



Violence Policy Center

EIGHTH EDITION

OCTOBER 2023

American Roulette

MURDER-SUICIDE IN THE UNITED STATES

Road Trip Takes Tragic Turn

**Murder/suicide leaves
city stunned on Sunday**

**Believe officer killed girlfriend,
then turned gun on himself**

Man kills wife, self at tag agency
**GOP IN
MURDER
SUICIDE**

Trip Takes Detour Into Murder And Suicide

Father kills son, self

Maumelle mom killed child, then herself, police say

**HORROR AT
THE RANGH**

Mother of three kills
two children, herself

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The Violence Policy Center (VPC) is a national nonprofit educational organization that conducts research and public education on violence in America and provides information and analysis to policymakers, journalists, advocates, and the general public.

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INTRODUCTION

Murder-suicide is “a dramatic, violent event” in which a person commits one murder or multiple murders, and then shortly after commits suicide.¹⁻² What makes these acts particularly disturbing is that they affect more than one person and often involve a family. Murder-suicides are almost always committed by a man with a firearm. Yet outside of high-profile mass shootings, the phenomenon of murder-suicide usually garners little public attention as a significant contributor to gun-related death and injury. This is despite the fact that, as one medical professional has observed, “because many murder-suicides result in the death or injury of family members and sometimes mass murder, they cause countless additional morbidity, family trauma, and disruption of communities.”²

Currently, comprehensive, up-to-date information specific to murder-suicides in the United States is not readily available, making it challenging to assess the toll in death and injury.^A In order to more fully understand the human costs of murder-suicide, in 2002 the Violence Policy Center (VPC) began collecting and analyzing news reports of murder-suicides, resulting in a series of studies titled *American Roulette: Murder-Suicide in the United States*. This is the eighth edition of the study.^B For each analysis, the VPC tracked murder-suicide incidents over a six-month period using Internet news reports. For this most recent edition of the study, news reports of murder-suicides were collected for the period January 1, 2021 through June 30, 2021. To be included in the study, both the murder and subsequent suicide had to occur within 72 hours of each other and within this six-month time period. Recognizing the lack of publicly available data, this study likely provides one of the most current and accurate portraits possible of murder-suicide in the United States.

Medical studies estimate that between 1,000 and 1,500 deaths per year in the United States are the result of murder-suicide.²⁻³ This VPC analysis reveals that in the first half of 2021:

- There were 258 murder-suicide events resulting in 588 murder-suicide deaths, of which 258 were suicides and 330 were homicides.
- Extrapolating on this information, we estimate 10 murder-suicide events occurred in the United States each week during the study period.
- Of the 258 murder-suicide events, 90 percent were known to involve a firearm (232 of 258).
- Of the 258 suicides, 91 percent were male (235 of 258), five percent were female (14 of 258), and three percent were not identified by sex (nine of 258).
- Of the 330 homicides, 69 percent of victims were female (227 of 330), 27 percent were male (89 of 330), and four percent of victims were not identified by sex (14 of 330).

A The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS) compiles and combines data about violent deaths from medical examiners, coroners, police, crime labs, and death certificate registrars. Since 2018, all 50 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia have reported data to NVDRS. While information about murder-suicides and other violent deaths are captured by NVDRS, data about murder-suicide events specifically are not available to the public. For more information about NVDRS, see https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/nvdrs/NVDRS-Overview_factsheet.pdf.

B Prior editions of the VPC study *American Roulette* were issued in April 2002, May 2006, April 2008, May 2012, October 2015, June 2018, and July 2020. For a chart comparing the key findings of each of these seven editions as well as this most recent edition, please see page seven.

- Sixty-two percent of all murder-suicides involved an intimate partner (160 of 258). Of these, 95 percent were females killed by their male intimate partners (152 of 160) and 93 percent involved a gun (148 of 160).
- Fourteen percent of the homicide victims were children and teens less than 18 years of age (45 of 330).
- Sixty-six children and teens less than 18 years of age were survivors who witnessed some aspect of the murder-suicide.
- Eight of the murder-suicides were perpetrated by family annihilators, all of whom were male. Seven of these incidents involved intimate partners.

By doubling the total number of fatalities during the six-month period for a yearly estimate, there were an estimated 1,176 murder-suicide deaths in 2021. This is within the standard range of estimates for murder-suicides. Due to the necessary limitations of our incident-collection method, this is most likely an underestimate. Anecdotal evidence suggests that our study may have missed a small percentage of murder-suicides. This could be the result of an incident not being reported, not being reported as a murder-suicide, not falling within our self-imposed time frame, or not being published in an online format.

