of interest.

## HUMAN PARTICIPANT PROTECTION

This study was approved by the Colorado Multiple Institutional Review Board. Participants were provided information about the study and were considered to have provided informed consent by continuing to complete the anonymous survey.

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