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Gun retailers as storage partners for suicide prevention: what barriers need to be overcome?

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Abstract

Introduction—Safe storage of guns outside the household while someone is at risk for suicide is important for suicide prevention. Some gun retailers offer temporary firearm storage as a community resource. Others may be willing if perceived barriers can be addressed.

Methods—We invited all gun retailers in eight Mountain West states to respond to a questionnaire about the barriers they perceive in offering temporary, voluntary gun storage for community members.

Results—Ninety-five retailers responded (25% response rate). Fifty-eight percent believed federal laws make it harder to store guns and 25% perceived state laws to be obstacles. Over 60% cited legal liability in storing and returning guns as barriers. Other important barriers included cost, space and logistical issues of drop off and pick up.

Conclusions—Strategies to reduce legal and other barriers will need to be addressed to better engage gun retailers as a community resource for safe gun storage.

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INTRODUCTION

Approximately half of the 44 193 suicide deaths in 2015 in the USA involved firearms.¹ Public health researchers and healthcare providers have increasingly emphasised the importance of safe storage of firearms by recommending temporary storage away from the household when someone in the home is at risk of suicide.^{2–4} Gun retail establishments may be a potential resource in the community for such temporary safe storage as they have knowledge of gun safety and transfer laws, have relationships with gun owners and already have storage facilities for the firearms they sell.

Gun retailers have demonstrated willingness to participate in suicide prevention efforts.⁵ For example, the New Hampshire Gun Shop Firearm Coalition found that about half of gun shops in their state were engaged in a campaign to display suicide prevention project materials.³ There are many more grass-roots efforts across at least 20 other states engaging gun shops as partners in suicide prevention.^{6,7}

For storage by gun retailers to be a feasible alternative to storing at home, it is crucial to understand both what makes gun retailers willing to store and also what barriers exist that reduce willingness.⁸ We examine the perceived barriers that influence gun retailers' willingness to provide temporary storage of firearms, focusing on their perceptions of laws (eg, background checks), liability (eg, determining when guns are safe to return) and logistical barriers (eg, space). This information can inform further efforts to enhance partnerships between public health and gun retailers.

METHODS

As detailed in Runyan *et al*, we conducted a cross-sectional survey of gun retailers in eight Mountain West states (Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming).⁸ We mailed the 24-item questionnaire to 601 eligible retailers with a storefront (eg, not doing business out of a home), as determined by screening calls to all businesses in our initial sampling frame. We attempted to contact every retailer in the region. Interested participants could respond via mail with a postage-paid self-addressed return envelope or online via a link with a unique ID. We did multiple mailings and included a US\$2 bill as incentive.

We conducted all analyses in SAS V.9.4 (Cary, North Carolina, USA) using weighted survey procedures to represent all 601 eligible retailers in the region. We calculated weights by adjusting for strata-specific non-response; strata were based on the number of employees (1, 2, 3, 4–6, >6) working at the business. As Colorado is currently the only state in our sample with a universal background check law, we combined responses from retailers in other states and compared them to Colorado.^{9,10} We also compared responses of retailers by whether or not they provided temporary storage for customers or community members. We used Wald χ^2 tests for categorical comparisons. The Colorado Multiple Institutional Review Board approved all protocols.

RESULTS

Ninety-five gun retailers in the region responded to the survey (all but six via mail) for a response rate of 25% after adjusting for unknown eligibility/returned mail/non-response. Almost all (96.5%) of the respondents were owners and/or managers; 51.9% had been with the business more than 10 years and an additional 31.2% for 4 to 10 years. Most businesses (82.5%) employed fewer than six employees. Businesses from all eight states were represented. Colorado represented 25.3% of respondents (n=24), Arizona 20.0% (n=19), Idaho 12.6% (n=12), Utah 11.6% (n=11), Montana 10.5% (n=10), Wyoming 8.4% (n=8), New Mexico 7.4% (n=7) and Nevada 4.2% (n=4).

Perception of legal barriers

Though we did not assess actual knowledge of laws, we assessed the extent to which gun retailers perceived that laws affected their ability to offer temporary storage (figure 1). More than half (52.3%) indicated they viewed federal laws as making it somewhat or much harder to store guns. Only 25.0% indicated that state laws would make it harder or much harder and 62.6% reported no effect. These views did not differ depending on whether retailers currently offered storage for federal ($P=0.10$) or state ($P=0.43$) laws. More than 60% of retailers said that legal liability related to both storing and returning the guns was either a major or moderate barrier (figure 2). Perceptions of liability differed significantly by whether or not the retailer offered storage (table 2).

