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Firearm Access, Storage Practices, and Suicidal Ideation Among California Veterans in 2021

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1 in 3 (36%)

California veterans who lived in a household with a firearm reported that at least one firearm was stored without any locking device (e.g., trigger lock or lockbox).



INTRODUCTION

According to the California Department of Public Health, 583 veterans died by suicide in California in 2020, with 61% of those suicides the result of firearm injuries (62% among males; 25% among females).¹ Access to a firearm and specific storage practices – such as storing a firearm loaded with ammunition and unlocked – are associated with increased suicide risk.^{2,3} Since many policies impacting firearm use and ownership are initiated at the state level, it is important to understand state-specific prevalence of firearm access and firearm storage practices and their intersection with mental health risk factors for suicide. This understanding can inform clinical, public health, and policy efforts to prevent firearm suicides among California’s veteran population.

Questions that were asked of adolescents and adults in the 2021 California Health Interview Survey⁴ included items assessing sociodemographic and military service

characteristics, firearm access, firearm storage practices, health care access, and mental health characteristics relevant to suicide risk. The mental health characteristics include serious psychological distress (Kessler Psychological Distress Scale [K6]),⁵ past-year suicidal ideation, and lifetime suicidal ideation and suicide attempt.

For this fact sheet, we report findings from respondents ages 18 years and older who identified themselves as military veterans and who resided in a household with at least one firearm, such as a pistol, shotgun, or rifle, including those kept in garages, outdoor storage areas, or motor vehicles. Participants were asked not to include “BB guns, starter pistols, or guns that could not fire.” We describe firearm access and storage practices among California veterans overall, then stratify these by whether respondents reported any lifetime suicidal ideation – an important

Exhibit 1 / Demographic and Military Service Characteristics of Veterans Who Reside in Households With Firearms, California, 2021

Characteristic	Prevalence estimate	95% confidence interval (%)
Male	91.4%	88.9–93.8
Age group		
18–34 years	8.6%	5.3–11.9
35–54 years	23.5%	18.8–28.2
55–64 years	16.3%	12.5–20.2
65–74 years	21.5%	17.8–25.2
75 and older	30.1%	26.3–33.9
Latino or Hispanic ethnicity	17.0%	13.3–20.8
Race		
White	80.9%	76.8–84.9
Black or African American	9.8%	6.5–13.2
Asian	5.0%	3.0–7.0
American Indian or Alaska Native	4.0%	2.4–5.6
Other Pacific Islander	0.3%*	0.03–0.6
Native Hawaiian	0.09%*	0.0–0.2
Other	4.8%	2.1–7.6
Marital status		
Married	71.1%	66.7–75.6
Widowed, separated, divorced, lives w/partner	21.8%	17.4–26.2
Never married	7.1%	4.4–9.7
1+ child in household under age 18	17.3%	13.5–21.0
Educational attainment		
Less than high school	3.3%	1.4–5.2
High school, some college, vocational	43.3%	38.9–47.7
College or advanced degree	53.4%	48.8–58.0
Work status last week		
Working at a job/business	41.6%	37.2–46.1
With a job/business, but not at work	2.5%*	1.0–4.0
Looking for work	3.5%	1.7–5.5
Not working	52.4%	47.5–57.3
Any service-connected disability	32.2%	27.9–36.5
Military service era[†]		
Iraq War/Operation Iraqi Freedom	23.9%	17.9–29.8
Afghanistan War/Operation Enduring Freedom	18.2%	13.0–23.4
Gulf War/Operation Desert Storm	20.3%	15.9–24.6
Vietnam War	53.6%	47.8–59.4
Korean War	7.6%	4.1–11.1
World War II	0.9%*	0.0–2.1

Notes: *Estimate is statistically unstable. †Not mutually exclusive.

Total survey respondents included in study=760

Source: 2021 California Health Interview Survey

correlate of future suicide risk.⁶ Estimates are weighted to represent the statewide population of veterans who reside in households with firearms.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Home firearms and firearm storage practices

According to the 2021 CHIS, 5.8% of California adults identified as veterans, and 38.1% of California veterans reported that they resided in a household with a firearm (see Appendix, Exhibit A1). The mean numbers of firearms and handguns in each veteran household were 4.3 and 2.2, respectively. In comparison, 16.3% of California nonveteran adults resided in a household with a firearm. Sociodemographic and military service characteristics among veterans who resided in households with firearms are shown in Exhibit 1.

When asked about firearm storage, approximately one-third (36.0%) of California veterans who lived in a household with a firearm reported that at least one firearm was stored without any locking device (e.g., trigger lock or lockbox), 25.6% reported that at least one was stored loaded with ammunition, and 13.9% reported that at least one was stored loaded with ammunition and without any locking device.

Mental health characteristics and health care access

Among California veterans who resided in households with firearms in 2021, 6.3% reported symptoms consistent with serious psychological distress in the past year, and nearly 1 in 7 (14.1%) said they had ever

seriously thought about dying by suicide. Among those who had ever seriously thought about dying by suicide and resided in a household with firearms, 21.7% reported suicidal ideation in the past year, and 23.3% had ever attempted suicide.