TRENDS IDENTIFIED FROM THE STUDY

Listed below are murder-suicide trends and characteristics as identified from the VPC analysis. Following each subsection is an incident taken from the news reports collected for the study illustrating the subsection's findings. At the end of this section, on page seven, is a chart comparing key findings of this study with those from the seven prior editions.

Following this section is an appendix that lists the number of murder-suicides by state. States with no reported murder-suicides during the six-month period are also listed in the appendix. Five states had 10 or more murder-suicides in the six-month period of the study. In order, these states were: Florida (28), Texas (20), Georgia (13), California (12), and Missouri (12).

MOST MURDER-SUICIDES INVOLVE A FIREARM

In the analysis, 90 percent (232 of 258) of murder-suicide incidents were known to involve a firearm. The following table describes the weapons involved.

WEAPONS INVOLVED IN MURDER-SUICIDES, JANUARY THROUGH JUNE, 2021^C

Weapon	Count (percent)
Gun ^D	232 (90%)
Handgun	13
Rifle	3
Pistol	2
Revolver	2
Shotgun	5
Gun type not specified	209
Knife	9 (3%)
Fire	5 (2%)
Other	5 (2%)
Unknown	12 (5%)

All major murder-suicide studies in the United States completed since 1950 have shown that firearms are by far the most common method of committing homicide, with the offender choosing the firearm for suicide as well.⁴⁻¹⁰ This is true for all studies, including those focused on specific populations, such as murder-suicides perpetrated by military members, adolescents, older adults, and those involving intimate partners. Estimates of firearms being used range from 80 percent to 96 percent of cases, but other weapons, including fire and knives, have been used. As one expert on a National Institute of Justice panel focusing on murder-suicide noted, guns are the “low-hanging fruit.”¹¹

C As multiple weapons may be used in one incident, percentages may total more than 100 percent.

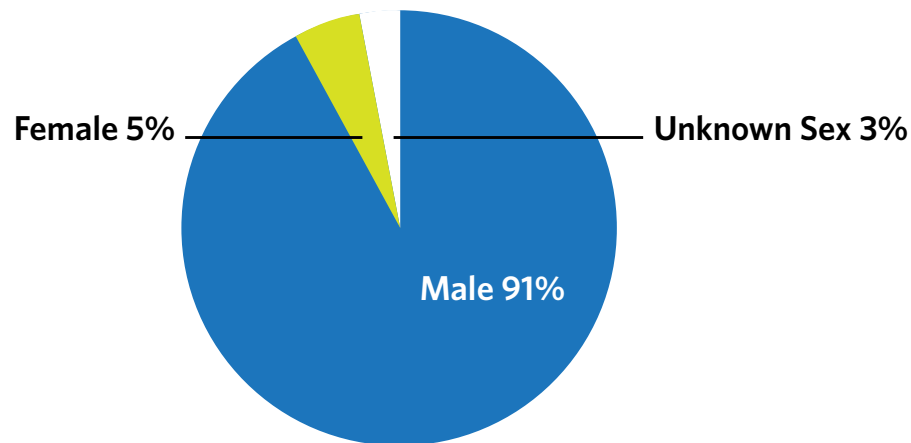
D As multiple gun types were used in two incidents, the sum of the specific gun types (handgun, rifle, etc.) is greater than the total number of incidents involving firearms.

TEXAS: In May, Scott McCulloch, 39, shot and killed his 78-year-old father, Willie McCulloch, with a pistol before using the weapon to kill himself. Police were dispatched to the scene after receiving a 911 call from a woman reporting that her son had shot himself.

MOST MURDERERS IN MURDER-SUICIDES ARE MALE

In this study, 91 percent of the offenders were males who acted alone (235 of 258). Other studies analyzing murder-suicide in the U.S. support this finding and have found that most perpetrators of murder-suicide are male—more than 90 percent.^{5,7-8,10,12} This is again true across multiple studies regardless of the specific population of interest. This pattern is consistent with homicides in general—in 2020, 88 percent of homicides in the U.S. were committed by male offenders. While most homicides involve male victims killed by male offenders (67 percent), incidents of male victims being specifically targeted by male offenders in murder-suicides are relatively rare.

SEX OF MURDER-SUICIDE OFFENDERS



WISCONSIN: In January, Matthew Vinz, 30, shot and killed his parents, Terrence Vinz, 65, and Debra Meagher, 62. Matthew had a history of drug use and serving jail time. During the months leading up to the murder-suicide, there were warrants for his arrest in three counties. Family members believe he was violent towards his parents prior to the murders. Vinz shot and killed both of his parents with a rifle in the home where they all lived before he used the weapon on himself.

