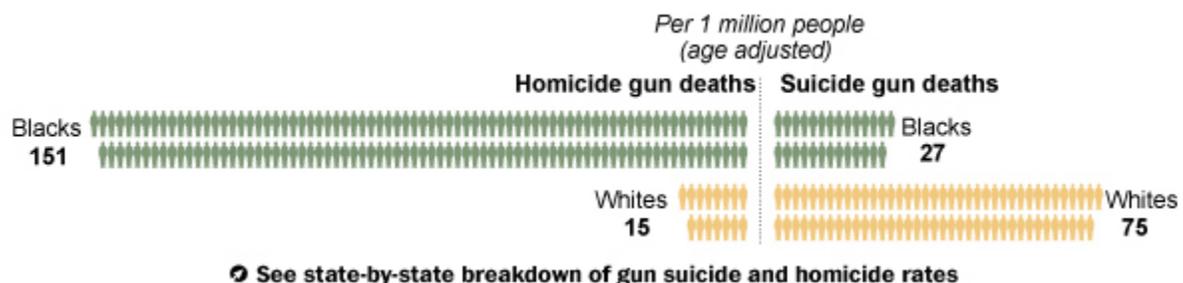


Gun deaths shaped by race in America

By Dan Keating, Updated: March 22, 2013

Gun deaths are shaped by race in America. Whites are far more likely to shoot themselves, and African Americans are far more likely to be shot by someone else.

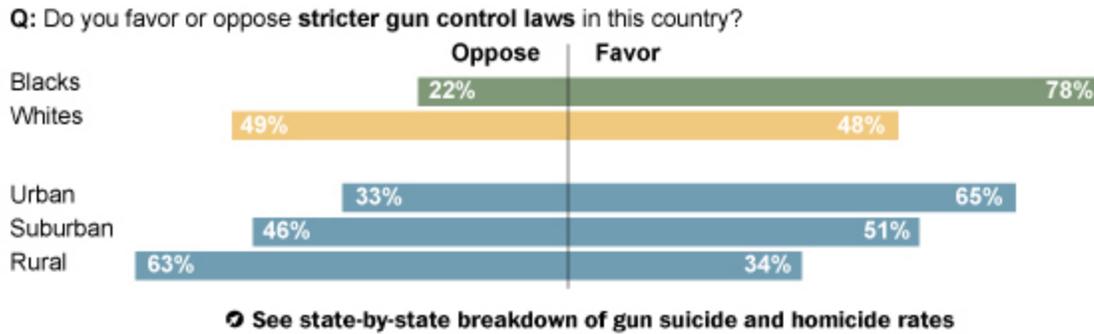
The statistical difference is dramatic, according to a Washington Post analysis of data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. A white person is five times as likely to commit suicide with a gun as to be shot with a gun; for each African American who uses a gun to commit suicide, five are killed by other people with guns.



Where a person lives matters, too. Gun deaths in urban areas are much more likely to be homicides, while suicide is far and away the dominant form of gun death in rural areas. States with the most guns per capita, such as Montana and Wyoming, have the highest suicide rates; states with low gun ownership rates, such as Massachusetts and New York, have far fewer suicides per capita.

Suicides and homicides are highly charged human dramas. Both acts shatter families, friends and sometimes communities. But the reactions are as different as black and white, and those differences shape the nation's divided attitudes toward gun control.

For instance, African Americans tend to be stronger backers of tough gun controls than whites. A Washington Post-ABC News poll this month found that about three-quarters of blacks support stronger controls, compared with about half of whites. The poll also found that two-thirds of city dwellers support stronger gun controls, while only about a third of rural residents back them.



Suicide and homicide rates among Asian Americans and Hispanic Americans do not reflect the sharp differences seen among blacks and whites.

Gun homicides, especially mass shootings, tend to spark demands for change. Although suicides account for almost twice as many gun deaths as homicides nationwide, they tend to be quiet tragedies, unnoticed outside the hushed confines of family and friends.

Suicide is “absent from the discussion of gun policy,” said Daniel Webster, director of the Johns Hopkins [Center for Gun Policy and Research](#) in Baltimore. “The [availability of firearms does indeed increase the risk of suicide](#), but most people don’t see it that way.”

Opponents of gun control [counter](#) that some countries with high gun ownership rates, such as Israel, have few suicides and that countries such as Russia, where guns are scarce, have high rates of suicide. The reasoning is that determined people can find a way to kill themselves, although suicide experts say the prevalence of guns allows for impulse suicides that otherwise might not occur.

The most ardent advocate for gun rights, the [National Rifle Association](#), casts the link between guns and suicide as something of a virtue. “Gun owners are notably self-reliant and exhibit a willingness to take definitive action when they believe it to be in their own self-interest,” the NRA wrote in a fact sheet, called “[Suicide and Firearms](#),” on the Web site for the group’s lobbying arm. “Such action may include ending their own life when the time is deemed appropriate.”

‘A different mindset’

Janett Massolo, who is white, works at a suicide-prevention center in Reno, Nev. She provides training in suicide prevention and counsels families that have lost a member to suicide. She understands their grief — nearly 17 years ago her daughter Shannon killed herself.