One-fourth of California veterans who resided in households with firearms in 2021 had received care for mental health needs within an emergency department setting (24.4%), and 18.0% reported needing professional help for an emotional, mental health, alcohol, or drug problem in the preceding year. Approximately 1 in 10 had received care from a primary care clinician (7.8%) or other professional (11.8%) for an emotional, mental health, alcohol, or drug problem in the preceding year.

Mental health and firearm storage practices

Of California veterans who resided in households with firearms and reported any lifetime suicidal ideation, 18.4% said that at least one household firearm was currently stored loaded with ammunition and without any locking device (Exhibit 2).

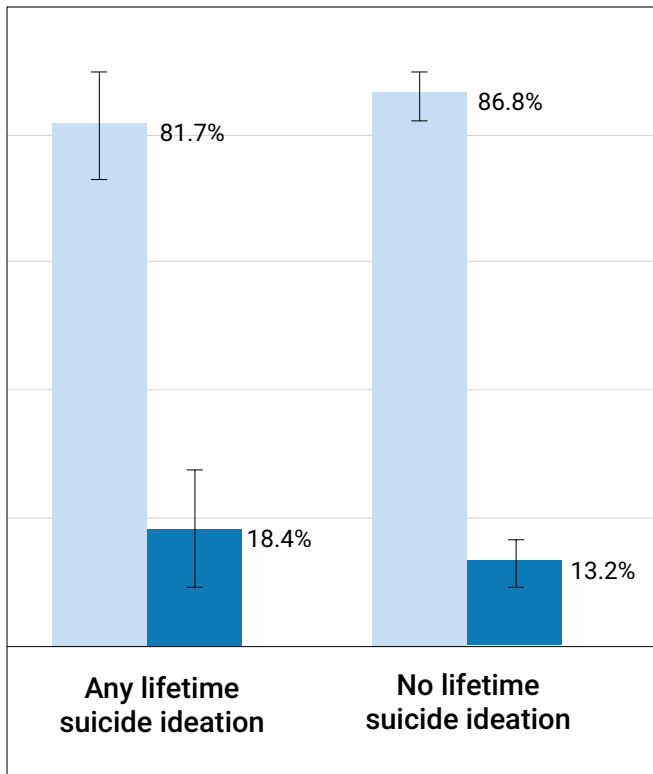
Among California veterans who resided in households with firearms in 2021, nearly

1 in 7 (14.1%)

seriously thought about dying by suicide.

Exhibit 2 / Firearm Storage Practices by Presence of Lifetime Suicidal Ideation Among Veterans in Households With Firearms, California, 2021

■ No loaded and unlocked firearms in household ■ Loaded and unlocked firearms in household



Confidence intervals (in parentheses): 18.4% (9.7–27.0); 81.7% (73.0–90.3); 13.2% (9.7–16.7); 86.8% (83.3–90.3)

Source: 2021 California Health Interview Survey

IMPLICATIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

In 2021, 38.1% of California veterans reported living in a household with a firearm. In comparison, 16.3% of California nonveteran adults reported living in a household with a firearm during the same time period, and in 2015, nearly half of veterans nationally reported living in a household with a firearm.⁷

Of California veterans residing in households with firearms, 13.9% reported that at least one firearm was stored loaded with ammunition and unlocked – double the prevalence compared with nonveterans in California (6.8%).⁸ Programs to educate, encourage, and facilitate secure storage of household firearms – such as providing free or discounted locking devices or reducing barriers to accessing out-of-home storage options – will be important for reducing the risk of suicide or other firearm injuries among both veteran and nonveteran populations.

Findings from the 2021 CHIS also demonstrate a substantial need for mental health and substance-related services for veterans: Almost 1 in 5 veterans (18.0%) who resided in households with firearms reported needing professional help in the preceding year for such care, and 14.1% reported having seriously considered dying by suicide at some point in their life. Of the latter group, almost 1 in 5 reported that they lived in a household with at least one firearm that was stored loaded with ammunition and unlocked. Future work is needed to determine how best to align Veterans Affairs (VA) and non-VA clinical care systems to improve access to mental health services and align them with ongoing parallel efforts to promote voluntary, secure firearm storage among at-risk veterans.

Disclosures

The contents of this work are the authors' sole responsibility and do not necessarily represent the official views of any of the authors' or contributors' funders or employers.



The California Health Interview Survey covers a wide array of health-related topics, including health insurance coverage, health status and behaviors, and access to health care. It is based on interviews conducted continuously throughout the year with respondents from more than 20,000 California households. CHIS interviews were offered in English, Spanish, Chinese (both Mandarin and Cantonese), Vietnamese, Korean, and Tagalog. CHIS is designed with complex survey methods requiring analysts to use complex survey weights in order to provide accurate variance estimates and statistical testing. CHIS is a collaboration of the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, the California Department of Public Health, the California Department of Health Care Services, and the Public Health Institute. For funders and other information on CHIS, visit chis.ucla.edu.

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Endnotes

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