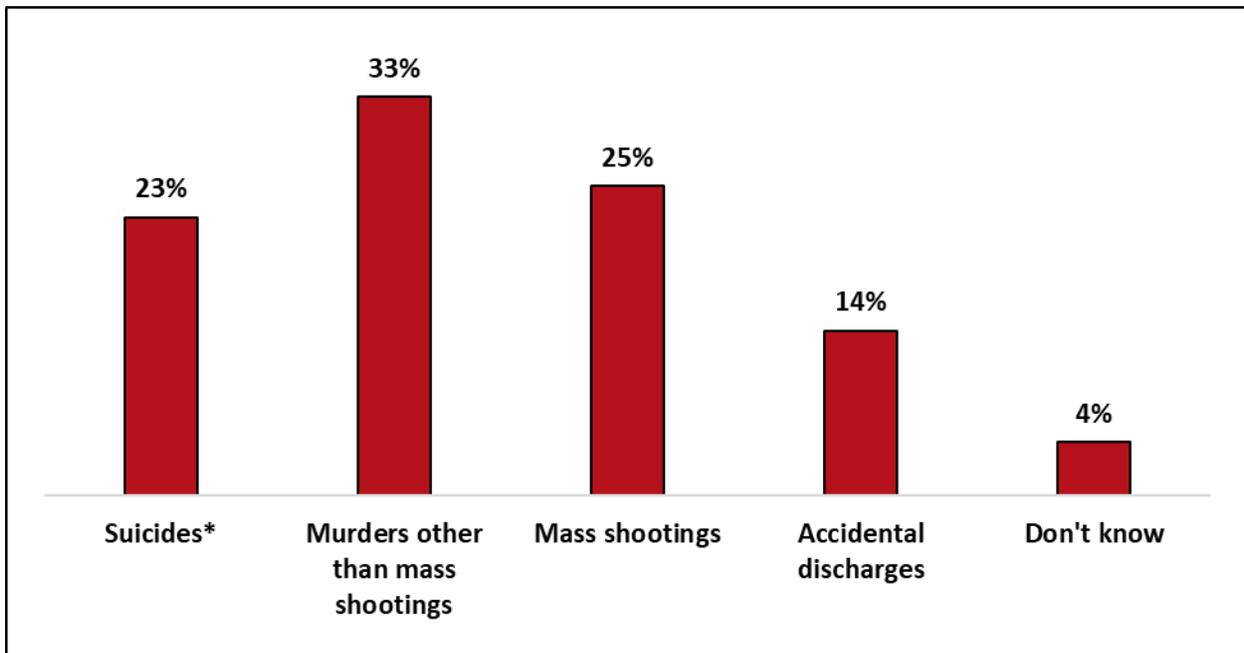


## APM Survey

# What do Americans think causes the most gun-related deaths?

October 2, 2019

**Only one-quarter of Americans are aware that suicides are the leading type of gun-related deaths in the United States**



Source: APM Survey, July 16-21, 2019. N = 1,009 U.S. adults age 18 or older; overall margin of error is +/-3.4 percentage points. Refusals (0.8%) are not shown.

Question: "As far as you know, which of the following is responsible for the most gun deaths in the United States?" (\* denotes correct answer.)

# Introduction

This nonpartisan, nationally representative survey provides new information about the American public's opinions related to gun policy. It was conducted July 16 to 21, 2019, just two weeks prior to the mass shootings in El Paso, Texas, and Dayton, Ohio.

The APM Research Lab conducted this survey jointly with two partners: Guns & America, a reporting collaboration of 10 public radio stations covering the role of guns in American life; and Call to Mind, American Public Media's initiative to foster new conversations about mental health.<sup>1</sup> Data collection was conducted by SSRS of Glen Mills, Pennsylvania.<sup>2</sup>

This brief summarizes the results of one of the survey's key questions:

As far as you know, which of the following is responsible for the most gun deaths in the United States: Mass shootings, Murders other than mass shootings, suicides, or accidental discharges?

