



OPA No. 2022-169 • PERSEREC No. RN-22-04 • July 2022

## Incorporating Lethal Means Safety into the Early Military Career Training Pipeline to Mitigate Suicide Risk

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### Introduction

Most military suicides involve firearms, with nearly 70% being caused by self-inflicted gunshot wounds in 2020 (ranging from 64.3% to 79.8% across Service components; DoD, 2021). Importantly, almost all Service members who died by firearm suicide in 2019 used a personally owned firearm (Psychological Health Center of Excellence, 2021). Firearms also constitute the most lethal method of suicide death, with almost 90% of suicidal acts with a firearm resulting in death (Conner et al., 2019). Reducing firearm suicide has become a central focus of prevention efforts for each Service branch, and the White House (2021) has articulated this priority goal in a recent national strategy for reducing military and veteran suicide.

A 2017 Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness memorandum entitled *Guidance on Promoting and Increasing Lethal Means Safety regarding Suicide Prevention* stated that the Services should consider adding suicide prevention into recurring or annual firearms training for their military personnel (DoD, 2017). In 2021, the Defense Suicide Prevention Office tasked the Defense Personnel and Security Research Center (PERSEREC), a division of the Defense Personnel Assessment Center, with developing and evaluating a firearms safety training in the context of suicide prevention. A first step involved conducting formative interviews with military suicide prevention and firearms safety experts. This research note describes the methods used to conduct the interviews and their findings. Additionally, it discusses how PERSEREC used the interview findings to reorient the

study focus from training development to a needs assessment of the early military career training pipeline, and the role firearms safety could play there.

## Method

We invited Service branch-level Suicide Prevention Program Managers (SPPMs) and Violence Prevention Integrators (VPIs), firearms instructors, combat arms instructors, firearm range supervisors, a Prevention Operations program manager, and a Senior Enlisted Leader from the four Services and Special Operations Command to participate in individual or group (for individuals from the same office) interviews. We developed an interview guide (available upon request from the fourth author) and questions tailored to interviewees' roles addressing

- existing firearm suicide prevention training,
- facilitating factors and barriers to integrating suicide prevention content into firearms safety training,
- recommended training content and learning objectives,
- recommended training format, and
- training logistics.

Individuals from Army, Navy, Air Force, and Special Operations Command participated in the interviews. During November and December 2021, we conducted eight remote interviews with a total of 14 participants. We subsequently conducted a content analysis to identify themes mentioned in two or more interviews.

## Results

In this section, we describe interview findings related to settings where training content should be integrated, format for new content, the content itself, content delivery personnel, and training of these personnel.

### Settings Where Training Content Should Be Integrated

Participants in every interview recommended that safe firearms storage should be addressed in early military career settings. For example, one combat arms instructor stated, "If this kind of lethal means training is something we would have to do every year, we might as well start them [Service members] off with that in basic training." Early military career settings mentioned by interviewees as possible places for safe firearms storage education are presented in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**

#### *Early Military Career Settings Recommended for Safe Firearms Storage Education*

Delayed Entry Program	Officer Training School	Reserve Officers' Training Corps
Recruit training	Officer Development School	A School
Technical training school	Officer Candidate School	C School
Accessions training	Service Academies	Select-Train-Educate-Promote program
First Term Airmen Center	Basic Officer Leaders Course	First command

Interviewees recommended and emphasized the benefits of repeating safe firearms storage messages to reinforce initial education and information. For example, one SPPM noted that repetition in boot camp is good for new recruits. Another SPPM stated,

Redundancy would be the training method of this type of training, so its inclusion in the basic training would be good. It's just the seed that would be cultivated throughout. We do a lot of things annually and complain; it's just what we do. Redundancy is good if we are able to reach one person. We groan a lot. But it's very important.

