

Means Safety in the Department of Defense

Defense Suicide Prevention Office



PERSONNEL AND READINESS



Agenda

- Means Safety Defined
- Mean Safety Examples
- Guiding Principles
- 2020 Quick Compass Survey of Active Duty Members
- Way Forward



Means Safety Defined

- Means safety in suicide involves making a method:
 - Less accessible during a suicide attempt (e.g., safe storage of firearms and medications)
 - Less likely to cause death if used in a suicide attempt
- A powerful tool for reducing suicide, as means safety targets the capability for suicide rather than the desire for suicide.
- Research has refuted the idea that if someone wants to die and is prevented from using one means, they will find another way (means substitution hypothesis).



Means Safety Examples

Medications

- Prescription medications are the most common method of non-fatal suicide attempts for Service members.
- Means Safety for Medications:
 - Do not keep lethal doses on-hand.
 - Discuss medications with your doctor or pharmacist.
 - Lock up all medications.
 - Dispose of outdated or no longer needed medications.
 - Avoid consuming alcohol while taking medications.

Firearms

- The most lethal and common method for suicide among Service members is via firearm.
- Means Safety for Firearms:
 - Store firearm with a locking device that prevents unauthorized access or use.
 - Separate firearms and ammunition when not in use.
 - Store in a secure locked box.
 - Make sure household members understand safety guidelines for firearms.
 - If someone in the home is at-risk for misusing a firearm, consider storing firearm outside of the home (e.g., with a trusted individual or in a secure facility).



Guiding Principles

- Understanding Service member beliefs and attitudes on safe storage may help the Department with targeted efforts to encourage safe storage and decrease suicide risk.
- Access to firearms increases risk for suicide. In CY2019, the majority of Service member suicide decedents died by firearm, ranging from 59.6% to 78.7%, across military populations (CY 2019 DoD Annual Suicide Report)
- Firearm storage practices are influenced by beliefs and attitudes. Believing misconceptions about firearms and suicide is associated with less safe storage practices (Anestis & Daruwala, 2020; Simonetti et al., 2018).
- Safer storage practices reduces risk of suicide (Kellermann et al., 1992; Kposowa, Hamilton, & Wang, 2016; Miller et al., 2013). Individual actions can make a difference. Putting time and distance between a person at risk and a means for suicide is an effective way to prevent death (Anestis et al., 2014; Klonsky & May, 2010; Simon et al., 2001; Swann et al., 2020).



2020 Quick Compass Survey of Active Duty Service Members - Overview

- 2020 Quick Compass Survey of Active Duty Members (QCAM) was funded by the Defense Suicide Prevention Office and performed by the Office of People Analytics.
- Survey examines Service member attitudes and behaviors around firearm storage, as well as beliefs about firearms and suicide risk.
 - Survey topics:
 - Beliefs and Attitudes about Safe Storage of Firearms
 - Firearm Ownership and Storage Practices
 - Misconceptions about Firearms and Suicide Risk
 - Note that questions on personal firearm ownership/storage were only asked of Service members who live on-installation; thus, this subset of results are not generalizable to the full military population.
- See back-up slides for additional information on the survey methodology and limitations.



Results From All Survey Respondents

Guiding Principle: *Understanding Service member beliefs and attitudes on safe storage may help the Department with targeted efforts to encourage safe storage and decrease suicide risk.*

Results on beliefs on safe storage:

- Firearms ***should be stored in a firearm safe*** (73% agree; 8% disagree)
- Firearms ***should be stored locked and unloaded***, with ammunition stored separately when not in use (57% agree; 23% disagree)
- ***Having a firearm in the house makes it a safer place*** to be (68% agree; 7% disagree)
- Service members who live on a military installation ***should be required to register their firearms*** (63% agree; 19% disagree)



Results From All Survey Respondents

Guiding Principle: *Understanding Service member beliefs and attitudes on safe storage may help the Department with targeted efforts to encourage safe storage and decrease suicide risk. (Cont.)*

Results on beliefs on education and training on safe storage:

- 97% agree that anyone who has a firearm(s) should discuss firearm safety with their family (and 98% agree when children are in the home)
- **Service members reporting that training/advocacy would encourage safe storage of personal firearms**
 - Training on how to store a firearm safely for home defense (86% Likely; 3% Unlikely)
 - Advocacy for firearm safety by peers (80% Likely; 5% Unlikely)
 - Training on the benefits of firearm safety (79% Likely; 6% Unlikely)
 - Training on how to store firearm safely at home (78%; 7% Unlikely)
 - Advocacy for firearm safety by superiors (66% Likely; 12% Unlikely)