MOST MURDER-SUICIDES INVOLVE AN INTIMATE PARTNER

The most prevalent type of murder-suicide was between two intimate partners,^E with a man killing his current or former wife or girlfriend. Such events can be the result of a breakdown in the relationship and/or other adverse life

^E For the purposes of this study, an intimate partner or intimate acquaintance is defined as a spouse, common-law spouse, ex-spouse, girlfriend/boyfriend, or ex-girlfriend/boyfriend.

experiences.^{3,7,12} The average age difference between the offender and primary victim in murder-suicides involving an intimate partner was 5.3 years with a range of zero to 26 years. (Other studies on fatal violence for spouses have found that there is a greater risk of homicide victimization as the age difference between the husband and wife increases.¹⁴) In this study, 62 percent of all murder-suicides involved an intimate partner (160 of 258). Of these, 95 percent were females killed by their male intimate partners (152 of 160) and 93 percent involved a gun (148 of 160).^F

DELAWARE: In April, Llewelyn Gill, 47, shot and killed his wife, Stephanie Gill, 28, and her friend, Deanna Dominick-Dalton, 21, before killing himself. Police responded to a middle school for reports of a shooting. Llewelyn and Stephanie had gone to the middle school to pick up their daughter for a doctor’s appointment. They got into an argument in the parking lot and Llewelyn shot his wife. Gill then fled in the couple’s car, leading police on a chase that ended when he shot himself and crashed his car into a tree. Later that day, police discovered Dominick-Dalton’s body at the Gill residence. It is unclear when she was shot. Neighbors reported Llewelyn had a history of suicidal ideation and violence. He had been arrested a few months prior in a domestic incident and neighbors said Stephanie was afraid of him.

MANY MURDER-SUICIDES WITH THREE OR MORE VICTIMS INVOLVE A MALE “FAMILY ANNIHILATOR”—A SUBCATEGORY OF INTIMATE PARTNER MURDER-SUICIDE

Many multiple-victim murder-suicides involving a male murderer and a large number of victims (three or more) are perpetrated by family annihilators. Family annihilators are murderers who kill their intimate partners and children, as well as other family members, before killing themselves. In many cases, a family annihilator is suffering from depression and has financial or other problems and feels the family is better off dying with him than remaining alive to deal with the problems at hand.¹⁵⁻¹⁶ Eight murder-suicides perpetrated by family annihilators were identified in this study. Of these eight, the offender was male in all cases and seven of the eight involved current or former intimate partners.

OHIO: On Father’s Day (June), retired military sergeant Nicholas Mavrakis III, 47, shot and killed his wife Lesley Mavrakis, as well as his 13-year-old son Ace, and five-year-old daughter Pippa. He then shot himself. Police were dispatched to the home after a relative called 911 when no one answered the door at the family’s house. Neighbors reported that Nicholas suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of military deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan.

MOST MURDER-SUICIDES OCCUR IN THE HOME

In this study, 78 percent of murder-suicides occurred in the home (200 of 258). Available data confirm that the home of the offender and/or victim is the most likely place for a murder-suicide.^{6-8,10} Studies show that within the home, more murder-suicides are committed in the bedroom than any other room.⁵

^F In comparison, in 2020, for all homicides where the relationship could be determined, 16 percent of homicide victims were killed by an intimate partner. Of these, 76 percent were females killed by their intimate partners (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2020 Expanded Homicide Tables. Available at: <https://cde.ucr.cjis.gov/LATEST/webapp/#/pages/downloads> under the Crime in the United States Annual Reports section).

OHIO: In January, Aaron Williams, 32, shot his two daughters, ages six and nine, before killing himself. Multiple gunshots were heard in the home and when police arrived the two sisters were found suffering from gunshot wounds. Williams died at the scene while the children were transported to a nearby hospital where they later died.

CHILDREN ARE OFTEN VICTIMS OF, AND WITNESSES TO, MURDER-SUICIDE

Fourteen percent of the homicide victims were children and teens less than 18 years of age (45 of 330). Sixty-six children and teens less than 18 years of age were survivors who witnessed some aspect of the murder-suicide.⁶

ALABAMA: In March, DeAngelo Carter, 32, shot and killed India Zippora Collins, 26, before shooting himself. Collins' daughters, ages six and two, are believed to have witnessed Carter killing their mother. Police believe Carter shot Collins in the head, put the children in a bedroom, and then shot himself. According to police, Carter called his mother at midnight the night before the bodies were discovered saying he "messed up."

