

Disseminating Suicide Safety Information in Gun Shops: A Pilot Study Year Two

Report provided to the Colorado State Office of Suicide Prevention

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Report prepared by

Susan E. Becker, Ph.D.

Colorado Mesa University

Summary:

Firearms are the most prevalent means used to cause death by suicide. Colorado pilot tested promotional and educational materials designed to promote suicide safety among gun owners and retailers. This research evaluates usage and effectiveness of the materials on customers and owners and proposes improvements to the program for expansion.

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For Inquiries: sbecker@coloradomesa.edu

Project Justification:

The Rocky Mountain west has among the highest suicide rates in the country. Colorado is unusual among those states for having a relatively large population concentrated in urban and suburban settings where resources are more available for prevention and intervention of suicide. Despite these resources, Colorado ranks number 6 among the states with the highest suicide rates (CDCP, 2012). The suicide death rate in Colorado was 19.7 in 2012, which was the highest rate to date (Colorado Department of Public Health & Environment, 2013).

Firearms are the most common and lethal means of suicide resulting in death with 91% of suicide attempts using firearms resulting in death (Miller, Azrael & Hemenway, 2004). Rosen (2016) reports that states with high gun ownership have rates of suicide by gun of 3.8 times higher than states with low levels of gun ownership. A large epidemiological study demonstrated a clear link between gun ownership and higher suicide rates overall and at the state level, where the percent of households with gun ownership is directly linked to the individual risk of suicide. (Kposowa, 2013). Lewiecki and Miller (2013) report that fifty-five percent of suicide attempts are impulsive and not preceded by much planning. Accessible firearms therefore present an available means of suicide where forethought and planning would not necessarily be required. For example, Watkins and Lizotte (2013) report that adolescents who had access to firearms were 1.5 times more likely to attempt suicide than teens who did not have access. While men in their middle years have higher suicide death rates, concerns over firearms extend to youth as well.

While legislating changes to gun laws and purchase waiting periods is one possible response to this clear link, there is significant public resistance to gun control in most western and Rocky Mountain states. Increasing public awareness of the risks of suicide by firearm is a more achievable step to reducing risk. First attempted in New Hampshire, the gun shop project is intended to reduce risk by providing awareness and prevention information through locations where guns and ammunition are purchased. Providing the gun owning public information that 1) increases awareness about the risk of guns being used for suicide and 2) providing basic suicide prevention information is the primary purpose of this project.

The Colorado State Office of Suicide Prevention has pilot tested this project developed as a grassroots program designed to inform the gun owning public by delivering educational materials to shops where firearms are sold. One lesson learned from the first year pilot study is that the materials need to be clear in their focus on gun safety, and not anti-gun in any way. It is also important to emphasize the grassroots nature of the project and de-politicize the materials as much as possible since conflicting political messages can interfere with the acceptability of the materials (Lawrence & Birkland, 2004). These materials include information for shop owners and employees, suicide prevention lifeline cards and a gun safety rules rack card for customer use, and an awareness poster to be displayed in the store. The rack card and lifeline cards (wallet size) are presented in a card holder for the convenience of the shop owners and to present a professional look.

Method:

Each county that participates has local coordinators who visit with the shops, shooting ranges and other places where gun owners may congregate (Gun clubs and hunter safety classes for example). They bring the materials, explain to the owners and/or managers about the project, answer any questions they may have, and hopefully gain agreement to display materials in the place of business.

The evaluation data were collected during a one-month follow-up interview with shop owners and managers and included both quantitative and qualitative aspects of their responses to the promotional materials as well as any perceived impact on customers. In addition, the evaluators checked for the presence of the materials and spoke to employees as well as the contact owner or manager, where relevant. The purposes of the program evaluation data are to both refine the promotional materials and to explore attitudes and beliefs of gun shop owners that would impact use and dissemination of the materials.

