



**Firearms & Suicide Prevention:**  
A module for Massachusetts BFS classes



**Protecting our families**  
involves more than  
keeping them safe from  
accident or attack.

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# Massachusetts

has the **second lowest firearm death rate** in the nation  
(just 1/4 the U.S. rate).

56% of MA firearm deaths are **suicides\***.

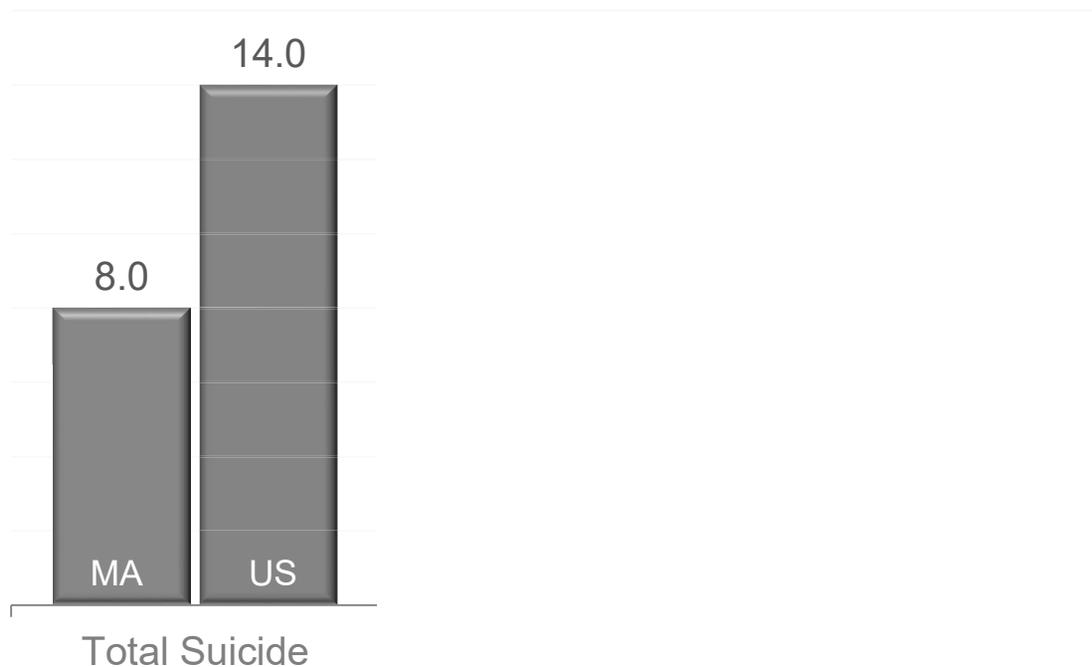


\*Data year 2021

Source: Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS), Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control; 2021 Massachusetts Violent Death Reporting System, (MAVDRS) Massachusetts Department of Public Health

# MA and US Suicide Rates, 2021

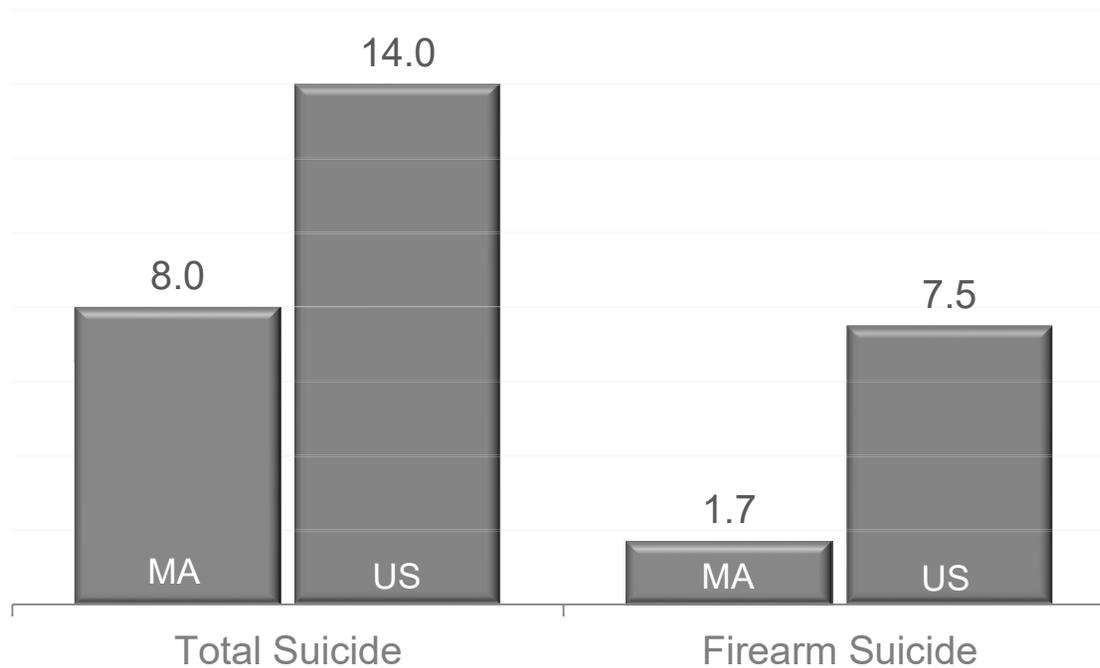
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Suicide rates per 100,000 population

