

## Essay

## Firearms policy, suicide prevention and the swedish model

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**Abstract:** Suicide is a global health problem and committing suicide with a firearm is a common method. As recent studies discuss the importance of removing a firearm from a patient trying to commit suicide in the US, it is believed that Sweden and the Swedish model can be highly useful for American policymakers. Sweden has a low rate of firearm-related suicide which is believed to be a direct reflection of the highly restrictive gun laws of the country. On the contrary, the US, with a less restrictive gun laws, has a high level of firearm-related suicides. The US is thus in acute need of reforms in its gun laws, otherwise, any suicide preventive efforts may risk being in vain.

**Keywords:** Suicide, Firearm, Sweden, Gun Laws, Suicide Prevention

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Firearms causes more than 1000 deaths each day (International Action Network on Small Arms, 2011), as 60% of all homicides globally are committed by a firearm (Geneva Declaration, 2008). Often, however, the role of a firearm in suicide is forgotten. The recent published report, "Global Violent Deaths 2017 – Time to Decide", by the Small Arms Survey, states that there is a robust correlation between access to firearms and suicide by a firearm. The report concludes that policies targeting the possession of firearms, are of importance to reduce firearm suicides (McEvoy et al., 2017).

### Firearm-related Suicide

Previous studies have shown that there is a robust correlation between household ownership of firearms and committing suicide with a gun (Miller et al., 2002; Miller et al., 2007). Firearm-related suicide also contributes to a higher mortality and

more serious injuries (Singh et al., 2002; The Joint Commission 2016). Although firearm-related suicide exists in all countries, the US stands out as the country has a high rate of firearm-related deaths, including firearm-related suicides (Richardson et al., 2011). In discussing firearm-related suicide per 100 000 population, the US had the highest rate of firearm-related suicide in the world in 2016 with 7.1 deaths (Alpers et al., 2018). It is probably the less restrictive gun laws in the US, in comparison with for example the western Europe, which is responsible for the high rate of firearm-related suicide in the US.

Recently, Olfson et al. (2017) showed an elevated risk for a new suicide attempt following nonfatal self-harm, why Nordentoft et al. (2017) wrote that a firearm should be removed from a person attempting to commit suicide. In another publication, Alban et al. (2017) showed that US states with less strict gun laws, in comparison to states with stricter gun laws, had more firearm-related suicide attempt injuries and that these injuries were related to a higher mortality. The

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authors concluded that a “nationwide standardization of firearm state laws are warranted, particularly for young adults and suicide-prone populations.”

### **The Swedish Model**

I believe that Sweden could be a great role model in discussing the above issue. Although still high, the rates of suicide have been decreasing in Sweden. In 2016, 1470 suicides were registered which was the lowest rate of suicide in the country since 2011 (National Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention of Mental Ill-Health, 2017). Statistics from 2014 by the National Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention of Mental Ill-Health (2017) in Sweden, show that the most common method of suicide in certain and uncertain suicides, is by poisoning (36.4%) and hanging (31.1%). A firearm was only used in 8.3% of the more than 1000 cases presented.

In comparison with the US, Sweden has a much lower rate of firearm-related suicides, even though the amount of firearm related violence is highly increasing in the country (Khoshnood, 2017). The reason is vivid; those committing suicide with a firearm, usually use firearms they have a license for or have inherited from a family member. In a very few cases have they been able to purchase a weapon on the black market. Sweden is a country with highly restrictive gun laws, making it difficult for people to get hold of a firearm the legal way (Khoshnood, 2017).

The Swedish Gun Law (1996) is the foremost law regulating ownership of a firearm in Sweden and states that a license must be issued by the police before an individual can own a firearm. Everyone above the age of eighteen can apply to the police to own a firearm. After an investigation on the applicant, the police will either accept or reject the application. In the application it is important to state the specific reason for why the applicant is in need of a weapon. There are mostly two reasons for why the police will accept an application to own a firearm; the individual is either a member of a shooting club or a hunter. If a member of a shooting club, the applicant must show a certificate that he has passed a shooting test.

In discussing possession of a weapon, a physician in Sweden is obligated according to the Gun Law (1996), to report a patient to the police if it is suspected that the patient is not fit to possess a firearm because of medical issues (The National Board of Health and Welfare, 2013). It is then up to

the police to investigate the matter and take the needed actions.

The Swedish model have been successful as seen in the low rate of firearm related suicides (National Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention of Mental Ill-Health, 2017) as well as accidental firearm fatalities (Örnehult et al., 1987).

### **Reforming US Gun Laws**

According to the National Vital Statistics Reports (Kochanek et al., 2016) 33 594 people were killed in the US by a firearm; Firearm-related homicide accounted for close to 33% while firearm-related suicide accounted for close to 64% of all the firearm-related killings in the US. Firearm-related suicide is thus a highly disturbing problem in the American health care system as well as the US as a country. Indeed, in some US states, the use of a firearm is the most common method of committing suicide. A previous study by Manion et al. (2012) showed that among 3334 suicides in the state of Maryland, close to 50% were committed by a firearm as a method of suicide and was thus the most common method of committing a suicide followed by hanging/strangulation (26.8%) and poisoning (14.9%).

Viewing the notion of firearm-related suicide from a European point of view, there is a believe that the US must reform its gun laws, not only to better encounter firearm-related homicides and firearm-related gang violence, but also to encounter firearm-related suicides which is a huge and important healthcare problem in the US.

The US gun laws are highly liberal. The US bill of rights consists of the ten first amendments to the constitution of the US. The second amendment states (National Archives, 2017): “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” This amendment thus protects the right of every US citizen and permanent residents to possess a firearm. There are furthermore several federal laws and state specific laws regulating the ownership of a firearm. The US gun laws are, however, more liberal than other countries gun laws, like Sweden, and the control system is not as organized and rigorous as it is in Sweden.

In discussing reforms in the American gun laws, Sweden can be a great role model in both discussing its gun laws, as well as the obligations which a physician has toward his patients in regard to mental ill-health and firearm possession. If

reforms in the question of gun laws are bureaucratically difficult or not have the proper political support, at least the policymakers of the country should focus on some reforms with regard to patients with mental ill-health, high risk for suicide and firearm possession.

Even though suicide prevention is vivid in US health care policies, it is an undoubtful fact that

without any reforms in foremost gun laws of the country, any work and any actions in the field of suicide prevention will unfortunately be without any significant effect.

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