

# Gunshots: Vermont Gun Deaths, 2011-2016

The role of guns in life — and death — in Vermont.

Vermont Public Radio

In Vermont, 420 people died from gunshot wounds between the beginning of 2011 and the end of 2016.

In Morrisville, a 21-year-old man killed himself in his family's apartment in 2012. A year and a day later, his mother did the same thing.

In Windsor, a 98-year-old World War II veteran killed himself in the middle of September 2013.

At a few minutes before 11 p.m. in Newbury one night last December, an 80-year-old bus driver shot and killed his wife and then himself. Her death certificate says "married." His says "widowed."

Using death certificates provided by the Vermont Department of Health, VPR compiled a database of every gun death in Vermont from January 2011 through December 2016.

Each of the 420 entries in the database represents a real person with a unique story. Viewing the database as a whole makes it possible to see patterns and better understand how different parts of Vermont's population are affected by gun deaths.

# A Way Of Life

Guns are as embedded in Vermont life as dirt roads, dairy farms and maple syrup. To many in Vermont, the word “gun” doesn’t carry the same foreboding weight as it does in other places, where guns are known simply as weapons that hurt people.

“Guns aren’t scary in rural Vermont,” one Vermonter wrote recently. “They’re just another tool that you learn to respect at a young age, just like the ax or maul you use to cut firewood, the hatchet you use to kill chickens, or the knife you carry to gut trout and feather kindling.”

**Vermont Voices:**

We asked Vermonters to weigh in on the role guns have in their lives. **Here’s what they had to say.**

It’s not clear exactly how many guns there are in Vermont. The state government doesn’t collect any information about gun ownership, and the only federal data available comes from background checks which aren’t used in all gun purchases.

Past estimates show that nearly half of all Vermont households have at least one gun, which means there are likely tens of thousands of guns in Vermont.

# A Cause Of Death

There's a part of the story of guns in Vermont that's not as well-known.

That is because the characters in that story aren't here to help tell it. There's also the stigma that remains around suicide, which is what happened in 373 (89 percent) of Vermont's gun deaths between 2011 and 2016. Stigma and privacy concerns surrounding domestic violence make it difficult to fully understand its connection with guns in Vermont.

In an effort to better understand the full story of Vermont's relationship with guns, VPR requested six years of data from the Vermont Department of Health.

The department provided 420 death certificates; one each for every person killed by a gunshot wound in Vermont between Jan. 1, 2011 and Dec. 31, 2016.

VPR staff and volunteers compiled those documents into a database of all of the state's gun deaths over that six-year period.

**Learn More:**

To view the full data set and to find out more about how the data from the death certificates was compiled, **click here.**

*Editor's Note: A major aspect of firearms deaths in Vermont is suicide, and much of this reporting is meant to help foster a better understanding of that issue.*

*If you are concerned about yourself or someone you know, help is available to anyone. Here are some resources:*

**National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** 1-800-273-8255

**Veterans Crisis Line & Military Crisis Line:** 1-800-273-8255, Press 1

**Crisis Text Line:** 741-741

**Vermont Suicide Prevention Center:** <http://vtspc.org/>

In emergency situations, **call 911.**

# 420 Deaths

The state of Vermont collects certain information about each person who dies within the state's borders; death certificates show the deceased person's date of birth, education level, marital status, place of birth and address.

The documents also show the circumstances surrounding the death: Was it a homicide or a suicide? How much time passed between injury and death? Where did the injury take place? Was the person working when they died or off the clock?



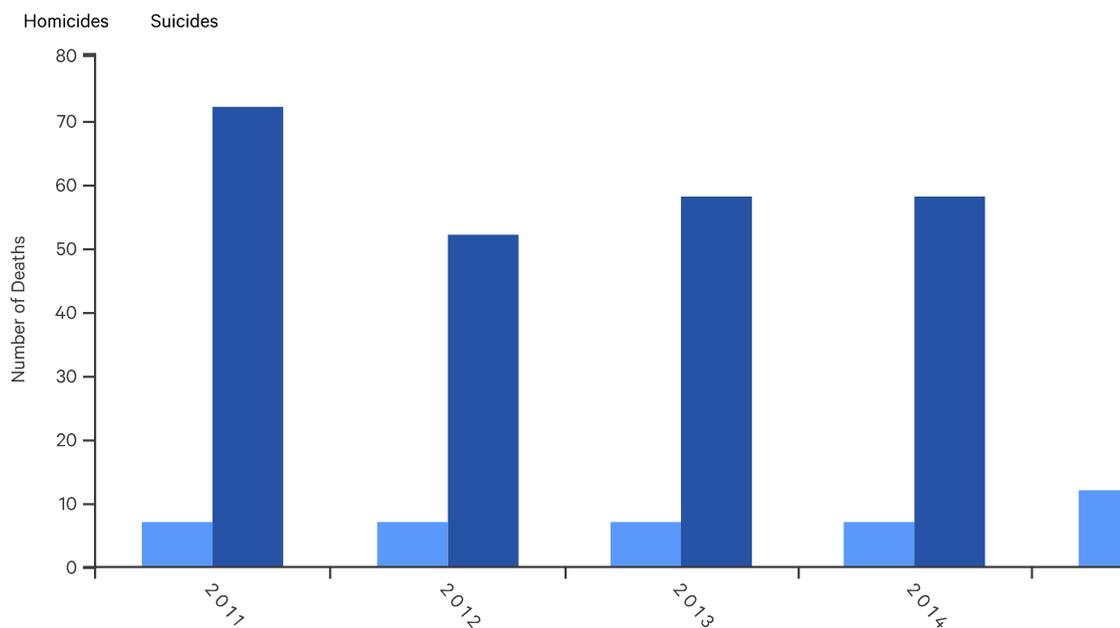
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Taylor Dobbs and Mitch Wertlieb talk about the database of Vermont gun deaths.