Note that the order of the options was scrambled to avoid possible order effects, with the exception that "murders other than mass shootings" always followed "mass shootings."

Additional background materials and results from this survey, including results from questions about Extreme Risk Protection Orders (ERPOs or "Red Flag" laws), characteristics of gun owners, and a detailed description of this survey's methodology and sample characteristics as well as the standard transparency disclosures required by the American Association of Public Opinion Research, the Roper Center, and CNN are available at [www.apmresearchlab.org/gun-related-deaths](http://www.apmresearchlab.org/gun-related-deaths).

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<sup>1</sup> For more about Guns & America, please see: <https://gunsandamerica.org/>.

For more about Call to Mind, please see: <https://www.calltomindnow.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> See the appendix for additional details about the methodology used in this survey.

# Knowledge of suicide as the leading type of gun death in America

Of the options we offered for causing “most gun deaths” – suicide, mass shootings, murders other than mass shootings, and accidental discharge – suicide is the correct answer, accounting for roughly 60% of gun-related deaths in the U.S. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there were 23,854 suicides by firearm, 14,542 homicides by firearm, and 486 unintentional deaths by firearm in 2017.<sup>3</sup>

Although the CDC does not distinguish between “mass shootings” and “other murders,” they do list 216,889 homicides by firearm during 2000-2017, just over 12,000 per year, compared to an average of 19,000 suicides per year over that same time period. There is no single, agreed-upon definition of “mass shooting,” however, the Gun Violence Archive has cataloged an average of 378 deaths from mass shootings per year during 2014 through 2018.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the CDC also lists 11,090 unintentional firearm deaths, or just over 600 per year during 2000 to 2017.

By and large American adults are unaware that suicide accounts for the most common type of gun-related death in the United States today. Only one-fourth indicate that gun deaths by suicide outnumber mass shootings, murders other than mass shootings, and accidental gun discharges. This is no better than guessing at random from among the four available choices.

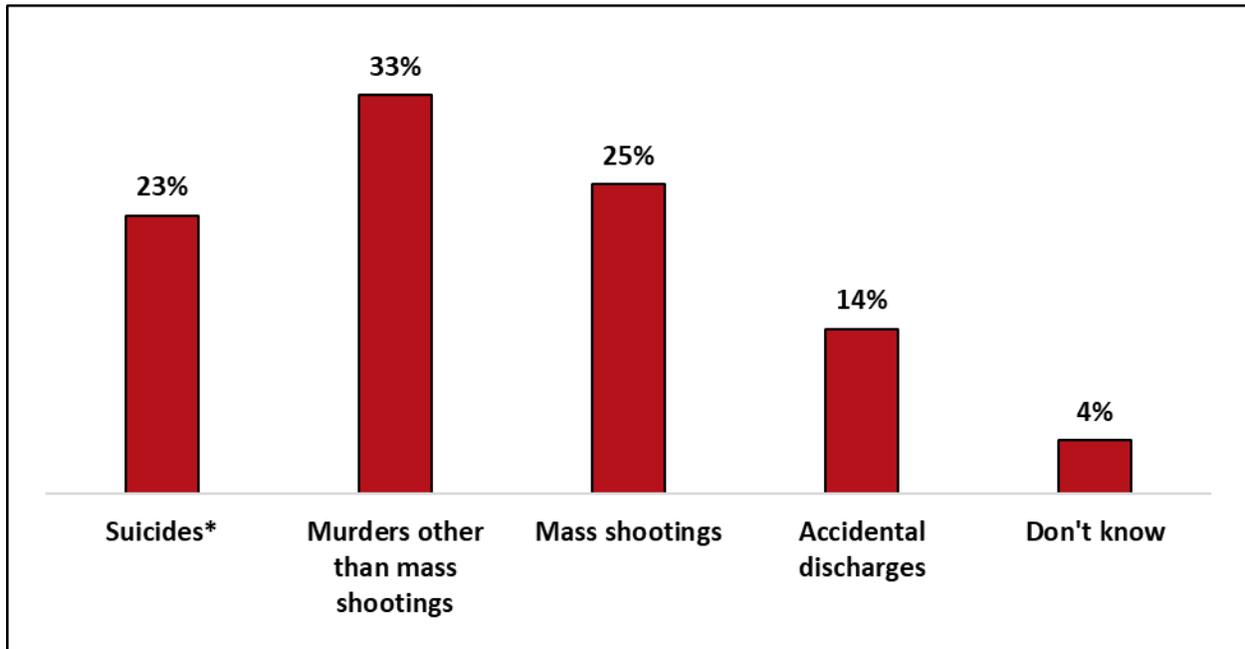
The most common answer is “murders other than mass shootings,” with one-third of American adults believing this is the leading cause of gun death. One-quarter think “mass shootings” are the leading cause of gun-related deaths. Fourteen percent believe that “accidental discharges” of guns account for more gun deaths than the three other categories offered in the question.

