

CONVERGENCE



From Across the Divide on Guns, Diverse Leaders Advise on Preventing Firearm Suicide

Yearlong collaborative Convergence Dialogue tackles source of 60% of gun deaths

WASHINGTON, D.C. (December 7, 2021) – [Convergence Center for Policy Resolution](#), the leading nonprofit devoted to bridging divides and developing solutions to intractable public issues, today shared findings and solutions emerging from the yearlong Convergence Dialogue on Guns and Suicide Prevention at a panel discussion with some of the leaders who participated in the collaborative dialogue.

From across the normally unbridgeable divide on guns in America, participants came together, beginning in September 2020, to advise on the challenges, potential solutions and pressing next steps for preventing firearm suicides in America. In their report, Convergence Dialogue participants wrote, “We hope this report can demonstrate:

1. There are ideas and strategies we believe can meaningfully reduce the number of firearm suicides in our country—a project we agree is both urgent and doable.
2. A civil, good-faith conversation related to firearms is possible, and,
3. Such a conversation can build empathy, understanding, and deeper respect for one another even in the face of major disagreements.”

In recent years, over 60 percent of all gun deaths in America are suicides, and about half of all suicides are by firearm, facts shared by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In addition, most experts fear the ongoing global health crisis continues to take a heavy toll on mental health, often disproportionately among some of America’s most vulnerable individuals and groups. The work of the group was further complexified by decades of stubbornly rising suicide rates, as well as increases in the prevalence and diversity of gun ownership in America.

Participants advising on these issues included leading voices from both gun rights and responsibilities groups and gun violence prevention groups as well as experts from the firearms industry, suicide prevention groups, and mental health groups. Medical practitioners, researchers and faith leaders were also a part of the yearlong effort.

Representing a broad spectrum of perspectives from urban and rural America as well as diverse ideological and socioeconomic backgrounds, the group convened for regular virtual sessions hosted by Convergence. As a result, *The Convergence Dialogue on Guns and Suicide Prevention Report*, released today, details a series of actionable proposals and strategies.

Suicide Prevention: A Path Forward through Dialogue

More than 40 percent of adults in the U.S. live in a household with at least one gun present, and their reasons for gun ownership and intended uses vary widely. Those who own firearms often feel caricatured, while those proposing reforms related to guns feel similarly misunderstood. The Convergence report highlights the importance of engaging gun owners as part of building smart and effective strategies for the reduction in gun deaths.

Despite diverse backgrounds and strongly held positions, dialogue participants advised on strategies to prevent these deaths working from a core set of ideas highlighted in the report:

- suicide deaths by firearm are not inevitable;
- suicidal ideation and periods of acute crisis are often short in duration; and

- safer storage practices and well-constructed interventions save lives.

After building a deeper understanding of gun ownership, the group reviewed existing strategies and potential solutions to prevent firearm suicide. Participants assessed suicide data such as risk factors and suicide rates within different high-risk demographic groups, including white males, veterans, African American youth, American Indians / Alaska Natives and the LGBTQ+ community. The group also discussed interventions that might effectively prevent and reduce the number of suicides in these diverse populations.

Members of the Convergence group were encouraged by the tenor of the yearlong discussions. "Like many Americans, I am often frustrated by the seemingly intractable firearms debate where few solutions are agreed upon," said Chris Cheng, American sports shooter and The History Channel's "Top Shot" Season 4 champion and Second Amendment advocate. "A core reason for this frustration is the fact that gun owners are rarely invited to environments where our way of life is heard without judgment or discrimination. I am encouraged by the civil discussions had amongst the various voices and perspectives, where our time and energy focused on potential solutions in mental health and suicide prevention."

Mental health experts were equally encouraged. "I've been doing research on suicide prevention for 25 years, but I've never sat down with gun advocates, ever. I thought we lived on different planets," said participant Sherry Molock, a pastor and researcher at George Washington University who specializes in suicide risk and prevention in African American adolescents and young adults. "It was very eye-opening for me to talk with people who are either gun advocates, gun owners, or even those who are involved in policy work because they had a different perspective and are crucial to crafting research efforts and solutions that can really work to save lives."

Funding, Scale, Research, Education: Four Strategies to Support Suicide Prevention

The report that culminated from these discussions outlines the contours of the challenge and a set of strategies to address the rise in suicide deaths by firearm. Key strategies call on leaders across public and private philanthropy, research, mental health, the gun community and advocacy groups to address gun suicide in America now.

The Convergence report suggests immediate action through the implementation of the following actions:

FUNDING. Increase and expand public and private funding of programs that seek to prevent suicides by firearm.

- Support partnerships between unlikely allies when applicable

SCALE. Highlight current work by firearms groups and others to promote and expand their suicide prevention reach and scope.

- Incentivize gun owners, gun-rights groups and the gun industry to speak out in ways that strategically drive behavior change and prevent suicides by firearm.

RESEARCH. Increase and expand firearm suicide prevention research.

- Study suicide, firearms and suicide prevention strategies via partnerships with scientists, clinicians and consumers of mental health services
- Reach out to individuals and groups with a range of lived experiences, including members of gun-owner-aligned groups.

EDUCATION. Share and amplify education and training on lethal means and suicide prevention.

- Identify channels to inform and educate about lethal means safety across interests and value groups—faith communities, neighborhood groups, affinity groups and especially in venues and spaces utilized by gun owners
- Promote safer in-home storage and temporary out-of-home storage during a crisis, amplifying the voices of gun owners as credible and empowering messengers

Guns in America: A Critique of the Current National Conversation

The report seeks to demonstrate the viability of cross-sector conversations by introducing ideas and strategies participants agreed can meaningfully reduce the number of firearm suicides in our country. Calling progress toward this stated goal as both urgent and doable, the report suggests that civil, good-

faith conversations related to firearms are not only possible but also “build empathy and understanding, fostering a deeper respect for one another even in the face of major disagreements.”

The report states that the current national conversation on guns in America often lacks effective efforts to find solutions across opposing perspectives. In light of this shortcoming, the report spotlights specific local and audience-targeted programs and initiatives studied by the group that work to prevent firearm suicide.

In addition to encouraging the duplication and amplification of efforts at the local, state and national level, the report provides detailed descriptions of existing programs that:

- Build competency among health care providers.
- Reduce the tendency of gun owners to forego mental health care.
- Raise awareness about mental health assessment.
- Encourage gun-based businesses to engage gun owners in conversation and learning about gun safety, storage options and mental health.

“The debate on guns is one of the most charged in the country, but we’ve shown that a good-faith conversation on specific pathways to prevent firearm suicide is possible,” said Russell Krumnow, senior director of the *Convergence Dialogue on Guns and Suicide Prevention*. “The relationships established during this dialogue demonstrate that we can build deeper mutual understanding on tough issues and that there’s a shared desire to lift up solutions that ultimately save lives.”

To download a copy of the *Convergence Dialogue on Guns and Suicide Prevention* report, please visit <https://bit.ly/2ZKIWXH>.

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About Convergence Center for Policy Resolution

Convergence is a national non-profit based in Washington, D.C., that convenes individuals and organizations with divergent views to build trust, identify solutions and form alliances for action on issues of critical public concern. Reports and recommendations issued through Convergence Dialogues reflect the views and ideas of the individuals and organizations who participated. Learn more at: <https://convergencepolicy.org>.

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