Here's what we learned using data from the death certificates and other data from the Vermont Department of Health:

- Over the six years in question, there were 33,417 total deaths in Vermont — about 5,500 per year. The 420 gun deaths accounted for 1.26 percent of deaths in the state between 2011 and 2016.

### Gun Deaths In Vermont Per Year



Source: Vermont Department of Health

- In total, there were 373 suicides and 47 homicides involving firearms in Vermont during the six-year period in question.
- The majority of the gun deaths — 339 over the six-year period in question — were caused by white men shooting themselves.
- Men 80 years old or older accounted for 32 suicides; the oldest female to die in a suicide by firearm was 79 years old.

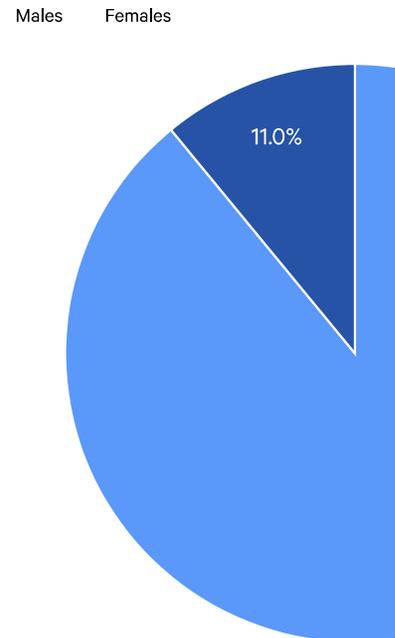
**89 percent of the gun deaths in Vermont from 2011 through 2016 were suicides.**

- Vermont had 80 gun deaths in 2016, more than in any of the previous five years.
- There were 12 homicides involving firearms in 2015. There were seven homicides involving guns in each of the previous four years and in 2016.
- There were 47 people shot and killed by someone else in Vermont from 2011 through 2016. In five cases, medical examiners documented that the person killed was shot by police or

law enforcement. (On death certificates, medical examiners call it “homicide” any time a person is killed by another person. In that context, it is a medical term and does not necessarily mean that anyone has been charged or convicted of a crime.)

- Domestic violence played a role in some of the firearms-related deaths. It’s not possible to determine every case based on death certificates alone because death certificates do not mention the name of a person’s killer or the relationship between shooter and victim. However, there were three cases in which a husband and wife were pronounced dead at the same time and place - one killed by homicide, one by suicide.

### Gun Deaths In Vermont (2011-2016): Sex Of Deceased



Of the 420 people killed by guns in Vermont from 2011 through 2016, 374 were male and 46 were female. Source: Vermont Department of Health

### The People Behind The Data

More than anyone else in Vermont, the state’s medical examiners are intimately familiar with how Vermonters die. They’re responsible for the information in every death certificate in the state; they’re the ones who can look at a body and assess how the person died, whether it took seconds or minutes for the person to die and sometimes how long ago the death took place.

These medical examiners aren’t responsible for policies in place to save lives, and they aren’t responsible for somehow repairing the emotional damage to a community when someone dies unexpectedly. Their job is to simply accept that someone has died and determine the facts surrounding the death.