We explored whether perceptions varied by state—a proxy for differing state-level policies. A much greater proportion of Colorado retailers indicated that state laws make it harder to offer temporary storage compared with those in the other seven states (55.7% vs 13.2%, $P<0.001$). While a somewhat greater proportion of Colorado retailers stated that federal laws make it harder to store (61.2% vs 48.9%, $P=0.15$), the difference was not statistically significant (table 1).

Perception of logistical/practical barriers

We explored several potential practical barriers to offering gun storage (figure 2). Over 60% reported a concern about being able to tell if it is safe to return the gun (major or moderate barrier). Storage space and logistics were also seen as at least moderate barriers (55.5% and 51.8%, respectively) and 38.9% indicated cost as a moderate or major barrier. Retailers not offering storage were more concerned about these barriers compared with those who already provided storage, particularly with safely returning the gun (81.4% vs 28.1% cited it as a major barrier, respectively; table 2). Staff training in handling transfer paperwork was noted as a barrier by 40.0% of gun retailers, though 20.1% indicated their staff were already trained.

DISCUSSION

Gun retailers are a potentially important resource for temporary firearm storage when individuals are in crisis. Though we previously reported nearly half of retailers in the region already provided temporary storage and others indicated willingness to consider offering storage,⁸ we found retailers perceived considerable barriers to doing so.

In order to encourage more retailers to offer temporary gun storage, specific elements of state and federal laws need to be clear and widely disseminated. The complexity of these laws may inhibit citizens seeking storage and retailers from offering the service. Given that some retailers did not know how either state or federal laws would affect their ability to store guns highlights the need for additional education and clear guidelines for implementation.

Overall, more retailers were concerned with federal law than state law. This may be because federal law requires a background check for all firearm purchases from licensed dealers. In suicide prevention, a delay in firearm transfer can be problematic because (1) time from suicide ideation to attempt is often very short¹¹ and (2) the perceived inconvenience of a lengthy process may discourage storage. McCourt *et al* proposed including clear statutory provisions for temporary storage by licensed firearm dealers for suicide or violence prevention.⁹ Assessing how such provisions might reduce concerns and encourage retailer engagement will be important.

Retailers had less concern about state laws, possibly because most states in our study had no additional laws affecting temporary transfers (Mccourt *et al* summarises issues by state). The exception is Colorado, which requires background checks for most firearm transfers, including private sales and most unlicensed transfers.^{9,12} The law does provide background check exemptions for temporary transfers of less than 72 hours.¹³ Clarification around how law impact gun retailers and provisions specific to suicide prevention and mental health concerns may reduce perceived barriers to temporary storage.¹⁴

Gun retailers, like many other businesses, operate in a complex legal, liability and regulatory environment. In order to fully realise the potential of partnerships, suicide prevention programmes must be attuned to perceived legal barriers and help clarify ambiguities. Public health should be familiar with and communicate to retailers how relevant laws and regulations could impact their willingness to engage in providing temporary gun storage.

Although laws and liability appear to be the most concerning, retailers identified several important logistical issues that many perceived as major barriers to storing guns (eg, space). Future research should identify how retailers already offering storage overcame such barriers.

Limitations

We included gun retailers in an eight-state region of the west and cannot generalise nationally. Also, we recognise that there is no readily available sampling frame for this population, so we may have under-represented the full spectrum of retailers. Our response rate of 25% may have led to response bias. Weights were adjusted for non-response, but we cannot know all possible sources of bias. Despite these limitations, to our knowledge this is the first study to examine barriers that influence firearm retailers' decisions to offer temporary gun storage, an important part of suicide prevention.

CONCLUSIONS

Gun retailers can be an important resource for suicide prevention by offering temporary gun storage when a person is in crisis and may have implications for other gun-related injuries as well. To encourage partnerships with gun retailers, public health professionals should clarify how state and federal laws relate to temporary transfer of firearms and seek strategies that reduce legal impediments perceived by retailers. Logistical barriers may be easier to overcome if the legal barriers are addressed first and if there is demand for safe storage through referrals from clinicians and public health programmes addressing suicide prevention as well as from the public.

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What is already known on the subject

- ▶ Safe storage outside the home can reduce the risk of suicide when an individual is in crisis.
- ▶ There are numerous efforts across the USA to engage gun retailers as partners in suicide prevention.
- ▶ Many gun retailers have indicated that they would be willing to provide storage.

