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Suicides have prompted some gun ranges to change rules

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By **Matt Rocheleau**

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Suicides at gun ranges — like the apparent double suicide that stunned people at a Massachusetts shooting range last week — are relatively rare occurrences, according to a Harvard researcher who has studied the issue.

But they are a troubling, painful reality and have prompted numerous firing ranges to adopt policies to try to prevent such incidents, said Catherine Barber, an expert on suicide and violent death from the Harvard School of Public Health's Injury Control Research Center.

“Some ranges have had a few of these events, and it’s pretty traumatizing to the staff and whoever was around at the time and, of course, the families,” said Barber.

Barber a few years ago combed through records in the National Violent Death Reporting System, a database maintained by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

She found that, among the 16 states that submit records for the database — including Massachusetts and Rhode Island — there were 51 suicides at a public shooting range in the six-year span from 2005 through 2010.

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Barber acknowledged her analysis may have missed some suicides at gun ranges, noting that she searched for certain key terms within the narratives of the reports and read through them to verify the accounts. She also excluded cases at police firing ranges or at target shooting areas at people's homes. But she said her methodology likely captured most, if not all, cases.

The 51 she tallied accounted for a remarkably small portion — less than two-tenths of a percent — of the 29,528 suicides by firearm in those states during that time.

“It’s a very rare event,” said Barber.

A January 2014 article by the [Orange County Register](#) found that between 2000 and 2012 there were 64 suicides at shooting ranges in Los Angeles, Orange, and San Diego counties in California. California was not included in the analysis Barber did because it does not report such data to the CDC.

But that report, too, described gun range suicides as relatively unusual, noting that there were about 17,800 suicides in those counties during that 12-year period, meaning the ones at gun ranges accounted for less than four-tenths of a percent of the total.

Barber said that in many of the cases she has researched, people who killed themselves at gun ranges went to the location alone and rented the gun.

“Some of them definitely seem to be opportunity-type events where the person is going to the range to gain access to a gun,” she said.

As a result of those patterns, numerous gun ranges around the country have implemented various policies designed to prevent people from trying to take their lives there.

The policies include requiring people who rent guns to be accompanied by someone else at all times or requiring people who want to rent a gun to take a safety training course first, she said.

“For the most part, those policies seem well-targeted to the actual types of events they see there,” said Barber.

Gun ranges have also been the site of fatal accidents, murders, and other violence.

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