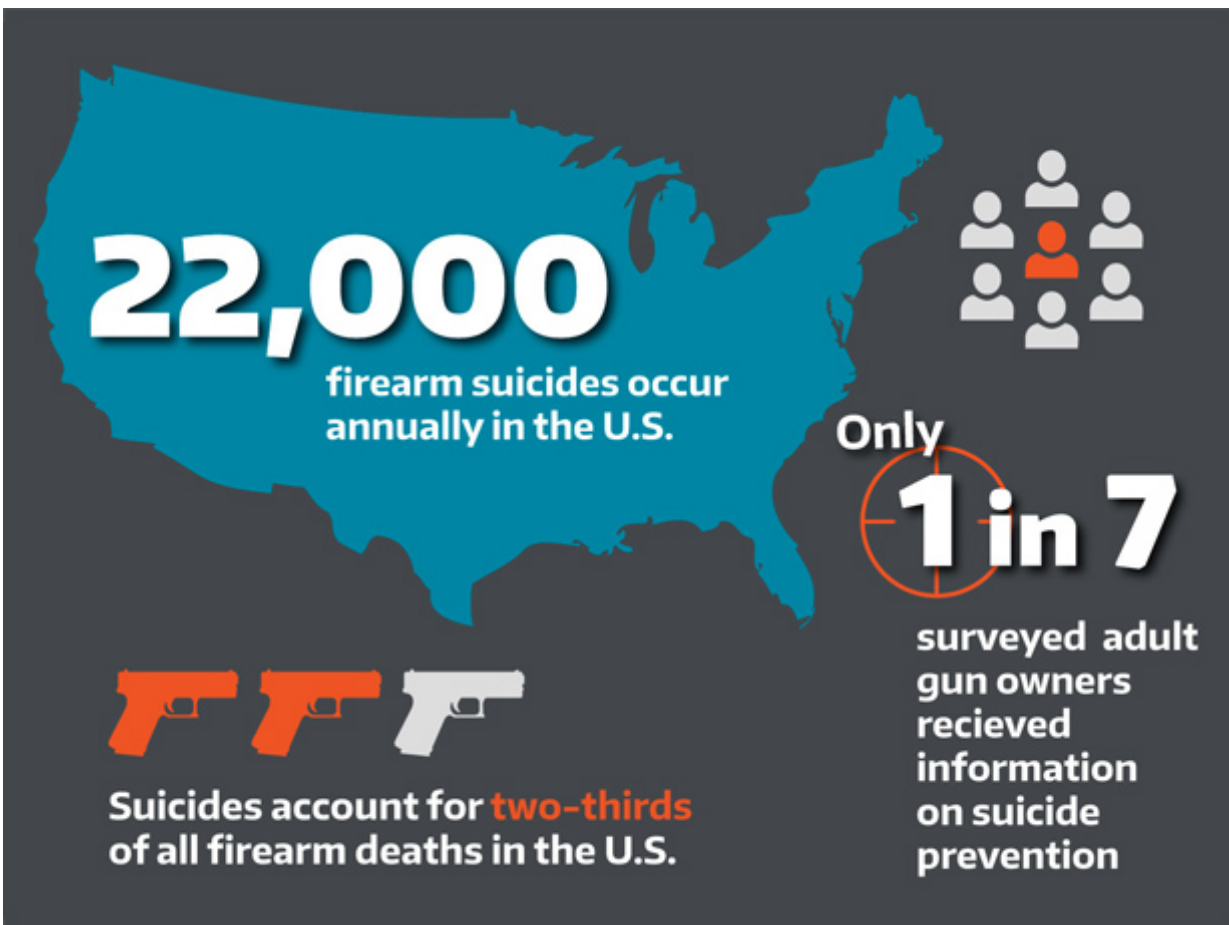


Firearm-safety class rates in US little changed in 20 years

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A graphic illustrates gun ownership's link to suicides in the United States. Credit: Elizar Mercado, University of Washington School of Public Health

Only about three in five U.S. firearm owners have received any formal gun training, according to a new study from the University of Washington.

"This percentage has not changed much in 20 years, said Dr. Ali Rowhani-Rahbar, an associate professor of epidemiology at the UW School of Public Health, who led the study. "What's more surprising is how the content of these trainings have not been adapted to talk about one of the greatest risks associated with owning a firearm or living in a gun-owning household: [suicide](#)."

The results were published July 12 in the journal *Injury Prevention*.

The United States does not have a national standard or requirement for firearm-safety training prior to purchasing a gun, putting the responsibility on gun owners and those who live with them to find ways to learn safety strategies.

Suicide rates in the United States are on the rise, [according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention](#). Suicides account for two-thirds of all U.S. firearm deaths and up to 80 percent of firearm deaths in Washington state each year. The rate is especially high among middle-aged populations. Yet only 15 percent of the study participants who owned guns reported having received information about suicide prevention.

"There is very little research about the content of formal firearm-training programs, or even about the percentage of U.S. adults who have ever received formal firearm training," Rowhani-Rahbar said. "Before our study, the most recent estimates of the proportion of adult firearm owners with formal firearm training in the United States came from surveys conducted in 1994."

Rowhani-Rahbar and UW Ph.D. student Vivian Lyons used data from a national online survey to generate up-to-date estimates about firearm training in the United States. Information from nearly 4,000 people indicated that only 61 percent of all gun owners and 14 percent of non-owners who live with a firearm owner have received any formal gun training, percentages largely unchanged since the 1994 surveys.

Among gun owners, more men (66 percent) than women (49 percent) reported having received formal training. Those who reported buying a gun for personal protection were less likely to have received training than those who owned a gun for hunting or sport.

When asked about the content of firearm trainings, survey participants commonly reported learning safe gun handling and storage, and accident prevention.

"Our findings suggest that we could be doing a much better job with firearm trainings for all gun owners and non-owners who live with a gun owner," said Rowhani-Rahbar. "The link between firearm access and suicide is strong and well-documented. Gun training provides a valuable opportunity to include educational messages about suicide prevention."

Firearm-training classes, regardless of their setting - gun shops, hunting clubs, shooting ranges, etc. - can promote awareness about warning signs of suicide and encourage gun owners to keep firearms from at-risk individuals.

Guns can be found in one-third of U.S. homes. When they are present in the household, researchers have found that the risk of firearm injury, intentional or not, increases for everyone in the household, especially when guns are not locked, unloaded, and stored in a safe place.

Other high-income nations, including Canada, Australia and Germany,

have national standards that require safety training or an exam before one can legally purchase a gun.

The United States has no national standard or requirement for gun ownership, even though several surveys and national polls show that most U.S. citizens favor required formal firearm [training](#) to qualify for ownership.

"There exists a strong safety culture among firearm-advocacy groups around preventing the 500 unintentional firearm deaths that occur annually in the United States," said Rowhani-Rahbar. "We should strive to enhance that culture to also prevent the 22,000 firearm suicides that occur annually in the United States."

More information: Ali Rowhani-Rahbar et al, Formal firearm training among adults in the USA: results of a national survey, *Injury Prevention* (2017). [DOI: 10.1136/injuryprev-2017-042352](https://doi.org/10.1136/injuryprev-2017-042352)

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