

Suicide more prevalent than homicide in US, but most Americans don't know it

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In the United States, suicide is twice as common as homicide—and more often involves firearms—but public perception is just the opposite.

News reports, movies and TV shows may contribute to the perception of a high risk of firearm homicide, authors of a new study say, leaving a substantial gap between ideas and reality and potentially leading to further danger.

Now, first-of-its kind research, led by the University of Washington, Northeastern University and Harvard University, delves into [public perceptions](#) of [gun violence](#) and the leading causes of death in the U.S. The study, published Tuesday in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, seeks to facilitate national public discussions about firearm ownership and storage.

"This research indicates that in the scope of violent death, the majority of U.S. adults don't know how people are dying," said Erin Morgan, lead author and doctoral student in the Department of Epidemiology at the UW School of Public Health. "Knowing that the presence of a firearm increases the risk for [suicide](#), and that firearm suicide is substantially more common than firearm homicide, may lead people to think twice about whether or not firearm ownership and their storage practices are really the safest options for them and their household."

To analyze national public perceptions, researchers used data from the 2015 National Firearms Survey, a web-based survey of nearly 4,000 U.S. adults. In that survey, individuals were asked to rank the relative causes of [violent death](#) in their state over the past year. The data were then compared to each state's official death count. The results indicated that although suicide was more common than homicide in all 50 states, the majority of respondents did not identify it as such.

"The relative frequencies that respondents reported didn't match up with the state's data when we compared them to vital statistics," Morgan said. "The inconsistency between the true causes and what the public perceives to be frequent causes of death indicates a gap in knowledge

and a place where additional education can be helpful."

Researchers say education about the actual risks is critical. If people believe homicide is the top risk, for example, they might purchase a gun to protect themselves. And without an understanding of the high risk of suicide, people may be less inclined to store firearms safely.

To Morgan and her colleagues, this education on firearm risks needs to extend to the media and entertainment industries.

"By having mass media and other communication mechanisms enable further discussions of suicide, we, as a society, can have a more informed conversation about suicide prevention," Morgan said.

Moving forward, the researchers are interested in learning more about how people form their perceptions of gun violence, in order to begin shifting those beliefs.

"We know that this is a mixture of mass and individual communication, but what really leads people to draw the conclusions that they do?" Morgan said. "If people think that the rate of [homicide](#) is really high because that's what is shown on the news and on fictional TV shows, then these are opportunities to start to portray a more realistic picture of what's happening."

More information: *Annals of Internal Medicine* (2018). [DOI: 10.7326/M18-1533](#)

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