MA has one of the lowest suicide rates in the nation even though the % of residents who have seriously considered or attempted suicide is on par with the US average (per National Survey on Drug Use and Health).

## MA and US Suicide Rates, 2021



The state's lower suicide rate is driven by its lower firearm suicide rate. This is likely a result of the state's low gun ownership rate which is 1/4 the national rate.

Suicide rates shown are per 100,000 population. For example, 8 per 100,000 means 8 suicides for every 100,000 residents.

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*Putting time and distance between a suicidal person and a highly lethal method—especially a gun—can save a life.*

But why?

“ If you really want to die, you will eventually find a way.”

Some people do, but most don't.

Not everyone who becomes suicidal, acts on their thoughts or remains suicidal.

# Pesticides and Sri Lanka

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- Mid-1990s: Sri Lanka one of the highest suicide rates in the world. Pesticides leading method.
- Removed only the most highly human-toxic pesticides, not all pesticides.
- Suicide rates dropped 50% from 1996 to 2005 – saving over 20,000 lives.
- Drop driven by decline in pesticide suicides.
- Suicides by other methods did not drop. Nor did nonfatal pesticide attempts.
- The *behavior* (trying to take one's life) didn't change. The lethality of that behavior changed.



# Why Means Matter

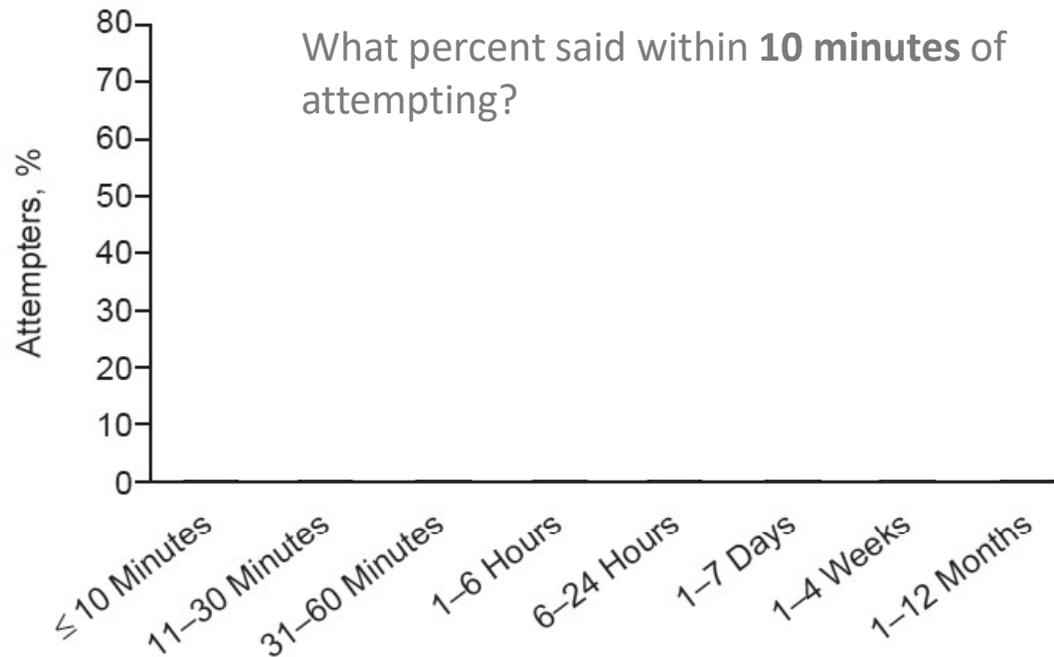
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1. The acute phase, when someone is at highest risk, of a suicidal crisis is often brief.
2. Precisely what we value about guns—their speed, accuracy, power, simplicity—makes them more deadly than other methods. Other means are less likely to be lethal.
3. >90% of those who attempt and survive—even people making very serious attempts--do not go on to die by suicide

