



# Guns key to senior suicide problem

By Marshall Kapp

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Gun control: Obama 'can't do it alone,' says Ambassador 09:05

## Story highlights

This week is National Suicide Prevention Week

Marshall Kapp: Senior suicide a big problem in America

**Editor's Note:** Marshall Kapp is director of the Florida State University Center for Innovative Collaboration in Medicine and Law. The views expressed are his own.

**(CNN)**—Most people have a vision of what they want their lives to be like when they retire -- more family time, new hobbies, travel.

After all, they're called the "golden years" for a reason. But, of course, there are challenges to getting older, ranging from poor health to financial problems. Sadly, for too many seniors who can't see the light at the end of the tunnel -- either because of their circumstances or serious mental impairment -- they seek relief by turning to the barrel of a gun.

Senior suicide doesn't usually make the news, but it is a big problem in America; and one that is particularly pronounced in homes where a gun is present. One in four suicide attempts by seniors are lethal. For these Americans aged 65 and older, firearms account for [72% of all suicide deaths](#).

Let me be clear, my aim is not to infringe on anyone's right to bear arms, but instead arm Americans with the facts of gun ownership and suicide. And the bottom line is this: gun ownership + impulsivity + lethality may well

= death. I'll explain.



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Marshall Kapp

A gun in the home provides almost immediate, unhindered access to a means of suicide. This is especially important to consider as people age. An easily accessible weapon in the home poses a real health risk, especially when coupled with age-related diseases such as Alzheimer's and other dementias. It therefore rests on the shoulders of family and friends to make sure any firearm is either removed from the home or, at the very least, unloaded and safely locked away.

The impulsive nature of many suicides is another part of the equation. In fact, a recent study found that 60% of those who attempted suicide did not plan it. Contrary to popular belief, not all suicides have clear warning signs. That's why it is so important to acknowledge and avert the risks before it's too late.

The relationship between firearms and suicide is significant not only because of their frequent use as a method amongst seniors, but also because of the high lethality of guns. Ninety-one percent of suicide attempts with a gun are lethal. The effect of a firearm is instantaneous and affords the victim no opportunity to rethink his or her decision, or for medical intervention to save the person.

Clearly, we have got to stop avoiding the topic of suicide in America and start talking about it. This is especially true when it comes to seniors, who are rarely the target of awareness campaigns or other suicide prevention efforts. Doctors should counsel senior patients about the risks of guns in the home, something that should be as much a part of a senior's health care conversation as driving, nutrition, and physical activity.

This week marks Suicide Prevention Week, a good time to be talking about these issues, and the smart work being done by organizations like the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence -- which has [released a new report "The Truth about Suicide and Guns"](#) -- that are working to educate Americans about the connection between guns and suicide and to encourage us to talk about it.

Of course, there is one, surefire way to drastically reduce the number of older Americans who die from suicide each year and, simultaneously, make American homes much safer: Keep guns out of the home. Our golden years should be celebrated and lived to the fullest -- but the deadly combination of gun ownership, impulsivity, and lethality is an all too real threat for many seniors. Only by sharing the facts can we discourage people who may use a gun on themselves from keeping one in the house in the first place.

If you or someone you know may be contemplating suicide, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1 (800) 273-8255.



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