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<sup>3</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Leading Cause of Death Reports (<https://webappa.cdc.gov/sasweb/ncipc/leadcause.html>; accessed August 5, 2019). 343,834 suicides by firearm during the years 2000-2017; an average of over 19,000 per year.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://gunsandamerica.org/story/19/08/04/what-is-a-mass-shooting-why-we-struggle-to-agree-on-how-many-there-were-this-year/>, and <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/reports>.

## Although suicides account for the majority of all gun deaths in the United States, most Americans believe mass shootings or other homicides are more common



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Question: "As far as you know, which of the following is responsible for the most gun deaths in the United States?" (\* denotes correct answer.)

None of the groups we are able to examine in this survey showed a high awareness that suicide is the leading cause of gun-related deaths. There are, however, some divergent patterns between the groups, suggesting that groups have different assumptions, or are relying on different sources of information, about gun-related death.

- Men are somewhat more aware than women that suicide is the leading cause of gun deaths; 28% of men compared to 18% of women answered the question correctly.
- Parents with children living at home are somewhat more aware that suicide is the leading cause of gun deaths than those who are not parents of children living at home (30% compared with 21%).
- Those with a four-year college degree or higher educational attainment are somewhat more aware that suicide is the leading cause of gun death; 28% answered the question correctly, compared with about 20% of those with less education.
- Those from households with annual incomes above \$50,000 are somewhat more likely than those from households with annual incomes below \$50,000 to know that suicide is the leading cause of gun-related death. These lower-income households are nearly twice as likely to think that mass shootings are the leading cause of gun deaths.

- Whites and Latinos are markedly more aware that suicides are the leading cause of gun deaths than is the case for African Americans. Only 4% of African Americans correctly identify suicides as the leading cause of gun-related deaths in the U.S.; 53% believe that “murders other than mass shootings” are the leading cause of gun deaths.<sup>5</sup>
- Place of residence does not appear to be strongly related to knowledge of the prevalence of gun-involved suicides:
  - When dividing the nation into four quadrants, the only statistical difference is that those from north eastern states are somewhat more likely to answer this question correctly than are those from southern states (28% compared to 19%).<sup>6</sup>
  - Those living in metropolitan areas and non-metro areas are equally likely to answer this question correctly.<sup>7</sup>
  - When aggregating the results of the 85 respondents from the eight contiguous “suicide belt” states that have among the nation’s highest rates of suicide, the answer patterns were the same as for the rest of the nation; only roughly one-quarter correctly answered that suicide is the leading cause of gun-related death.<sup>8</sup>
- Although Republicans and Democrats differ markedly in their preference for various gun-related policies, and Republicans are twice as likely as Democrats to own a gun, the two major parties do not differ markedly in their knowledge of gun-related deaths.
- Gun owners are more likely than those who do not own a gun or those live with someone who owns a gun to know that suicides are the leading cause of death (29% compared to 20%). Those without a gun in their household are most likely to think that mass shootings are the leading cause of gun deaths.