# Suicidal Crises

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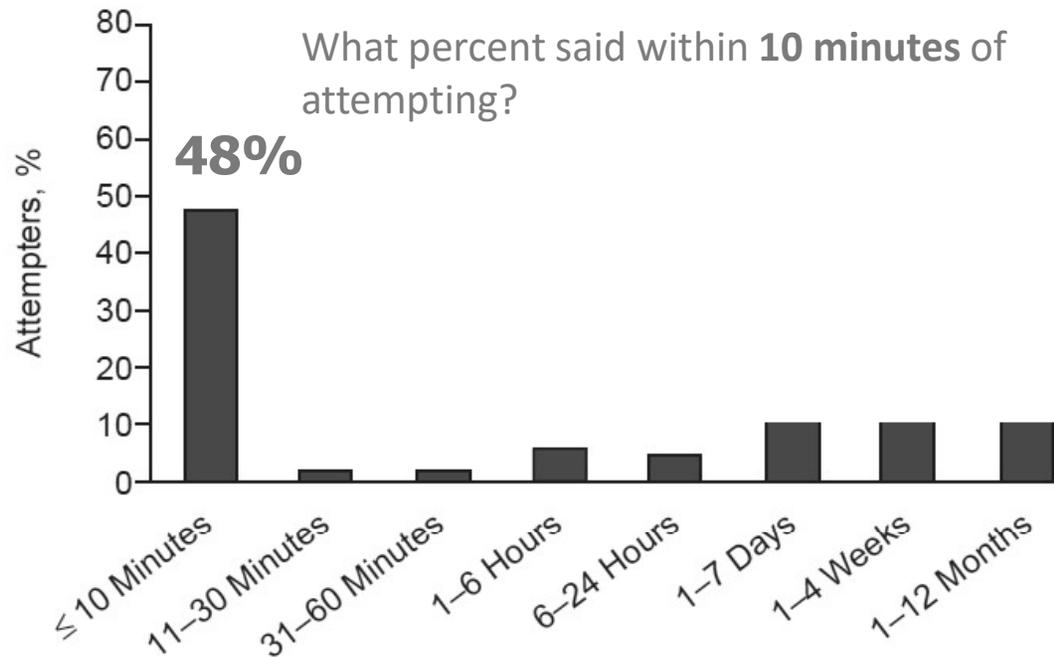
People seen in the hospital following a suicide attempt were asked when they had *first* started thinking about making that attempt.



Deisenhammer 2009

# Suicidal Crises

People seen in the hospital following a suicide attempt were asked when they had *first* started thinking about making that attempt.



This doesn't mean attempts come out of the blue. Most people who become suicidal have struggled with ongoing concerns. But the movement from distress to suicidal idea to attempt can be rapid and unpredictable.

# Protecting One Another

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- Having access to a firearm during a suicidal crisis increases the odds that an attempt will prove fatal.
- We can protect one another. **Be alert to signs of suicide in friends and family.**
- If someone is at risk, help **keep guns from them** until they recover.