UNIQUE FACTORS MAY DRIVE MURDER-SUICIDE AMONG THE ELDERLY

In this study, 21 percent of murder-suicides involved a murderer 55 years of age or older (54 of 258). While most murder-suicides involve family turmoil, a smaller, discrete category involves older people where the declining health of either the victim, the offender, or both is the motivation for murder-suicide.^{10, 17-18} A higher percentage of murder-suicide offenders are age 55 or older compared to all homicide offenders in the U.S. In fact, older people rarely commit homicide. While approximately one-fifth of offenders in this study were 55 years of age or older, in 2020, only seven percent of known homicide offenders were 55 years of age or older.¹³ Suicide, however, is disproportionately represented in this age group, with 35 percent of suicide victims being 55 years of age or older.¹⁹

NEW YORK: In February, James Russell Claybrook, 84, shot and killed his wife Marcia Reitman Currie, 70. According to law enforcement, Claybrook called police to report a burglary in his home. When they arrived, they found Currie dead in bed and Claybrook dead on the floor in the same room. The husband and wife were both suffering from medical issues and appeared to have been experiencing substantial pain.

⁶ One study noted that children of the victim and/or perpetrator witnessed the murder-suicide, were in the immediate vicinity, found their parents' bodies, or were killed in 43 percent of the cases studied. E. Morton, C.W. Runyan, K.E. Moracco, J. Butts, "Partner homicide-suicide involving female homicide victims: a population-based study in North Carolina, 1988-1992," *Violence and Victims* 13, no. 2 (1998): 91-106.

AMERICAN ROULETTE: SELECT COMPARISONS FOR THE YEARS 2001, 2005, 2007, 2011, 2014, 2017, 2019, AND 2021

Category	2001	2005	2007	2011	2014	2017	2019	2021
Murder-suicide incidents involving a firearm	95%	92%	89%	90%	93%	91%	89%	90%
Murder-suicide incidents in which the killers were male	90%	94%	95%	90%	89%	89%	91%	91%
Murder-suicide incidents that involved intimate partners	74%	74%	73%	72%	72%	65%	65%	62%
Average age difference in intimate partner killings (in years)	6.6	6.3	6.0	3.3	3.8	3.1	4.3	5.3
Murder-suicides that occurred in the home	76%	75%	75%	80%	81%	82%	81%	78%
Number of children killed in murder-suicides	N/T*	47	45	55	45	42	51	45
Number of children who witnessed murder-suicides	N/T	N/T	44	66	63	52	67	66
Murder-suicide incidents with an elderly perpetrator (age 55+)	21%	23%	27%	25%	33%	29%	23%	21%

* N/T = Not Tabulated

CONCLUSION

Findings from this study are consistent with prior editions: the killer in murder-suicides is almost always a man, the weapon is almost always a gun, and these events most frequently take place in the home. Women rarely perpetrate murder-suicides.

Most people think of suicide as a solitary act, affecting only one person. Yet, the effects of murder-suicide go far beyond the shooter: family, friends, co-workers, and absolute strangers are among those who are killed as a result of these acts of desperation. Moreover, murder-suicide often leaves children parentless. During the six-month period tallied in this study, there were 258 suicides—yet the total number of deaths was 588. More people died from murders associated with the suicide—330—than from the suicides themselves. These numbers call into grave question the common belief that suicide, especially firearms suicide, is a solitary act that affects only the person holding the gun.

A significant number of murder-suicides involved intimate partners. Therefore, stronger domestic violence legislation may be one avenue of intervention, including programs that assist men with coping with issues of anger, control, and separation. Prevention efforts likely need to be tailored to specific age demographics. For example, one study showed that homicide was more likely to be the primary intent (as opposed to suicide) among younger perpetrators, while older perpetrators were more likely to exhibit suicidal intent.¹⁰ Efforts to identify individuals intending to hurt themselves or others and removing firearms from their possession is a valuable prevention strategy. In addition, experts have suggested that more research should be focused on the impact that domestic violence murder-suicides have on the families in which they occur. The establishment of state-level domestic violence task forces to examine the particular circumstances of domestic murder-suicide—including cultural, social, economic, and geographic issues—should be encouraged. State and local authorities should evaluate and establish best practices for domestic violence prevention and intervention for governmental and non-governmental efforts.

Depression and the strain of providing care for a spouse in failing health have been cited by experts as a significant contributing factor to murder-suicide among older persons.²⁰ Health care options that provide aid to older caregivers and that aim to monitor and treat depression in such cases may be one useful intervention.