Shannon was a 15-year-old high school student. Her behavior was sometimes erratic, but her mother put it down to teenage volatility. After Shannon’s best friend shot herself to death, she told her mother that she was appalled. “How could anything get that bad?” she said.

Six months later, shortly before noon on a Saturday, Massolo told her daughter that she was running next door for a minute. Shannon said she was hopping into the shower. When Massolo returned to the house five minutes later, her daughter’s body was on the floor in her parents’

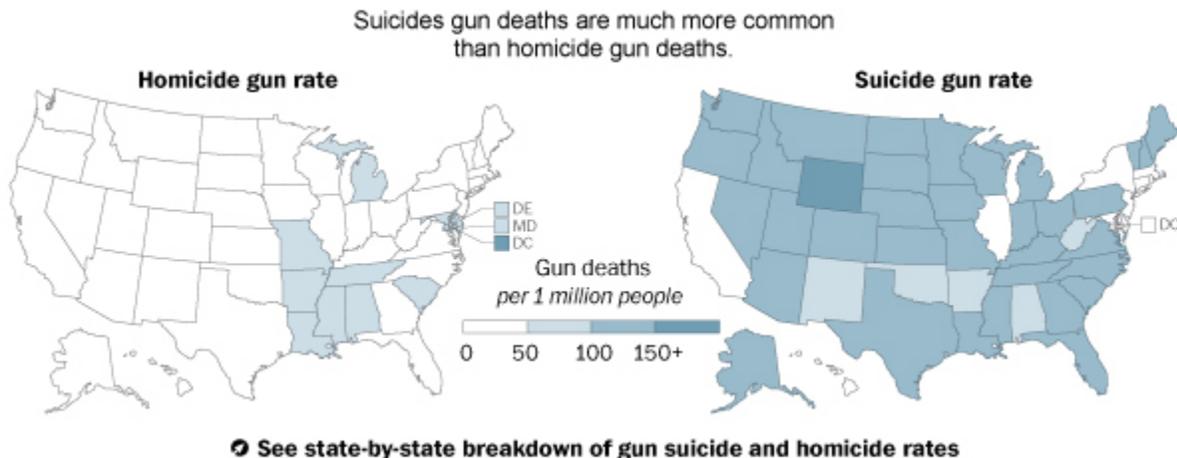
bedroom. At first, Massolo thought Shannon was searching for something under the bed. Then she saw the head wound.

Her father's handgun had been in an unlocked drawer; the bullets were elsewhere in the bedroom. Massolo said her daughter would not have had time to get the gun, find the bullets, load the gun and kill herself in the time she was next door. Massolo concluded that Shannon had planned her suicide.

Shannon knew how to handle the gun. Her parents had taught her and her sisters to fire weapons. They had gone to shooting ranges. "The mind-set out here is that we use guns for hunting, for target shooting, to keep the family safe," said Massolo. "If you want to keep the family safe and you have mental illness in the family, then lock your guns up for a while or give them away for a while. We're not saying give them away forever. We don't want to take the gun away."

The gun Shannon used to kill herself had been in the family for years. It was a gift to her father from his father-in-law, a former Reno police officer. Shannon had used it for target practice many times.

"That's something we've dealt with," Massolo said in a recent interview. "We taught her how to kill herself. But we were trying to teach her how to be safe. It's a different mind-set out here about guns. I know the East Coast doesn't think that way."



Massolo said the weapon had sentimental value to her husband, so after the suicide inquiry, he got it back from the police. His wife won't look at it, but her husband won't part with it.

"The gun did not kill Shannon," she said. "Shannon killed Shannon. I tell him it was not his fault. It could have been any method. She killed herself. That was my way of relieving some of his guilt."

Shanda Smith, who is black, has a totally different view of guns and their place in society. Nearly 20 years ago, her two children were shot to death on their way to a church Christmas party in the Congress Heights neighborhood of Southeast Washington.

Smith, a single mother who never knew her own parents, remembers the new Scrabble game her children had opened two days before the church party. “I remember one of the words was ‘peril,’” she said in a recent interview. “They didn’t know it. I told them it means danger.”

Rodney Smith, 19, was home on break from the University of Kansas, where he had a football scholarship. He had borrowed a relative’s beat-up Camaro Z28 and was driving his sister, Volante, 14, and two younger children to the party. Boo, as his sister was called, was in the passenger seat.

As the car approached the church on Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue, someone ran up to it and fired a handgun at Rodney and Boo. Smith’s two children were in body bags being loaded into an ambulance when she got to the scene. It would turn out that the Smiths were killed in a case of mistaken identity.

“They were right where they needed to be,” Smith said of her children, “but somebody had access to a gun, and he shot the wrong kids.”

Smith channeled her grief into a group called Survivors of Homicide Inc., where she works with others who have lost family members and close friends in shootings. Her favorite event is an annual Christmas party she hosts for children who have lost siblings or parents to shootings.

