

In West, region of guns and suicide, outreach to curb deaths

Guns are integral part of daily life

By DAVID CRARY
Associated Press

MONTROSE, Colo. — Keith Carey is a gunsmith in Montrose, a town with a frontier flavor set amid the rocky mesas of western Colorado. He's a staunch, though soft-spoken, defender of the right to bear arms.

Yet now he's also a willing recruit in a fledgling effort to see if the gun community itself — sellers and owners of firearms, operators of shooting ranges — can help Colorado and a swath of other Western states reduce their highest-in-the-nation suicide rates.

"Suicide is a tragedy no matter how it's done," said Carey, whose adult daughter killed herself with a mix of alcohol and antidepressants a few years ago on the East Coast. However, he sees the logic in trying gun-specific prevention strategies in towns like Montrose, where guns are an integral part of daily life.

"It's very expedient for people to commit suicide by a firearm, without too much forethought," Carey said. "Unfortunately, it's generally effective."

So at the urging of a local police commander, Carey agreed last year to participate in the Gun Shop Project, a state-funded pilot program in which gun sellers and range operators in five western Colorado counties were invited to help raise awareness about suicide. It's a tentative but promising bid to open up a conversation on a topic that's been virtually taboo in these Western states: the intersection of guns and suicide.

The counter in Carey's tiny shop — where he repairs horns and woodwinds as well as guns — now displays wallet-sized cards with information about a suicide hotline. A poster by the door offers advice about ways to keep guns out of the hands of friends or relatives at risk of killing themselves.

"Consider offering to hold on to their guns or to help store their guns temporarily," the poster says. "You may save a life."

Carey says some of his customers take materials home, or ask a few questions. But the conversations tend to be brief.

"Suicide is one of those morose subjects that a lot of us don't want to talk about," he said. "But it's all too common. I believe any method of suicide prevention is worth a good hard try."

Nearly two-thirds of gun deaths

Across the U.S., suicides account for nearly two-thirds of all gun deaths — far outnumbering gun homicides and accidental deaths. In 2014, according to federal data, there were 33,599 firearm deaths; 21,334 of them were suicides. That figure represents about half of all suicides that year; but in several western Colorado counties, and in some other Rocky Mountain states with high gun-ownership rates, more than 60 percent of suicides involve firearms.

A map of state suicide rates reveals a striking pattern. Along with Alaska, the states with the highest rates form a contiguous bloc of the interior West — Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Nevada, Colorado, Utah and New Mexico. All have age-adjusted suicide rates at least 50 percent higher than the national rate of 12.93 suicides per 100,000 people; Montana's rate, 23.80, is the highest in the nation.

Between 2000 and 2014, gun suicides increased by more than 51 percent in those states, while rising by less than 30 percent nationwide.

Theories abound as to why residents of this Western region kill themselves at such high



David Crary/AP Photo

Josh O'Neal, general manager of the Rocky Mountain Gun Club in Grand Junction, Colo., stands in front of a display of firearms at the state-of-the-art shooting range. O'Neal says safety is a high priority at the facility, but he and his staff are apprehensive regarding the possibility that a suicidal person might rent a gun at the site and then kill themselves.



David Crary/AP Photo

Martha Graf, left, executive director of the Western Colorado Suicide Prevention Foundation, and Cindy Haerle, a board member of the foundation, look at one of the suicide-prevention posters that are being distributed to gun shops and shooting ranges in and around Grand Junction, Colo. Haerle's brother, John, killed himself with a pistol shot when he was 29 after prolonged struggles with depression.

rates. Commonly cited factors include the isolation and economic hard times that are prevalent in rural areas of these states. A University of Utah psychiatrist, Perry Renshaw, contends that the lower oxygen levels of higher altitudes contribute to elevated suicide rates.

There's also widespread belief that a self-reliant frontier mindset — admirable in many circumstances — deters some Westerners from seeking help when depression sinks in.

"We embrace the cowboy mentality," says Jarrod Hindman, director of Colorado's Office of Suicide Prevention. "If you're suffering, suck it up, pick yourself up by your boot straps. But that doesn't work very well if you're suicidal."

Underlying all these explanations is the fact that firearms — the most effective of all the common means of suicide — are more ubiquitous in the West than in most other parts of the country.



David Crary/AP Photo

The grave site of Matt Townsend in a cemetery in Grand Junction, Colo.; the tombstone was designed to reflect his passion for playing pool. Townsend, who fatally shot himself in 1989 at the age of 33, had been a close friend since childhood of Jim Doody, who went on to serve as mayor and city councilor.

Catherine Barber, a suicide prevention expert at the Harvard School of Public Health, says numerous studies show that residents of gun-owning homes are at substantially higher risk of suicide than other people — simply because a suicide attempt is more likely to involve a gun and thus prove fatal. According to federal estimates, suicide attempts involving

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9-1-WHAT?

THE BEST OF THE WORST CALLS TO ASTORIA 911 DISPATCH

Duck down

Thankfully, folks here on the North Coast have their priorities straight. A duck gets hit by a car in Astoria? Call 911. Someone steals a cat in Warrenton? Ditto. But when children refuse to get off at their bus stop? Just deal ...

Follow reporter Kyle Spurr on his 9-1-What? Twitter watch, where a few of the sometimes head-scratching calls to area dispatch take center stage. The full feed is at www.twitter.com/9_1_WHAT.



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