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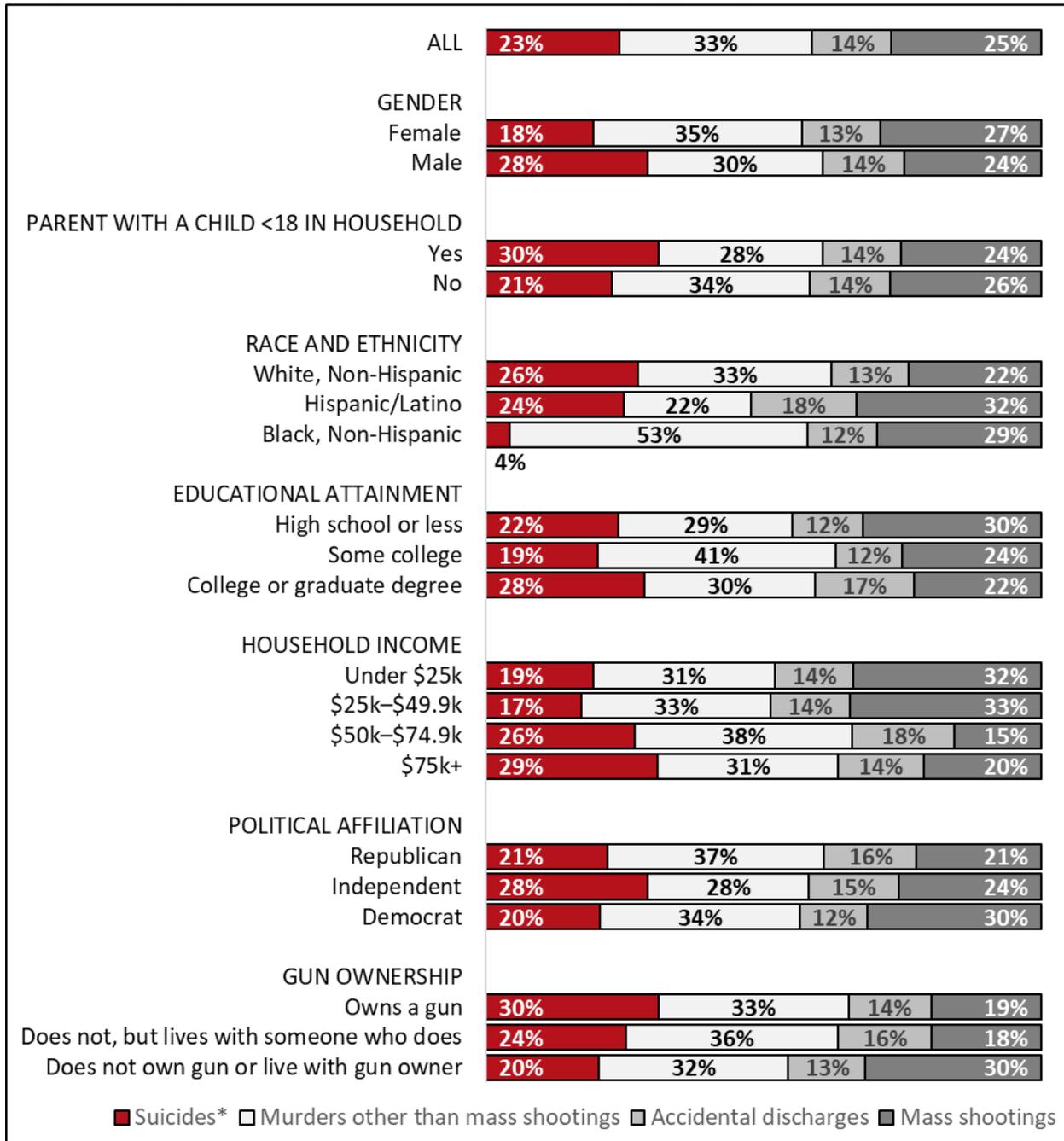
<sup>5</sup> While the question asks about “...the most gun deaths in the United States,” it is relevant to note that among African Americans, the leading cause of gun-related deaths is homicide. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, among African Americans during the years 2000 to 2017 there were 19,940 suicides by firearm, 120,275 homicides by firearm, and 2,103 unintentional deaths by firearm (<https://webappa.cdc.gov/sasweb/ncipc/leadcause.html>; accessed August 5, 2019).

