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Our Position

Mental Health America of Texas is opposed to permitting guns on college campuses because of the potential for suicides.

Suicide prevention measures include restricting access to means of completing suicide -- more guns could mean more suicides. College campuses are often places where drugs and alcohol are more prevalent than in the overall community and many gun-related crimes, including suicide, are committed under the influence of drugs and alcohol. And, college campuses have a much higher percentage of young adults aged 18-25 than in the wider community. Research indicates that regions of the brain responsible for judgment, risk assessment, and decision-making are the last areas to fully develop, continuing to develop until age 25 to 30.¹ Because young adults on college campuses may not possess full risk assessment or decision-making abilities (including how to appropriately manage responses to stress and other negative emotions), gun-friendly campuses increase the risk of gun violence including suicide.

Guns and Suicide

Suicide took the lives of 3,047 Texans in 2013² and is the 2nd leading cause of death for young Texans (aged 15-24) according to the most recent data.³ More Texans die annually from suicide than homicide.⁴ In 2013, there were over twice as many suicides as homicides in Texas.⁵

It is estimated that around 80% of individuals who report suicide-related behaviors have some form of mental health condition.⁶ Research shows that those from 18 to 25 years of age have the second highest prevalence of mental illness of any age group (19.4% versus 21.5% of adults aged 26 to 49), but that people aged 18-25 experience suicide ideation at the highest rate of any age group.⁷ These numbers help explain the fact that 24,000 college students attempt suicide annually.⁸ Furthermore, one study found that 12% of students experience suicide ideation at some point in their college career.⁹ In an ideations survey of college students who had considered suicide, between

¹ Adolescence, BETTER BRAINS FOR BABIES, <http://www.fcs.uga.edu/ext/bbb/brainTimeAdolescence.php> (last visited Oct. 2, 2015).

² Health Facts Profiles, TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF STATE HEALTH SERVICES (2013), <http://healthdata.dshs.texas.gov/HealthFactsProfiles>.

³ Five Leading Causes of Death by Sex and Age: Texas Residents, TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF STATE HEALTH SERVICES (2013), <https://www.dshs.state.tx.us/chs/vstat/vs13/t17.aspx>.

⁴ TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF STATE HEALTH SERVICES, *supra* note 2.

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ Namkee G. Choi, Diana M DiNitto & C Nathan Marti, Mental Health Treatment Use and Perceived Treatment Need among Suicide Planners and Attempters in the United States: between and within Group Differences. 8:305 BMC RESEARCH NOTES 1 (2015), http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4502636/pdf/13104_2015_Article_1269.pdf.

⁷ Results from the 2013 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Mental Health Findings, SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES ADMINISTRATION (Nov. 2014), <http://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/NSDUHmhr2013/NSDUHmhr2013.pdf>.

⁸ María del C. Fernández Rodríguez & Ivonne Bayron Huertas, Suicide Prevention in College Students: A Collaborative Approach, 47 INTERAMERICAN JOURNAL OF PSYCHOLOGY 53 (2013), <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3809451/>.

⁹ *Id.*

14 and 15% of respondents said that using a gun would be their chosen method.¹⁰ With an 85% fatality rate, guns are by far the most fatal method of suicide.¹¹

General trends in the US show a relationship between gun ownership and suicide. Several studies identify increased gun ownership with higher mortality rates from suicide, and in states with higher than average household gun ownership, several thousand more people die than in states with lower average gun household ownership.¹² In other words, “where there are more guns, there are more suicides.”¹³ Since college students already experience increased feelings of suicidality and because gun ownership positively correlates with suicide rates, the establishment of gun-friendly campuses likely has serious implications for suicide rates on college campuses.

College and Alcohol/Substance Abuse

College has long been associated with alcohol consumption and research shows that a significant number of college students use alcohol and other drugs at some point during their college education. According to the most recent Core Institute survey of US college students:

1. 81.3 % of the college students surveyed consumed alcohol in the past year (“annual prevalence”).
2. 68.6% of the students consumed alcohol in the past 30 days (“30-day prevalence”).
3. 60.3% of underage students (younger than 21) consumed alcohol in the previous 30 days.
4. 42.8% of students reported binge drinking in the previous two weeks.¹⁴

Additionally, research has shown that rates of heavy alcohol use and binge drinking are higher among 18 to 34 year olds than any other age group.¹⁵ Full-time enrolled college students (aged 18-22) were more likely to report heavy drinking or binge drinking than their part-time or non-enrolled counterparts.¹⁶

Furthermore, alcohol is involved in 95% of violent crimes on college campuses.¹⁷ In fact, as one study points out, “alcohol and controlled substance abuse are important predictors of future risk for violence, including firearm violence, whether directed at others or at oneself, and whether or not mental illness is also present.”¹⁸ Because alcohol and drug use are significantly present on many college campuses, the risk of violence on campus is high; when guns are present on college campuses, the risks of harm and violence become increasingly lethal.

Recommendations

¹⁰ Chris Brownson, Characteristics of Suicidal Crises in College Students: Implications for Suicide Prevention, TEXAS SUICIDE PREVENTION SYMPOSIUM (Jun. 10, 2008), <http://www.texassuicideprevention.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/CharacteristicsofSuicidalCrisesinCollegeStudentsImplicationsforSuicidePrevention.pdf>.

¹¹ Firearm Access is a Risk Factor for Suicide, MEANS MATTER (Sep. 11 2012), <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/means-matter/means-matter/risk/>.

¹² Matthew Miller, Catherine Barber, Richard A. White & Deborah Azrael, Firearms and Suicide in the United States: Is Risk Independent of Underlying Suicidal Behavior? 178 AMERICAN JOURNAL OF EPIDEMIOLOGY 946 (2013), <http://aje.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2013/08/22/aje.kwt197.full.pdf+html>.

¹³ MEANS MATTER, *supra* note 11.

¹⁴ Executive Summary, Core Alcohol and Drug Survey - Long Form, SIUC/CORE INSTITUTE (Aug. 25, 2014), http://core.siu.edu/_common/documents/2013.pdf.

¹⁵ Results from the 2013 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: Summary of National Findings 36, SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES ADMINISTRATION (Sep. 2014), <http://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/NSDUHresultsPDFWHTML2013/Web/NSDUHresults2013.pdf>.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 40.

¹⁷ J. Price, A. Mrdjenovich, A. Thompson & J. Dake, College Counselors’ Perceptions and Practices Regarding Anticipatory Guidance on Firearms, 58 JOURNAL OF AMERICAN COLLEGE HEALTH 133 (2009), <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19892650>.

¹⁸ Garen J. Wintemute, The Epidemiology of Firearm Violence in the Twenty-First Century United States, 36 ANNU. REV. PUBLIC HEALTH 5 (2015), <http://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-031914-122535>.

POSITION STATEMENT: Guns on Campus



Increasing the prevalence of guns in an area with a large concentration of individuals in an age group associated with undeveloped judgment and risk assessment cognition, higher suicide rates, and higher substance abuse rates is not prudent. Providing better mental health and substance abuse prevention and intervention services is a safer and more effective method for deterring violence.