Existing surveillance of violent deaths in the U.S. should be improved and information specifically about murder-suicides should be made available to the public. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's surveillance system for violent deaths, the National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS), captures comprehensive information about homicide, suicide, unintentional (firearm only), legal intervention, and undetermined intent deaths.²¹ Though murder-suicide events are captured in NVDRS, information about these events is not made publicly available. In order to better understand the phenomenon and develop effective prevention strategies, data about murder-suicides collected and reported by NVDRS should be made easily available to the public and include detailed information, to the extent possible, on: the sex, age, race, ethnicity, and profession of the perpetrator and victim(s); the type of weapon used, including the make and model of firearm if available; the specific location of the event, e.g. workplace, specific room in residence; whether any children witnessed the event; and, any available information regarding the motivation of the murderer.

Finally, the most common catalytic component in murder-suicide is the use of a firearm. Guns allow killers to act on impulse. Every major murder-suicide study ever conducted, including the VPC's current and previous studies, has shown that a firearm—with its unmatched combination of high lethality and easy availability—is the weapon most often used to murder the victims, with the offenders then turning the gun on themselves.^{5-10,22} In this study, access to a gun was the critical component for almost all of the murder-suicides. Of the 49 murder-suicides with more than one homicide victim, 90 percent (44 of 49) were known to be firearm-related. The presence of a gun allows the offender to quickly and easily kill a greater number of victims. If there had not been easy access to a firearm, these deaths may simply have been injuries or may not have occurred at all. Efforts should be made to restrict access to firearms where there is an increased risk of murder-suicide, for example where an individual has a history of domestic violence and/or has threatened suicide. State and local officials, including judges, should aggressively enforce laws that currently prohibit individuals with a misdemeanor domestic violence conviction or who are the subject of a restraining order for domestic violence from purchasing or possessing a firearm. Research shows that state laws restricting those under domestic violence restraining orders from accessing firearms, and laws allowing the warrantless arrest of those in violation of domestic violence restraining orders, are associated with reductions in intimate partner homicide.²³

Murder-suicides are horrific and violent events that often involve families, intimate partners, and children. The impact this violence has on survivors and communities is significant and all too often unacknowledged. As these incidents are almost always perpetrated with a gun, policies which restrict access to firearms among violent offenders or individuals at risk of hurting themselves or others are vital to preventing these events. Making timely and comprehensive (to the degree possible) data about this category of lethal violence easily available to researchers, policymakers, community leaders, the news media, and anti-violence advocates is essential to informing policy efforts and ultimately preventing future murder-suicides.

APPENDIX: MURDER-SUICIDES BY STATE AND THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

This appendix lists murder-suicides by state and the District of Columbia. This chart includes the number of murder-suicide incidents recorded during the six-month study period, as well as the total number of people who died. It is important to note that lack of a murder-suicide during the first half of the year is in no way an indicator of whether or not there will be any reports of murder-suicide in the second half of the year.

State	Number of Murder-Suicide Events in the First Half of 2021	Number of People Dead from Murder-Suicide Events in the First Half of 2021
Alabama	7	15
Alaska	1	2
Arizona	6	14
Arkansas	2	5
California	12	25
Colorado	5	16
Connecticut	3	7
Delaware	1	3
District of Columbia	0	0
Florida	28	63
Georgia	13	29
Hawaii	1	2
Idaho	2	4
Illinois	5	10
Indiana	9	19
Iowa	5	10
Kansas	0	0
Kentucky	3	6
Louisiana	7	14
Maine	1	2
Maryland	6	16
Massachusetts	4	8
Michigan	9	18
Minnesota	4	8
Mississippi	6	12
Missouri	12	27
Montana	3	7
Nebraska	1	2
Nevada	5	10

State	Number of Murder-Suicide Events in the First Half of 2021	Number of People Dead from Murder-Suicide Events in the First Half of 2021
New Hampshire	0	0
New Jersey	7	15
New Mexico	0	0
New York	8	19
North Carolina	8	23
North Dakota	1	2
Ohio	6	15
Oklahoma	4	11
Oregon	2	4
Pennsylvania	9	23
Rhode Island	0	0
South Carolina	5	15
South Dakota	0	0
Tennessee	7	17
Texas	20	47
Utah	2	4
Vermont	0	0
Virginia	8	17
Washington	0	0
West Virginia	5	11
Wisconsin	5	11
Wyoming	0	0
U.S. Total	258	588

ENDNOTES

Citations are individually listed by the order in which they appear in the text. Citations may be referenced multiple times throughout the text.

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