## Format

No interviewees recommended developing a new training to address firearms safety training in the context of suicide prevention. Some advised against it, arguing that there are already too many mandatory trainings and that Service members would not find a new training valuable. Several interviewees provided negative feedback about the prospect of creating another training. For example, one SPPM stated,

Don't do it. There are so many trainings; Service members get the trainings over and over again with the same content. It distracts from other things people have to do; they are not really paying attention. It's checking the block. The DoD does this a lot, so Service members are smart to this happening.

A Combat Arms Training and Maintenance Noncommissioned Officer in Charge/range supervisor agreed, stating, "It is hard to add training on this topic to the schedule, [especially] for people who don't have suicidal tendencies."

Participants in seven of eight interviews suggested adding content to an existing training instead of developing a new training. Interviewees recommended adding content to basic marksmanship training in boot camp, suicide prevention training, resiliency training, combat arms training, and/or firearms certifications.

Instead of training, interviewees recommended focusing on conversations about safe firearms storage. For example, one SPPM said, "We are focused on effective conversations, so that lethal means safety becomes ubiquitous and omnipresent within the culture."

## Content

Interviewees also identified education and information that Service members may need and would be open to receiving. Some SPPMs recommended addressing multiple outcomes that safe storage of firearms could prevent as opposed to just self-harm. An expanded focus, beyond the context of suicide prevention, would address safety more generally. Interviewees recommended focusing on safe storage of firearms to prevent accidents (including among children), theft, assault, domestic violence, as well as suicide risk.

Firearms instructors recommended presenting statistics to Service members about military suicides involving firearms. For example, a combat arms instructor said,

It is important to use statistics. If a person hasn't been around the military, they may not have heard about the role of firearms in Service member suicides. Catch their attention with the numbers. They may not know the statistics within their base or area. The statistics will grab their attention.

A firearms instructor agreed, noting, "It would be good to give statistics on how many Service members do use firearms to commit suicide. Open by presenting facts and providing more information on that."

Some interviewees recommended starting with a clear narrative supporting Service members' Second Amendment rights. For example, a Chief Master Sergeant advised,

Every talking point needs to start with the fact that we do not want to confiscate firearms. You have to start with that right out the gate. You have to defeat that narrative before it starts, stating that we support your

right to keep and bear arms. It is a personal choice. What we are asking for is responsible firearm safety. That is all we are trying to achieve. We want to lengthen the time it takes to make a bad choice that has permanent consequences.

Some interviewees recommended using positive messaging. For example, one SPPM described safe firearm storage messaging from non-military media campaigns that build into the culture of what gun owners should do, instead of focusing solely on suicide avoidance:

One media example that we liked was a video with an older gentleman at a firing range. He is shooting a handgun at a firing range. He talks directly to the camera, and he says he held onto a buddy's guns while his buddy was struggling, and he's glad his buddy is okay now. Then he goes back to shooting. This was a positive example of linking the two concepts.

## Content Delivery Personnel

Two of the three interviews with firearms or combat arms instructors recommended not assigning training delivery about suicide prevention to firearms instructors. A Combat Arms Training and Maintenance Noncommissioned Officer in Charge/range supervisor said, "I don't think that is our job. We should not deliver that training," and a combat arms instructor predicted, "I think there would be pushback."

In addition, we identified the following themes related to potential barriers to integrating suicide prevention content into firearms safety training. Each theme was expressed by one or more firearms or combat arms instructors:

- Some interviewees volunteered information about not locking up their personally owned firearms at home, even though we did not explicitly ask about this.
- Some interviewees expressed concern about possible infringement on Service members' Second Amendment rights.
- Some firearms or combat arms instructors did not believe that locking up firearms would stop individuals from accessing them when in crisis or believed that individuals at risk for suicide would find other lethal means if their firearms were locked.

A Combat Arms Training and Maintenance Noncommissioned Officer in Charge/range supervisor added, "If there are indicators of suicide risk, the commander or first shirt [Supervisor] would not authorize firearms training. So, if a Service member has those indicators, the commander would know." The interviewee also said, "I think if someone wants to commit suicide, they could go get help."

