Executive Summary

As participants in a year-long Convergence dialogue, we advised on the strategies included in this report in service of our common goal—preventing firearm suicide. Convened as a cross-sector, cross-partisan group, we’ve forged trust, deepened mutual understanding, and identified solutions to address this urgent issue.

We come from a broad spectrum of backgrounds, perspectives and experiences. We come from rural and urban America. We hold a wide range of policy views. Our group includes individuals from gun rights and responsibilities advocacy groups, the gun industry, suicide prevention groups, gun violence prevention advocacy groups, mental health and medical practitioners, researchers, faith leaders, and those with a range of important personal connections to this issue. Among us are leaders and groups with opposing views and, in some cases, our organizations have not had meaningful, constructive interactions prior to this dialogue process. But we recognized America needs a different and better conversation on guns, and we are losing far too many of our friends and neighbors to suicide. In coming together, we sought to listen generously across differences, dig beneath top-line positions to understand underlying reasoning and motivations, and rely on both lived experience and data to find solutions.

We hope this report can demonstrate:

- there are ideas and strategies we believe can meaningfully reduce the number of firearm suicides in our country—a project we agree is both urgent and doable.
- A civil, good faith conversation related to firearms is possible.
- Such a conversation can build empathy, understanding, and a deeper respect for one another even in the face of major disagreements.

Prior to starting this dialogue, Convergence conducted an assessment to determine where this process could add value, see what other good work could be learned from and built on, and find where the issue was “stuck” and in need of collaborative problem-solving. Convergence conducted over 130 interviews and small group discussions including people with widely divergent views and a mix of lived experience. We determined a better and different conversation was needed that meaningfully engaged a range of perspectives. Leaders right, left, center, and apolitical in nature told us people needed time and space to build trust through a process devoid of standard issue talking points, out of the glare of political debates and inclusive of heterodox voices. As our assessment progressed and themes began emerging, we determined that a dialogue on preventing firearm suicide, the majority of gun deaths in the United States and on the rise over the past 20 years, held real potential for impact and was most achievable in this contentious issue space.
In the course of our research and ensuing dialogue we identified a set of shared facts the group could build upon. While the full report below includes a list of findings, we highlight some of those core facts here. While there was apparently a modest decrease in the total number of suicides in the United States in 2020, the trendline has been a roughly 35% increase since 1999. Of all the gun deaths in America each year, approximately 60% are suicides. Further, about half of all suicides in recent years are by firearm. For certain groups, the level of attempts and deaths by suicide is particularly concerning, including veterans and increasing rates for groups like African American youth/young adults, Native populations, and LGBTQ populations.

When it comes to guns and suicide, this group believes we’ve not collectively focused enough attention and scaled solutions that work to substantially move the numbers. Good work is happening, and many programs are underway but much more can be done. Firearm suicides comprise the largest portion of gun deaths each year and yet do not get sufficient attention in the national conversation.

We believe it’s important that this group states loudly and clearly: suicide deaths by firearm are not inevitable. Suicidal ideation and periods of acute crisis are often short in duration and safe practices and well-constructed interventions can save lives. This report highlights a number of programs and interventions doing just that. Both message and messenger matter—we encourage all working on these issues to carefully consider language and we provide some guidance below on terms to use and avoid.

If anyone reading this is struggling or knows someone who is, know that you aren’t alone, and help is available. You can utilize the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1 (800) 273-8255 or text HOME to 741741 to connect with the Crisis Text Line.

All people benefit from attending to their mental health just as they do their physical health. We know suicide may result from a range of factors, including suffering from a mental health crisis. While gun owners are not more likely to experience a suicidal crisis than others, there is an elevated risk when such a crisis occurs. While a variety of means are used by individuals who die by suicide, the lethality is elevated when a firearm is used, with 83 - 90% of firearm suicide attempts resulting in death. Further, we know a suicidal person unable to access a gun does not typically find a different means and the acute period of crisis often passes. Therefore, means matter and that is why our group has focused specifically on a range of innovative ways to prevent firearm suicide. Evidence shows that heightened awareness, lethal means safety training, safe storage, and training of intervenors are some of the ways to prevent these deaths, as creating time and distance between a person in crisis and lethal means can save lives.

One of the themes from this dialogue was that both message and messenger matter in terms of effective prevention. While many individuals, professionals, and organizations have a role, we believe that gun owners must be an essential part of identifying,
implementing, and promoting solutions that work. The inclusion of these voices in public health initiatives, programs, and research efforts to prevent firearm suicide can ground and will improve such efforts. Interventions that include a range of inputs, including the lived experience of gun owners, are critical to saving lives.

Our group sought not to stigmatize or blame but to build understanding among gun owners and non-gun owners, recognizing the individuals who comprise these groups include a wide range of cultural identifications and are hardly of one geography, gender, income group, race, sexual orientation, or identity. We cannot characterize either group with sweeping, simplistic terms or labels, especially as the demographic make-up of those choosing to own and not own guns continues to evolve and diversify.

Despite our many differences there is one fundamental truth: we all want to prevent firearm suicide and want any person struggling with suicidal ideation to receive competent care, support, and resources. We worked hard to avoid the pitfalls of well-worn debates that fall back on generalizations, which alienate those from differing backgrounds and perspectives. We discussed some statutory and regulatory actions to build understanding even when we couldn’t reach full agreement. We advised on several important strategies outlined in this report, as well as cautions about things that don’t work. They are summarized here:

- **The possibility that a dialogue such as ours can be expanded**, thus using the process that shaped and informed this group to engage others in a collaborative problem-solving approach.

- **The findings and learnings included here**, which include important data on lethal means, information on gun ownership, consideration of elevated or increasing suicide rates within certain populations and demographics, the importance of language and framing, and moving away from harmful and often incorrect stereotypes allowed participants to show up with their full and complex perspectives.

- **Leading examples of best practices and promising programs**, including grassroots efforts and innovative ways for gun owners to increase awareness, engage in safer in-home and voluntary out-of-home storage opportunities in moments of crisis, as well as models that promote and allow for safe storage practices that address risk.

- **A call for increased funding, both public and philanthropic, that can prevent firearm suicide** by supporting promising, innovative programs built on established principles and those with evidence-informed track records.

- **A call for improvement and greater sophistication around evaluation of these programs**, recognizing the complexity and difficulty of assessing prevention programs of many kinds, not just those focused on firearm suicide.
• Highlighting the work of a range of groups, especially in the firearms community, to expand their reach and scope through powerful and growing partnerships.

• A call for a significant expansion of public and philanthropic research investments to study suicide, firearms, and suicide prevention strategies via partnerships with scientists, clinicians, consumers of mental health services, those with a range of lived experience, gun owners, and others.

• A call for new education campaigns around lethal means and suicide focused on credible messages and messengers, including work with a diverse mix of groups such as faith communities, affinity groups, doctors and mental health providers, and spaces utilized by gun owners to reach them with information on safety practices and how to access mental health resources. We want to bolster existing efforts and fill gaps to reach more people, including guidance on inclusive language to use and harmful practices to avoid.

We invite you to consider these ideas and take action in your own sphere of influence to save lives. We also invite leaders from the worlds of advocacy and policy, philanthropy, health care, community- and faith-based work, and other important sectors to recognize this type of collaborative problem-solving can lead to worthwhile, durable solutions. Join us in the work ahead as we seek to significantly reduce firearm suicide in the United States.
Footnotes


iv Ibid.


