Is There a Link Between Gun Ownership and Suicide in Black Americans?

A group aims to encourage safe gun practices and mental health awareness among gun owners.

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The number of African American gun owners has increased exponentially in recent years. During this time, suicide rates have also risen among young Black men, according to Kaiser Health News (KHN).

Perhaps not surprisingly, experts believe having a gun in the home increases the risk of suicide for every person who lives there.

Bill Mays, a firearms trainer in St. Louis, works to educate people about the intersection between gun ownership and suicide.

Mays is Black and works for Safer Homes Collaborative, a group based at the University of Missouri–St. Louis that aims to encourage gun sellers, gun owners and their loved ones to institute systems to prevent people in crisis from accessing firearms.

Mays told KHN that he knows how to talk with gun enthusiasts about sensitive matters like mental health issues, suicide risk and crisis management in a way that health experts cannot.

Suicide is usually an impulsive act. In fact, KHN cites a study that found that nearly half of survivors reported that it took them 10 minutes or less to attempt suicide after first considering it.

A few years ago, Mays himself was having suicidal thoughts until a call with his daughter pulled him out of the crisis.

“That’s the thing about suicide, is that you can have that feeling, but if someone intervenes, you know, that feeling can easily go away,” Mays said to KHN.

Safer Homes Collaborative is modeled on the New Hampshire Gun Shop Project, which enlists gun owners to deliver messages as part of a strategy called “means reduction.” The idea being, explained KHN, that if people can be kept away from a means of killing themselves for even a

short period, their risk of dying decreases.

Advocates of this work believe suicide can be significantly reduced if businesses refuse to sell firearms to individuals in crisis and family members keep guns away from people who feel suicidal.

In the United States, in part because of their high rates of gun ownership, for decades older white men had the highest rate of suicide.

However, suicide rates among young Black men increased almost 50% nationally from 2013 to 2019. The suicide rate among younger Black children ages 5 to 12 is now more than double the rate for younger white children. Meanwhile, 25% of Black adults owned a gun in 2021, up from 14% in 2015.

Deborah Azrael, associate director of the Harvard Youth Violence Prevention Center, coauthored a new study that estimates that from January 2019 to April 2021, around 16 million Americans had guns brought into their homes for the first time. Twenty percent of the new buyers were Black.

“Gun ownership is more diverse now, and so when we talk to people about the risks of guns, we want to make sure we’re reaching out across the board, and not just to the people we’ve typically thought of as gun owners in the past,” noted Azriel.

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