Firearms instructors noted that military firearms training programs do not currently address safe storage of firearms at home. Instead, military firearms training focuses on storage room procedures on base. For example, a firearms instructor stated, "The only thing we discuss in terms of weapon storage is the process of drawing out arms, how we sign out of the storage room, where we keep them." A combat arms instructor agreed, saying, "The combat arms firing instructors read a brief. Locking up firearms at home is not a part of their combat arms training program."

Some SPPMs recommended that medical personnel, psychologists, VPIs, installation-level SPPMs, and/or staff skilled in discussing emotions deliver information about this topic. Other interviewees suggested that content delivery personnel should be familiar with firearms and their operation, so that Service members perceive them as credible sources. For example, one SPPM stated,

First and foremost, they need to be familiar with firearms and their operation. One challenge with gun lock initiatives is that VPIs have traditionally been in charge, but at the installation level, they may not even know how to use the gun lock for a particular type of firearm (rifle, handgun, etc.). The facilitator needs to be familiar with safe storage from an experience perspective, not just an academic one.

Some interviewees further recommended that content delivery personnel should be able to engage with diverse audiences, including gun owners, sportsmen/women, and Service members who own guns, use them for sport, and/or need them for protection. A Prevention Operations program manager recommended,

The person who is leading the conversation needs general communication skills so they can be thoughtful and respectful with gun owners. In the last year, our own lessons learned are that there are polarized feelings surrounding gun ownership and how it relates to suicide prevention. The trainer needs to have the professionalism to have those tough conversations, engage people with respect, and not turn them off.

### **Training of Content Delivery Personnel**

To train content delivery personnel, some interviewees recommended providing data about the number of suicides involving firearms, risk of suicide and accidents associated with having a firearm in the home, and the lethality of firearms during suicide attempts. For example, one SPPM recommended,

They need to know information about the real risks. This includes the data on having a firearm in the home increasing the risk of accidents and suicide and the lethality of firearms during suicide attempts. That kind of prevention knowledge is secondary to the nuts and bolts of operating firearms.

### **Discussion**

Based on these findings from interviews with key subject matter experts and stakeholders, the Defense Suicide Prevention Office and PERSEREC have amended the study design to shift from training development to identifying optimal settings and approaches for incorporating education about safe firearms storage into early military career settings, with an emphasis on how to introduce and continue conversations about safe storage of firearms across the career lifecycle. As part of this revised approach, we will also expand our understanding of the major barriers we identified in these initial interviews by asking about why Service members may not secure firearms, how receptive Service members would be to learning about secure firearm storage, and where conversations about secure firearms storage should and should not occur.

Going forward, the objectives of this research will be to:

- identify the optimal settings, delivery methods, and messengers to incorporate information on lethal means safety;
- determine the level of, and facilitators to, receptivity among early career Service members to learning about and embracing a culture of lethal means safety;
- determine how we can incorporate education and conversations about lethal means safety into environments beyond early career training; and
- develop courses of action that outline avenues for incorporating education about lethal means safety into early career settings and for reinforcing these practices across the military career lifecycle.

In this study, we will conduct a needs assessment to determine the optimal approach for incorporating lethal means safety into early military career settings. We will begin with interviews with leading academic researchers in the field of firearms-related suicide prevention who have military experience or experience conducting such research in

military settings. Then, we will conduct visits to early career settings to observe combat arms/firearms training, life skills/suicide prevention instruction, and other formal and informal opportunities for engaging in conversations about safe storage of firearms with Service members. During our visits, we will conduct focus groups with staff and instructors from each of the settings and Services. Because of the vast cultural differences among the Services, our approach will provide information and recommendations specific to each Service and early career setting. Our report will present overall findings and a separate section for each Service describing unique findings and recommendations. The results will be available for the Services to use and incorporate into their plans to address lethal means safety in early military career settings and beyond.

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