Results:

Nine counties participated in this second year pilot study. Thirty-eight shops and other relevant organizations were contacted; 24% were Pawn Shops, 24% Sporting Goods Stores, 24% Gun Shops, and 29% were Shooting Ranges and Gun Clubs and other miscellaneous. County Project Coordinators contacted these shops between April and June of 2016 with follow-up data being collected approximately one month after the initial visit. Situations varied so that in some counties follow-up was also conducted by the coordinators while in other counties follow-up was conducted by different people in order to increase the honesty of the responses and reduce bias, where possible.

Feedback from County Coordinators

County Coordinators provided narrative feedback about their visits with shop owners/managers in order to begin the process of identifying best practices in disseminating information and gaining effective buy-in for the project. It was believed to be important to emphasize the grass roots nature of this project by distancing the state office from contact with the shops, ranges, etc. What follows is a summary of their feedback.

Several coordinators noted that these conversations can be challenging and that the ability to debrief with someone was important. Staying calm, focused and professional during the conversations was also identified as important. It was also noted that focusing on the grassroots nature of the project helped to reduce defensiveness in those who felt more targeted or that this was a gun control type program. In the county where the local mental health agency was the organization that supported the project, they did meet resistance on the part of an owner/manager who had a bad experience with the organization. It might be a good recommendation that a more informal county prevention type organization be utilized (or created) to create distance from official entities. Several coordinators also noted the value of subsequent follow up with

owners/managers to both resupply and see how things are going, as well as thanking them for their contribution to suicide prevention in the community. This should be a part of the protocol.

Evaluation Feedback

Initially, evaluators looked around the shop and spoke with an available employee who may or may not have been the contact manager/owner. They recorded the presence or absence of the materials and solicited brief feedback from the employees where relevant. Table 1 shows that materials were present and on display in 76% of the shops, and demonstrates the breakdown by type of material and the change from the previous pilot year. The use of a professional rack card/wallet card display meant the two materials for customers were displayed together and reduced the tendency of the managers to not display the lifeline cards due to their own discomfort with the topic of suicide which may have happened in the prior year (2015). Some comments presented later will show that possible discomfort still may influence the use of materials.

Table 1. Presence of Materials

Material	2016 Rate	2015 Rate	% Change
Elk or Shooting Range Poster	68%	56%	12%
Rack Cards	76%	48%	28%
Lifeline Cards	76%	40%	36%

In the shops where there were employees as well as the owner/manager, employee feedback was also solicited. The majority of employees were aware of all the materials, including 95% who were aware of the employee information Tip Sheet. Many said it was displayed in the employee break areas, typically on a bulletin board. This was a big change from the previous year where many shop owners did not know what to do with the non -customer materials and employees were not typically aware. Ninety-seven percent of the employee comments about the materials were positive, including those who were not able to display the materials to customers because of corporate issues. Only two concerns were voiced by employees; that the materials might be construed as an anti-gun campaign and that it is a sensitive subject (suicide).

Evaluators next requested to talk with the manager/owner (respondent) and proceeded to interview them about their opinions on the materials. These interviews were conducted at the respondent's convenience, with the ability to take breaks to wait on customers or other business as needed. 65% of the respondents were male and 61% between the ages of 45 and 64. The majority (87%) recalled the materials and 68% reported that they were making use of the materials in their shop, which is a 4% increase over the prior year. They were asked about any customer impressions of the materials they observed. Table 2 shows a representative selection of comments made by the respondent about customer responses to the materials.

Table 2. Customer Responses to Materials

Positive Customer Impressions*	Negative Customer Impressions*
<i>"A customer noted it was a good thing to have."</i>	<i>"Very mixed- people are concerned they are too political"</i>
<i>"People who accepted the information say they will read it"</i>	<i>"Poster is too wordy"</i>
<i>"Thanked me for posting"</i>	<i>"Most People don't look, the materials are inconspicuous"</i>
<i>"Made a lot of people stop and look"</i>	

* As reported by the owner/manager

Evaluators then asked owners/managers, "What do you think are some concerns shops may have about displaying these materials?" First an open ended answer was solicited and then respondents were given some choices. The most common open ended response was that they would be unable to put them (the materials) up for customers because of a corporate policy. Table 3 shows the response rate for the provided concerns.

