

Nationwide, almost 3 out of 4 Veterans who die by suicide (71%) use a firearm.¹ It is much more common for male Veterans (72%) than female Veterans (48%); however, use of firearms for suicide among female Veterans has increased 11 percentage points over the past two decades.¹ Because of the high lethality of suicide attempts by firearms, more needs to be understood about the context of these deaths in order to prevent future Veteran suicides from happening.

Stop Soldier Suicide used data from the 2019 National Violent Death Reporting System to better understand the attributes and life circumstances of Veterans who died by suicide using firearms (see Exhibit 1).²

- 82% of Veterans using a firearm died in their home. This is higher than those not using a firearm (75%).
- The most common life circumstance among Veterans who die by suicide using a firearm was existing physical health problems (44%). This was almost twice as common compared to those who did not use a firearm (23%).
- Known current mental health problems were present in only 39% of Veterans who died using a firearm, but 53% of those not using a firearm.
- Veterans using a firearm also had a much lower prevalence of ever being treated for a mental health problem, current treatment for mental illness, history of suicide attempts, and other known substance use problems compared to Veterans not using a firearm.

With such high levels of firearm-related suicides in the home, there need to be continued efforts to improve safe storage and accountable access of firearms in the home.

Firearm-related suicide prevention efforts in the Veteran serving community need to help Veterans who are struggling with their physical health as well as their mental health.

¹ U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention. 2022 National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report. 2022. Retrieved November 2, 2022 from https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/suicide_prevention/data.asp.

² 2019 National Violent Death Reporting System. Online analysis: <https://wisqars.cdc.gov/nvdrs/>.

LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES RELATED TO FIREARM SUICIDE DEATHS

Attributes	All Veterans		Used A Firearm		Did Not Use A Firearm		Comparison
Overall	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Difference
All Veteran or military suicide deaths	4952	100.0%	3561	100.0%	1391	100.0%	0.0%
Place of injury recorded in the NVDRS	4848	97.9%	3502	98.3%	1346	96.8%	1.6%
Homeless status recorded in the NVDRS	4768	96.3%	3440	96.6%	1328	95.5%	1.1%
Circumstances recorded in the NVDRS	4421	89.3%	3168	89.0%	1253	90.1%	-1.1%
Location	Count	Percentage*	Count	Percentage*	Count	Percentage*	Difference
House, apartment, including driveway, porch, yard	3870	79.8%	2866	81.8%	1004	74.6%	7.2% ++
Transport area: other, including inside motor vehicle	360	7.4%	262	7.5%	98	7.3%	0.2%
Natural area/countryside	170	3.5%	122	3.5%	48	3.6%	-0.1%
Commercial area (non-recreational), including medical service area, farm, industrial or construction area	164	3.4%	73	2.1%	91	6.8%	-4.7% -
Transport area: public highway, street or road	88	1.8%	69	2.0%	19	1.4%	0.6%
Other specified place, including school, sports/athletics area, or cemetery	76	1.6%	53	1.5%	23	1.7%	-0.2%
Recreational area, cultural area or public building	64	1.3%	50	1.4%	14	1.0%	0.4%
Residential institution, including shelter, prison	56	1.2%	7	0.2%	49	3.6%	-3.4% -
Homeless Status	Count	Percentage*	Count	Percentage*	Count	Percentage*	Difference
Not homeless	4730	99.2%	3423	99.5%	1307	98.4%	1.1%
Homeless	38	0.8%	17	0.5%	21	1.6%	-1.1%
Circumstance	Count	Percentage*	Count	Percentage*	Count	Percentage*	Difference
Current mental health problem	1904	43.1%	1243	39.2%	661	52.8%	-13.5% ---
Physical health problem	1662	37.6%	1380	43.6%	282	22.5%	21.1% +++
Person left a suicide note	1495	33.8%	1052	33.2%	443	35.4%	-2.1% -
History of suicidal thoughts or plans	1494	33.8%	1029	32.5%	465	37.1%	-4.6% -
Current depressed mood	1477	33.4%	1086	34.3%	391	31.2%	3.1% +
Ever treated for mental health problem	1223	27.7%	760	24.0%	463	37.0%	-13.0% ---
Crisis in preceding or upcoming 2 weeks	1185	26.8%	854	27.0%	331	26.4%	0.5%
Disclosed intent to commit suicide	1069	24.2%	794	25.1%	275	21.9%	3.1% +
Intimate partner problem	958	21.7%	637	20.1%	321	25.6%	-5.5% --
Current treatment for mental illness	935	21.1%	573	18.1%	362	28.9%	-10.8% ---
Alcohol dependence	744	16.8%	472	14.9%	272	21.7%	-6.8% --
Other suicide circumstance	634	14.3%	462	14.6%	172	13.7%	0.9%
History of suicide attempts	569	12.9%	274	8.6%	295	23.5%	-14.9% ---
Argument or conflict	559	12.6%	413	13.0%	146	11.7%	1.4%
Other substance abuse problem	356	8.1%	162	5.1%	194	15.5%	-10.4% ---
Job problem	339	7.7%	233	7.4%	106	8.5%	-1.1%
Financial problem	318	7.2%	222	7.0%	96	7.7%	-0.7%
Other death of friend or family member	316	7.1%	252	8.0%	64	5.1%	2.8% +
Recent criminal legal problem	293	6.6%	165	5.2%	128	10.2%	-5.0% --
Family relationship problem	275	6.2%	194	6.1%	81	6.5%	-0.3%
Eviction or loss of home	134	3.0%	88	2.8%	46	3.7%	-0.9%
Other legal problems	124	2.8%	82	2.6%	42	3.4%	-0.8%
Suicide of friend or family member in past 5 years	123	2.8%	91	2.9%	32	2.6%	0.3%
Other relationship problem (besides family)	65	1.5%	41	1.3%	24	1.9%	-0.6%
Previous perpetrator of violence in the past month	56	1.3%	40	1.3%	16	1.3%	0.0%
Victim had other addiction (e.g., gambling, sexual)	34	0.8%	17	0.5%	17	1.4%	-0.8%
Physical fight between 2 people	26	0.6%	17	0.5%	9	0.7%	-0.2%
Victim had history of abuse/neglect as a child	25	0.6%	14	0.4%	11	0.9%	-0.4%
Anniversary of traumatic event	22	0.5%	16	0.5%	6	0.5%	0.0%
Exposure to disaster	14	0.3%	13	0.4%	1	0.1%	0.3%
School problem	9	0.2%	8	0.3%	1	0.1%	0.2%
Previous victim of violence in the past month	6	0.1%	4	0.1%	2	0.2%	0.0%
Caretaker abuse/neglect led to death	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0.0%
Other undetermined circumstance	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0	0.0%	0.0%

-/+ is for differences in 2 to 4 percentage points between firearm and non-firearm suicides.

--/+ is for differences in 5 to 9 percentage points between firearm and non-firearm suicides.

---/+ is for differences in 10+ percentage points between firearm and non-firearm suicides.

*These percentages were only among those for whom the attribute was recorded.

Source: 2019 National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS). States included in this dataset were: AK, AL, AZ, CA, CO, CT, DC, DE, GA, HI, IA, IL, IN, KS, KY, LA, MA, MD, ME, MI, MN, MO, MT, NC, ND, NE, NH, NJ, NM, NV, OH, OR, PA, RI, SC, UT, VA, VT, WA, WI, WV, WY.

Suggested citation: Richardson, J.S., Hotle, R.A., Batten, S. (2022). "Life Circumstances Related to Firearm Suicide Deaths." Retrieved Month Date, Year from www.stopsoldiersuicide.org/research.