

Reporting mental health records to national firearm background check system decreases suicide rates

March 16 2022, by Savannah Koplou



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Could reporting mental health records to the national firearm background check system have a downstream impact on the number of suicides that take place in the United States?

The answer is yes, according to [research](#) published by University of Alabama at Birmingham Collat School of Business economists Ben Meadows, Ph.D., and Griffin Edwards, Ph.D., in the *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*.

From their findings, [states](#) that added mental health records to the national firearm background check system on homicide and [suicide](#) experienced a 3.3–4.3% decrease in firearm-related suicides. Furthermore, calculations indicate a reduction of roughly 702 suicides yearly in 48 participating states.

This research sheds light on the possibility that enhanced legislation coupled with better mental health data integration on a national level may lead to fewer suicides overall by preventing individuals from procuring weapons when they have documented [mental health problems](#).

"We're trying to understand the actual impact of better reporting of mental health issues to state databases used to prevent those individuals who may pose harm from getting firearms. It's an interesting addition to the literature surrounding law and economics—are there differences between states that pass laws and those that truly implement the laws," said Meadows, assistant professor in UAB's Department of Economics. "Here, we see the [answer](#) is yes. And resultant from this is fewer suicides. If states' goals are to restrict access to those who are deemed mentally unfit—a [common goal](#) across the sides of gun legislation debates—and reduce firearm suicides, this seems like a strong policy choice."

Of note, findings determined that reporting mental health data decreased only [suicide rates](#), not related homicide numbers.

While the authors did not advocate or debate gun policy in any way, they applied modern tools of causal analysis to better understand what

impacts future legislation might have on decreasing suicides rates, as well as supplemental effects of policy changes.

"No matter the policy arena, there are tradeoffs—that's a core tenet of economics, and we see that here," Meadows said. "It's quite possible that some non-violent individuals were prevented from procuring guns as well. The goal is not to take sides, but to better inform the debate, which we feel like this data has done."

More information: Fredrick E. Vars et al, Slipping Through the Cracks? The Impact of Reporting Mental Health Records to the National Firearm Background Check System, *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization* (2022). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jebo.2021.12.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jebo.2021.12.002)

Provided by University of Alabama at Birmingham

Citation: Reporting mental health records to national firearm background check system decreases suicide rates (2022, March 16) retrieved 15 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2022-03-mental-health-national-firearm-background.html>

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