Table 3. Concerns that Prevent the Display of Materials

Concern	Yes*	No
Materials won't prevent suicide	24%	76%
Materials could strike customers as anti-gun	30%	70%
Suicide is difficult to talk about	41%	59%
Suicide is a private matter and not other's business	12.5%	87.5%
Wouldn't want to embarrass customers	15%	85%
Don't want to scare customers away from a sale	23%	77%
Materials are inconvenient and take up space	35%	65%

*Percent based on those who were asked these questions. 29% of respondents were not asked.

"Suicide is difficult to talk about" was the most common concern that might prevent the display of materials, followed closely by "materials are inconvenient and take up space". Take together they may explain the relative popularity of the rack cards which focus on gun safety with a brief mention of suicide, compared to the poster and lifeline cards which more directly discuss suicide.

Respondent impressions of the specific materials may clarify some of these concerns further.

By summing the number of concerns, we found that on average shops had 1.76 concerns (median of 2). Further comparison showed that Sporting Goods stores (M = 3.75) and Gun Club's (M = 3.00) had the highest average number of concerns overall.

Feedback on Poster

Thirty-two of the possible 38 shops responded to these questions. The reason for missing data was not indicated on the response forms.

Forty-seven percent of the shops put up the poster, a 3% percent increase over the prior year.

Twenty-one percent stated that they would not be putting up the poster, which was a 5% increase

over the prior year. The reason for both of these numbers increasing is that the prior year's follow-up included a number of shops where they had not made a decision about the materials even at follow-up, so the undecided group has decreased compared to the prior year. Despite utilizing the most popular poster from the previous year's pilot study, responses to the poster are still quite mixed. Customer impressions seemed positive according to the respondents, with 10.5% reporting positive responses. Table 4 lists a representative sample of comments provided by the respondents about the poster.

Table 4. Owner/Manager Comments about Poster

"If it helps save a life, worth having up."
"People seem to appreciate it and read it."
"Poster is too big, would post if smaller, had room."
"Too many words. Picture isn't related to topic."
"Too wordy. Looks like a hunting poster. Took down."

Feedback about Gun Safety Rack Cards

The average number of rack cards taken during the interval between first visit and follow-up was 6.57 with a range from zero to 50. The sites appeared to vary widely in their use of rack cards from giving one out with every purchase to not having them where customers could access them easily due to limitations of counter space, etc. Feedback on the rack cards was very positive, with 68.4 percent having them on display and 10.5 percent stating that they do not plan to use them. This represents a 24% increase over the prior year. The primary reason given for not having them on display to customers was that they were not allowed due to corporate policies. Reported customer feedback was 26% positive and 8% mixed. Table 5 lists the general comments and reasons for no use given regarding the rack cards.

Table 5. Owner/Manager Comments about the Gun Safety Rack Cards

General Comments	Reasons for No Use
<i>"I like the safety rules"</i>	<i>"Corporate said no"</i>
<i>"Happy to display them next to cash register."</i>	<i>"Not going to force on people"</i>
<i>"Safety rules posted throughout club"</i>	<i>"Used in office. Too many materials, not important."</i>
<i>"People are taking them, need more."</i>	<i>"Only using in breakroom"</i>

Feedback about Lifeline Cards

Display of Lifeline Cards dramatically increased over the previous year, with 60.5% of the managers reporting display to customers, which is a 20.5% increase over the prior year. Customer response was 26% positive and 8% mixed. Only 5.3% of the managers say they include them with sales, which is lower than for the rack cards. It is reasonable to conclude that the dramatic increase in

use is at least partly due to the pairing of the rack cards and lifeline cards in the display holder. The average reported use of the lifeline cards was 3.43 with many shops reporting zero usage, or not knowing for sure. Several comments were made about the sensitivity of the information and giving people the right to take it or not, and to not embarrass the customer who is looking at the suicide prevention material. A couple respondents noted that the display was located next to the cash register due to space, and expressed concern about the privacy of the customer in taking suicide prevention materials. Table 6 lists the general comments and reasons for no use given about the lifeline cards.