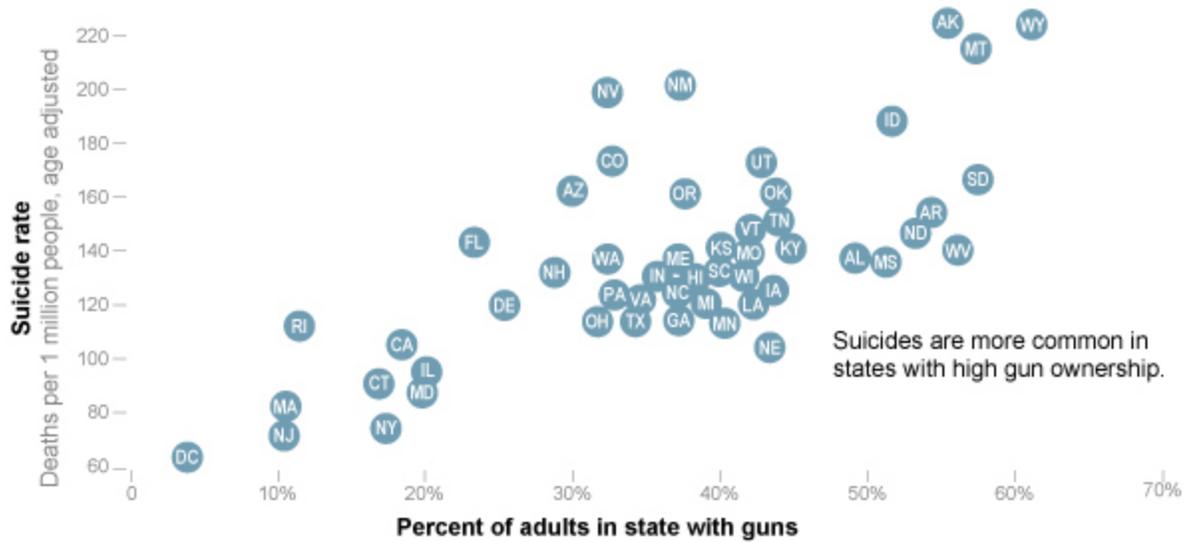
The Smith children were killed in 1993, a time when the District had one of the highest homicide rates in the nation. Even though rates have dropped sharply, Smith knows many families that have suffered from gun homicides. But she said they don’t buy guns as a solution. “That’s a difference in the African American community,” she said. “We don’t teach our kids to go hunting and shoot. We don’t have guns in our homes.”

‘Missing the point’

Contrasting life experiences, whether from a family member’s suicide or the death of a relative in a homicide, drive the nation’s split over an essential element of the gun debate: Would fewer guns save lives? Survivors of homicide victims consistently tell pollsters that the answer is yes, but the response to suicide is different.

“We have less empathy with those who take their own lives,” said [Sean Joe](#), an expert on suicide and violence at the University of Michigan. “So we don’t have the same national outcry. The key argument for me is that increased access to firearms increases suicide and homicide.”

Scholars say it is no coincidence that the places in the United States with high suicide rates also have high gun ownership rates. By contrast, states with the lowest gun ownership rates tend to have the lowest suicide rates.



See state-by-state breakdown of gun suicide and homicide rates

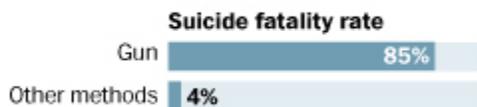
Eleanor Hamm works at the [statewide suicide hotline for Colorado](#), which has high rates of gun ownership and suicide. Her suicide-prevention program is [accredited](#) by the American Association of Suicidology, yet her experience with guns, which started when she got her first at 6, puts her closer to the NRA than the suicide association.

“The Western region is the highest region in suicide,” she said in an interview. “Out here, we own guns. You’re not ever going to get the guns away from anybody. What we can do is a better job of mental health. That will make a difference.”

Hamm echoed the NRA position, saying that people without access to guns will kill themselves by other means. “It’s easy for the passion of the day to look at gun control,” she said. “It’s missing the point of mental health and what is really truly taking place.”

But experts say that the urge to commit suicide is neither unstoppable nor permanent. “I emphasize that suicide is preventable — treatment works,” said Iliana Gilman, spokeswoman for a crisis hotline in Austin.

Attempting suicide with a gun is 20 times more likely to be fatal than other methods.



See state-by-state breakdown of gun suicide and homicide rates

The impulse to commit suicide has been described as a trance, and the speed and lethality of a gun make it harder to interrupt the trance. Attempts at suicide are more than [20 times as likely to be fatal](#) when a gun is used.

“They are blinded,” said Lanny Berman, executive director of the [American Association of Suicidology](#). “They are so focused and tunnel-visioned on ‘I have to end the pain I’m in; I have to end it now.’ . . . A firearm is an immediate end to the problem.”

Some experts say mass shootings such as the one in which 20 first-graders and six adults were killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., in December can often be seen as extravagant suicides rather than homicidal rampages. And the young man behind that massacre killed himself before he could be apprehended. Preventing these killings, experts say, requires better treatment of mental health problems and limiting access to weapons.

“If I had to choose one thing,” said Joe, the Michigan professor, “I would try to reduce access and availability of firearms. The means matter more.”

dan.keating@washpost.com

Julie Tate contributed to this report.

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