Results – *Misconceptions About Firearms and the Risk for Suicide*

Guiding Principle: *Firearm storage practices are influenced by beliefs and attitudes. Believing misconceptions about firearms and suicide is associated with less safe storage practices.*

- All Survey Respondents:
 - Misconception #1: **If someone wants to die by suicide and you prevent them from using a firearm, they'll find another way** (58% believe this misconception)
 - Misconception #2: **Having a firearm in the home does not increase the risk of suicide** (56% believe this misconception)
 - Misconception #3: **Suicide risk is not related to how a firearm is stored** (66% believe this misconception)
- Service Members Living On-Installation:
 - Firearm owners living on-installation were asked about their firearm safe storage practices. **Owners who believed more misconceptions were less likely to agree with safe firearm storage practices.**
 - Greater firearm safety attitudes were also associated with safer storage practices.



Results of Members Living On-Installation

Guiding Principle: *Access to firearms increases risk for suicide.*

Results on access to personal firearms:

- 202 Service members living on-installation reported having personal firearm(s) at their on-installation residence
- Average number of firearms = 2.4¹

Guiding Principle: *Safer storage practices reduces risk of suicide.*

Results on safe storage practices:

- 89% always keep firearm locked;² **3% never keep firearm locked.**
- 69% never keep firearm loaded; **20% always keep firearm loaded.**
- 69% keep ammunition away from the firearm; **28% keep with firearm.**³
- **83% would use a firearm safe if it were provided for a reduced rate.**
- 58% purchased the personal firearm at an *off-installation firearm shop*, 32% from a *retailer*, and 29% from an *on-installation firearm shop*.

1. 92% own a personal firearm at their on-installation residence for shooting/target practice, 88% for self-defense, and 81% because it is a constitutional right.

2. 49% use lockable firearm cases, 47% use key locks, 35% use safes.

3. Storage practices may not be indicative of personal preference for those in the barracks, as they may not be permitted to keep firearms in the barracks.



Summary of Findings and Opportunities for Action

- The Department's understanding of Service members' personal firearm storage practices, beliefs, and attitudes is limited by law.
- Of those who reported keeping a personal firearm at their on-installation residence, ***the majority practice safe storage***;¹ however, there are areas to target:
 - ***Education on keeping firearm unloaded and ammunition stored separately.***
 - Identify options to ***offer firearms safes at a discounted rate*** to members.
- Over 80% of firearms were purchased at firearm shops; ***opportunities to work with these firearm shops*** may have significant benefit.
- The majority of respondents reported that ***training on how to store a firearm safely; and advocacy from peers and superiors about the benefits of firearm safety, would encourage safe storage.***
- Over 50% of ***Service members hold misconceptions*** about firearms and suicide, which are linked with *less* safe storage practices. ***Targeted messaging and training/education may bust misconceptions and improve safe storage.***

1. Storage practices may not be indicative of personal preference for those in the barracks, as they may not be permitted to keep firearms in the barracks. 11



Back-up Slides



Survey Methodology

- Survey Administration:
 - Web survey administered from February 2020 to April 2020
 - Sample size: 3,890 completed surveys; weighted response rate: 10%; 202 Service members were asked firearm ownership and storage behavior questions; *(Note, this is comparable to the 2019 Status of Forces Survey response rate of 13%.)*
 - Administered to Active Duty Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Air Force
- Stratified random sampling procedures used to select a sample representing the military population based on a combination of demographic characteristics
 - Demographic groups with lower response rates oversampled
 - For example, small reporting categories (e.g., Marine Corps officers) are oversampled in comparison to their proportion of the population so there would be enough responses from small reporting categories to analyze.
 - Data weighted to produce survey estimates representative of DoD active duty population
 - As this is the first DoD-wide survey covering these topics, caution should be exercised in drawing conclusions based on the findings.
- Only Service members that indicated living on-installation were asked about their personal firearms. Details on the following slide.



Limitations

- Section 1062 of the Ike Skelton National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year (FY) 2011 (P.L. 111-383), as amended in Section 1057 of NDAA for FY 2013 (P.L. 112-239), prohibits the Department from issuing any requirement relating to (or collect or record any information relating to) lawful acquisition, possession, ownership, carrying, or other use of privately-owned firearms, ammunition, or other weapons by a Service member on property that is not on a military installation or other DoD-owned or operated property, unless otherwise provided for in law.
- Therefore, the questions regarding personal firearm ownership and storage were only asked of Service members who indicated they lived on-installation, and results from these questions are not generalizable to the full military population.
- Additionally, Service members on-installation may not be permitted to keep personal firearms in their barracks, so storage choices may not be indicative of personal preference for those living in the barracks.