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A DISTINCTION WITHOUT A DIFFERENCE

An epidemic of officer suicide raises the question: do guns cause violence?

For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. Friday, June 14 was a very bad day for cops in the Big Apple. That date marked [the third occasion this month](#) in which a member of the force – in this tragic case, a 29-year old officer with six years on the job – would commit suicide with a gun.

NYPD suffered four officer suicides in 2018, and four so far this year. Alarming, this month's three took place within a single ten-day period. Reacting to the crisis, NYPD Commissioner James P. O'Neill [called on his colleagues](#) to use and promote the use of mental health resources:

This is a mental-health crisis. And the NYPD & the law enforcement profession as a whole absolutely must take action. We must take care of each other; we must address this issue - now...There is no shame in seeking assistance from the many resources available, both inside and outside the department. Accepting help is never a sign of weakness - in fact, it's a sign of great strength. Please, connect yourself or your friends and colleagues to the assistance that is so close by.

Officer suicide is by no means a new phenomenon. Yet it's never been officially tracked. (The FBI's yearly [Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted](#) report only includes deaths due to criminal activity.) However, in 2016 the nonprofit "[Blue Help](#)" began systematically collecting information about episodes of police and correctional officer suicide. According to its website there were 142 officer suicides in 2016, 169 in 2017, 167 in 2018 and 92 so far this year. To compare, the FBI's most recent LEOKA report indicates that 46 law enforcement officers were feloniously killed in 2017, all but four by firearms. BlueHelp doesn't presently publish manner of death, but firearms are presumably the predominant instrument in suicides as well.

Why do cops and correctional officers kill themselves? [Suicide-prevention organizations](#) and the professional and academic communities tend to emphasize the unique stressors of the criminal justice workplace. Here, for example, is what the [NIJ Journal](#) has said:

Be it an officer patrolling a high-crime neighborhood in a big city, a small-town cop responding to a bar fight, or a homicide detective arriving at the scene of a

multiple murder, the common factor in their jobs is stress. They work in environments where bad things happen...The same is true of corrections officers [who] work in confined societies that are, by definition, dangerous. The stress levels are so high that, in one study, 27 percent of officers reported symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Suicide isn't just a problem in law enforcement. According to the [Centers for Disease Control](#) it's the tenth leading cause of death in the U.S. What drives individuals to end their own lives? In a recent online article, "[Suicide Rising Across the U.S.](#)," the CDC cited seven reasons: relationship problems, substance use, personal crises, physical health problems, job/financial problems, criminal-legal problems and loss of housing. Guns got little play. While one table indicates that guns were used in 41 percent of suicides with mental health issues, and 55 percent where none were known to exist, they are explicitly mentioned only once, in a suggestion to safely store "medications and firearms to reduce access among people at risk."

It's not just the Feds who seem reluctant to put the onus on guns. "[Promising Strategies for Advancement in Knowledge of Suicide Risk Factors and Prevention](#)," a 2014 article in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine, identified seventeen factors, including gender, occupation, personality disorders, financial stress and maltreatment in childhood. Firearms didn't come up until the very last risk: "access to lethal means" (meaning, guns and pesticides.) The message that gun availability is but one of many hazards (and not necessarily the most pressing) seemed perfectly clear.

Yet as CDC data clearly indicates, firearms [are by far the most common means](#) of suicide. In 2017, guns were responsible for about fifty-one percent (23,854) of the 47,173 suicides recorded that year. Suffocation came in second at 13,075. Poisoning, at 6,554, was third. (For a table grouped by age click [here](#)).

Gun ownership and suicide rates are also closely linked. [A 2008 Harvard study](#) reported that the nine states lowest in gun ownership were also the nine lowest in suicide, and that the three with the most gun ownership were among the four [with the most suicides](#). A comprehensive study of [gun ownership and suicide between 1981-2013](#) found "a strong relationship between state-level firearm ownership and firearm suicide rates among both genders, and a relationship between firearm ownership and suicides by any means among male, but not female, individuals." And [a recent study of youth suicide](#) reported that for each ten-percent increase in households with guns, suicide among the young increased nearly 27 percent.

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Gun violence, of course, goes way beyond suicide. According to [the FBI](#), there were 16,617 murders and non-negligent manslaughters in 2017. [Guns were used](#) in 72.6 percent of these killings – about three in every four. [Firearms were also used](#) to commit 118,745 robberies (about 41 percent of the 319,356 reported that year) and 95,194 out of 741,756 aggravated assaults, or about one in every four.

Compared to other wealthy Western-style democracies, America seems a uniquely violent place. [A yearly global report](#), summarized by [NPR](#), revealed that in 2017 America's gun violence death rate of 4.43 per 100,000 pop. was fully nine times that of Canada and an astounding twenty-nine times higher than peaceable Denmark's.

Gun-control advocates argue that America's infatuation with firearms has created a toxic environment. Here, for example, is [Everytown for Gun Safety's](#) introduction to its sobering statistical compendium:

Every day, 100 Americans are killed with guns and hundreds more are shot and injured. The effects of gun violence extend far beyond these casualties—gun violence shapes the lives of millions of Americans who witness it, know someone who was shot, or live in fear of the next shooting.

But enough with numbers. Let's give the problem a bit of real life (and death). Below are four of the gun-violence related headlines that appeared on the main page of the *L.A. Times* website on June 20. (It's simply the day your blogger happened to look. Links were copied on the 21st., so wording may slightly differ):

- [“Sacramento police officer dies after shooting during domestic call”](#)
- [“Mass shooting leaves ten wounded outside Allentown, PA nightclub”](#)
- [“Two people killed in shootings near South L.A.”](#)
- [“Parents wounded by LAPD officer who killed their son still hospitalized”](#)

Here are two more found on June 26:

- [“San Jose man killed 4 in rage over visas before turning gun on himself, family member says”](#)
- [“2 workers, gunman dead at Bay Area car dealership”](#)

While some interventions seem to hold promise (see, for example, [“Red Flag at Half Mast, Part II”](#)) [“means restriction”](#) – that is, reducing access to potential instruments of violence like guns – is the international gold standard in suicide reduction. Given what's known, it's a relatively small leap to argue that limiting access to guns would sharply reduce violence of all sorts. That's what Great Britain did after the [Hungerford](#)

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[Massacre](#). And why Great Britain, Australia, Japan and Norway [enjoy freedom from the carnage](#) that Americans tolerate as the cost of, well, being American.

But we're not Great Britain. In the U.S., the proliferation of firearms, and the spectacular increase in their lethality, have dramatically affected the sociopolitical landscape. It's changed the rules and assumptions that shape social interaction and altered the very nature of our existence. When an off-duty LAPD police officer shopping with his family at a Costco [feels impelled to respond](#) to an assault with a barrage of gunfire (and in so doing, not only kills his unarmed, mentally disturbed assailant but critically wounds both of the man's parents, also unarmed) we know something really, really bad has happened.

A threshold has been crossed. Guns *cause* violence. They're not just "enablers" anymore.