Table 6. Owner/Manager Comments about the Lifeline Cards

General Comments	Reasons for No Use
<i>"Good thing to have displayed."</i>	<i>"Corporate said no."</i>
<i>"People are awkward about taking"</i>	<i>"Free Information, not going to force on people."</i>
<i>"Seems customers are more willing to take than rack cards"</i>	<i>"Owner doesn't want them"</i>
<i>"Hope they take them to learn more about suicide prevention"</i>	<i>"Intrusion to customer, if they want they will get while there." (not provide with sale)</i>

Conclusions:

Year 2 of the Gun Shop pilot project once again provided valuable information about both the materials and method of delivery. Firstly, there were clear gains in usage of the rack cards and lifeline cards over the previous year. The polishing of the materials, the professional look of the holder and the pairing of both rack card and lifeline card in the holder contributed to these gains, as well as the probable improvement in the "sales pitch" by the county representatives. There are still some concerns about the nature of the message, though there were far fewer comments about materials being "anti-gun" than in the prior year. The most well received material was the Gun Safety Rack Card, which was viewed most favorably by employees, managers and owners and customers (as reported by respondents) and was most likely to be included with sales.

In contrast to year one, the Tip Sheet was also very favorably received. This may be due to the simplification of the presentation materials to employees and managers, with only the tip sheet and an introductory letter being given, in addition to the materials for customer use. Also in contrast to year one, the poster was actually less favorably received. There were several unique (from more than one shop) comments about the poster being too wordy and too large for the available space. Shops were pleased about the display case for materials, and thought that the overall look was much more professional. Some of the non-shop environments were not happy with the display container, probably due to a lack of counter space or other display options.

In terms of presentation of materials during the initial visit, it seems that overall presenters did a better job, with more clarity about the purpose of both the project and the materials. This was

most evident in counties that participated in year one. This suggests some benefit of practice that might be helpful as the project rolls out to more communities.

Recommendations:

For the statewide rollout, there are several suggestions for possible improvement, both to the initial presentation of materials, and to the materials themselves.

Changes to Materials

There are three suggestions for improving the appearance and use of the materials:

1. Reformat the poster with a more straightforward message and less small print (one manager suggested something similar to the bus shelter program) and have an 8 ½" x11" option for shops that don't have as much room.
 - a. Cleaner simpler message
 - b. Photo that's more relevant to the issue. Seemed like too much about hunting – particularly for more urban communities. One suggestion was a person alone in a natural setting.
 - c. Smaller poster size option
2. Develop a bulletin board display option for the rack card/lifeline card display, for settings where they do not have counter space available. This would also solve the issue of privacy for some customers, so they might feel more comfortable taking information if the sales staff can't see them take it as was mentioned in the lifeline card discussion.
3. Develop advertising materials targeting gun owners in a broader scope, so that the roll out is not just through shops, ranges, and classes.
 - a. One coordinator suggested to think about levels of the campaign: Public level, the shop level, and the individual level.

Presentation of Materials

1. Practice the conversation with colleagues first as a dry run.
2. Contact shops before visit to find out best time or make an appointment to bring materials and speak with the contact person.
3. Let shops know broader context of prevention programs in community so they don't feel targeted.
4. Send thank you letter after feedback collected offering more materials when needed and thanking for feedback. Can also utilize further follow-up visits to check in.
5. Collect email for contact person to further follow up with information or other feedback.
6. Offer the alternative that rack cards and lifeline cards can be included with every sale, and/or at customer discretion

7. The contact list could include any shop where ammunition is sold even if guns are not. And hunter safety classes – perhaps only a subset of materials +gun lock?
8. State office needs to identify and respond to corporate level intervention for some shops (Gene Taylor, Cabelas, Walmart, Murdoch's)

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