## Who's at Risk for Suicide?

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- **Anyone**
- People experiencing **depression, substance use, or other mental health concerns**, especially if they're also facing a painful crisis like a relationship break-up, arrest, trouble at work, or financial crisis—problems that make you feel hopeless and trapped.
- We know our loved ones and if they are not acting like “themselves” we should be checking in, to see how they are doing.
- Middle-aged and older white men have the highest suicide rates.
- **Teens at home?** Adolescents who become suicidal may show few or no warning signs.
- A wise precaution: **store all guns locked** and make sure the person at risk doesn't know where the keys or combination are.

## Storage Options

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- If a household member is at risk of suicide, you could **store guns away from home** (e.g., with another licensed gunowner you trust, in accordance with state law) **until risk has passed**.
- **Change the locks** and make sure they can't find the keys/combo. Or disassemble the guns and store the slide or firing pin elsewhere.
- Another option: **don't keep ammunition at home until the risk has passed**.
- Hiding guns isn't recommended. Family members tend to know one another's hiding places.
- Additionally offering to **hold onto a gun maybe an option, in accordance with MA law**.

## What if It's You at Risk?

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- If you feel yourself **at increased risk, take precautions before things get to a crisis.**
- Any strategy that builds some time between you and a gun in a suicidal crisis will keep you safer.
- **Store your guns off-site temporarily or** ask someone you trust to hold onto a critical component like the cylinder, slide or firing pin. Or **store the keys** somewhere they're not available in a crisis (in accordance with MA state law).
- These are **temporary measures** until the crisis has passed.

## Getting Help

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- 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline: **call or text 988, or visit the website to chat**, <https://988lifeline.org/chat/> (Press 1 to speak to Veteran's Line, Text 838255 or Chat at [www.veteranocrisisline.net](http://www.veteranocrisisline.net) )
- **Massachusetts Behavioral Health Helpline**
  - 833-773-2445 or visit [masshelpline.com](http://masshelpline.com) for online chat
  - Available 24/7 for real-time support, initial clinical assessment, and connection to treatment in your community.
- If you tried treatment in the past and it wasn't helpful, remember the above services can offer a variety of resources and useful suggestions.

## Will Calling a Helpline Effect Your Gun Permit?

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- Simply contacting a helpline for support and talking about suicidal feelings **does not disqualify you** from having a gun permit.
- If a caller seems at imminent risk of harm,—e.g., they've said they're going to kill themselves right now and have the means and seem intent on carrying through—that changes things. **This happens in less than 2% of helpline calls.** In those scenarios, it is possible it could impact your gun permit status.
- You can find the link imminent risk policy on [988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline | Mass.gov](#)

# For more information for this subject, please find a FAQ, Video, and this Presentation from the QR code below



The screenshot shows the Mass.gov website for the Firearms Safety Instructors Certification Program. The page features a navigation bar with links for Menu, Select Language, Contrast Settings, State Organizations, and Log In. Below the navigation bar is a search bar and a breadcrumb trail: Public Safety > Personal Safety > Firearms Services. The main heading is "Firearms Safety Instructors Certification Program", followed by a sub-heading "OFFERED BY Massachusetts State Police". A photograph shows a classroom setting with several people seated at desks. Below the photo, there is a paragraph of text: "The Firearms Instructor Certification Program and the LEOSA Instructor Certification aim to ensure that those who possess or carry firearms, rifles or shotguns, do so in a safe and responsible manner. We work to ensure they adhere to all rules and regulations governing their certification. We are confident that all those certified to instruct this course will do so with these goals in mind. Those instructors looking to renew your certification, you will receive a renewal package via mail or email one month prior to certification expiration date."

## Suicide Prevention in Firearms Classes

- Suicide Awareness: A Firearm Safety Basic Video →
- FAQs Covering Suicide Prevention in Firearm Classes →
- Firearms & Suicide Prevention Module →
- Firearm Instructor Suicide Prevention Teaching Manual →



[Firearms Safety Instructors Certification Program | Mass.gov](https://www.mass.gov/firearms-safety-instructors-certification-program)



Gun owners can take voluntary steps to prevent suicide.

Together, we can protect our family, our friends, and our freedom.

*Tom Brown, Firearm Instructor*

*Photo courtesy of Lukas Budimaier, Unsplash*