<sup>6</sup> For purposes of this report, we divided the U.S. into four regions: North Central: Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, North Dakota, Nebraska, Ohio, South Dakota, Wisconsin. North East: Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont. South: Alabama, Arkansas, Washington DC, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia. West: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, New Mexico, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, Washington, Wyoming.

<sup>7</sup> “Metro” and “Non-Metro” are designated using the Federal Office of Management and Budget’s definitions.

<sup>8</sup> Temple University sociologist Matt Wray is credited with identifying the “suicide belt,” and has defined it as including Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, and Wyoming (e.g., <https://thesocietypages.org/officehours/2014/04/18/matt-wray-on-the-suicide-belt/>; accessed August 7, 2019).

**African Americans, women, and those from lower-income households are all groups that are particularly unaware that suicides are the leading type of gun-related deaths**



Source: APM Survey, July 16-21, 2019. N = 1,009 U.S. adults age 18 or older; overall margin of error is +/-3.4 percentage points. Refusals (0.8%) are not shown.

Question: "As far as you know, which of the following is responsible for the most gun deaths in the United States?" (\* denotes correct answer.)

# About the Survey

The survey was conducted by SSRS on its Omnibus survey platform. Interviews were conducted from July 16 to 21, 2019 among a sample of 1,009 respondents in English (974) and Spanish (35). Interviewing took place over the telephone, including both landline (303) and cell phone (706). The margin of error for total respondents is +/-3.42% at the 95% confidence level. All data are weighted to represent national parameters of the adult population.

For additional details about the sample and survey methodology, as well as transparency disclosures relevant to the American Association of Public Opinion, the Roper Center, and CNN please see: [www.apmresearchlab.org/gun-related-deaths](http://www.apmresearchlab.org/gun-related-deaths).

# Acknowledgments

This report was authored by the APM Research Lab's Managing Partner, Craig Helmstetter, and Senior Research Associate, Andi Egbert. The survey questions were designed with input from Guns & America's Director, Jeremy Bernfeld, and Research Editor, Lisa Dunn, as well as Call to Mind's Managing Director, Babette Apland, and Kyle Berta and Robyn Rappaport of SSRS.

# About the APM Research Lab: Bringing Facts into Focus

The APM Research Lab is a division of American Public Media that informs the public about challenges and opportunities facing families, communities, and organizations throughout the nation. Our mission is to foster an engaged democracy by inspiring curiosity, inquiry and discussion through fact-driven, credible research and analysis. Our Values: Independent, Useful, Informative, Non-partisan.

The APM Research Lab conducts research projects of all types — surveys, demographic analyses, literature reviews, and more — and informs the work of partner organizations and the broader public through traditional reports, as well as infographics, blog posts, interactives, presentations, and other platforms.

We are a member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research's Transparency Initiative and abide by its standards. See <https://www.aapor.org/Standards-Ethics/Transparency-Initiative/>.

In addition to philanthropic support and partnership, we are happy to entertain requests for proposals and other contractual inquiries related to research and analysis.

Contact: [info@apmresearchlab.org](mailto:info@apmresearchlab.org) | [apmresearchlab.org](http://apmresearchlab.org)