What this study adds

- ▶ We examine the barriers that may influence a gun retailer's decision to provide temporary storage of guns.
- ▶ Issues surrounding state and federal laws as well as general concerns about liability are barriers for many gun retailers.
- ▶ Addressing these barriers may facilitate partnerships between public health and gun retailers.

Figure 1.

Response from gun retailers in eight states (n=89)* to questions: “To what extent do state/federal laws affect your ability to provide temporary gun storage?” Percentages are based on weighted responses. *Five retailers did not respond to the state question. Six retailers did not respond to the federal question.

Figure 2.

Responses of gun retailers in eight states (n=94*) to the statement: "Other gun shop owners have mentioned several things that might be barriers to offering temporary gun storage. Please tell us about how you feel about each of the possible issues". Percentages are based on weighted responses. *One retailer did not respond to these questions.

Table 1

Perceptions of gun retailers (n=89) about state and federal laws in Colorado compared with seven other states* (percentages are based on weighted responses)

	CO[†] (n=23)	Other states (n=66)	P value[‡]
	Weighted % (95% CI)	Weighted % (95% CI)	
State laws			
Make it much easier	0.0	3.1 (0.0 to 7.3)	<0.001
Make it somewhat easier	0.0	0.0	
No effect one way or another	33.5 (12.2 to 54.8)	73.7 (64.0 to 83.4)	
Make it somewhat harder	19.3 (2.0 to 36.3)	2.1 (0.0 to 5.9)	
Make it much harder	36.4 (15.6 to 57.2)	11.1 (3.9 to 18.4)	
Do not know	10.8 (0.0 to 22.9)	9.9 (4.2 to 15.6)	
	CO[†] (n=23)	Other states (n=67)	P value[‡]
Federal laws			
Make it much easier	0.0	0.0	0.15
Make it somewhat easier	5.6 (0.0 to 16.5)	3.1 (0.0 to 7.1)	
No effect one way or another	22.4 (4.1 to 40.8)	39.5 (28.7 to 50.2)	
Make it somewhat harder	22.4 (3.3 to 41.2)	22.0 (13.0 to 31.0)	
Make it much harder	38.8 (17.6 to 60.1)	26.9 (17.1 to 36.7)	
Do not know	10.8 (0.0 to 22.9)	8.5 (3.4 to 13.7)	

* Five retailers did not respond to the state question. Six retailers did not respond to the federal question; other states include Arizona, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah and Wyoming.

[†] Colorado law differs from other study states partially because (1) a background check is required for all transfers (including private) and (2) there is a 72-hour temporary transfer exemption for the background check statute.

[‡]Wald χ^2 compared weighted percentages of making it harder/somewhat harder to making it easier/somewhat easier/no effect by state.

Table 2

Perceptions about perceived barriers of liability and logistics of gun storage among retailers in eight states who offer storage (Yes) compared with those who do not offer storage (No) * (percentages are based on weighted responses)

	Liability storing [‡]		Liability returning [‡]		Safety returning [§]		Space [¶]		Logistics ^{‡,†}		Cost ^{‡,‡}	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
	n=44 (%)	n=48 (%)	n=44 (%)	n=48 (%)	n=44 (%)	n=48 (%)	n=44 (%)	n=48 (%)	n=44 (%)	n=48 (%)	n=44 (%)	n=48 (%)
No barrier at all	16.4	10.3	12.8	8.9	12.7	2.2	20.8	20.2	24.6	21.5	33.3	30.8
Minor barrier	27.2	8.9	35.4	15.8	45.1	14.2	34.7	12.8	32.8	14.3	35.4	23.3
Moderate barrier	4.7	2.2	17.8	2.2	14.2	2.2	21.6	14.8	23.1	14.9	18.9	8.9
Major barrier	51.8	78.6	33.9	73.1	28.1	81.4	22.9	52.2	19.6	49.4	12.4	37.0
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
P value ^{**}	0.002		<0.001		<0.001		0.01		0.002		0.007	

* Responses of gun retailers from eight states (n=92) to the statement: "Other gun shop owners have mentioned several things that might be barriers to offering temporary gun storage. Please tell us about how you feel about each of the possible issues". One retailer did not respond to the barriers questions and two did not indicate if they offered storage.

[‡] Potential legal liability for the business while storing the guns.

[†] Potential legal liability for the business when returning the guns.

[§] Concern about being able to tell if it is safe to return the gun.

[¶] Having enough space to adequately store the guns.

^{**} Wald χ^2 was used for comparisons.

^{‡,†} Logistics of gun drop-off/pick-up.

^{‡,‡} The cost to the business of providing storage.