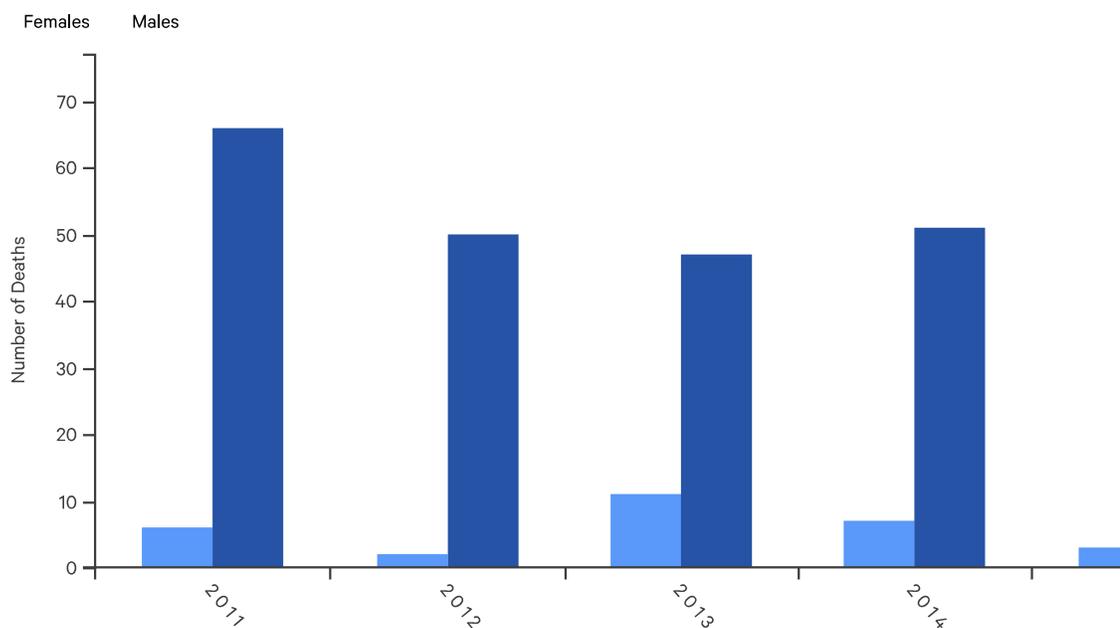
# Suicide

According to The New York Times, more than 60 percent of gun deaths in the United States are suicides. In Vermont from 2011 through 2016, suicide made up an even larger portion of gun deaths: 89 percent.

On average from 2011 through 2016, suicide by firearm killed someone in Vermont every six days. The 373 people who died from self-inflicted gunshot wounds outnumbered the 370 traffic deaths in Vermont during that period.

In each year from 2011 through 2014, guns were involved in more than half of all suicide deaths in Vermont. (2014 is the most recent statewide suicide data released by the state.)

**Suicide Gun Deaths In Vermont By Year**



Males accounted for 91 percent of people who died by gun suicide in Vermont during the period of 2011 through 2016. Source: Vermont Department of Health.



# Veterans

According to 2015 data from the Vermont Department of Health and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, there are 45,360 veterans in Vermont, which means about 7.25 percent of the state's population served in the U.S. military.

Of the 420 people killed by gunshots in Vermont from 2011 through 2016, nearly 30 percent of those who died — 121 people — were current or former members of the armed forces.

**Read:** 'Your Son Took His Own Life': A Veteran's Suicide Set His Mother On A Mission To Help Others

One of the challenges many veterans face after a deployment is the loss of their sense of closeness, says Brian Barrows, a 10-year veteran of the U.S. Army. A deployment puts soldiers close together, depending on each other every day. Barrows says that dynamic goes away when troops come home.

"We've got sort of a society where folks are out for themselves," he says. "In the military you work as a team in a small unit. Losing that sense of community and that sense of tribe is really impactful, and it can be really damaging."

**At least 114 of the 373 people who died in gun suicides in Vermont from 2011 through 2016 served in the U.S. armed forces.**

For many veterans, owning guns is non-negotiable; it's one of the rights they swore an oath to protect. Suicide prevention experts who work with veterans say there are preventative steps veterans and their families can take to reduce the risk of suicide without getting rid of their guns.

Meghan Snitkin, the suicide prevention coordinator at the VA medical center in White River Junction, says some preliminary safety measures with regard to firearms might include disassembling a weapon, storing their ammunition separately, or in some cases, having a family member or friend hold the firearm during a particularly risky time period.

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Hear VPR's profile of a mother on a mission to help veterans after her son, a combat veteran, died by suicide.

# Suicide Prevention

While political efforts related to gun safety usually end in deadlock or defeat in Vermont, there are academics, public health officials, gun shop owners and gun owners working on solutions to reduce gun suicides without implementing new legal restrictions on access to firearms.

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JoEllen Tarallo, the director of the Vermont Suicide Prevention Center, offers advice for people who have concerns that they or someone they know may be suicidal.

In Chittenden County, the HowardCenter has a waiting list for the free gun safes it gives away to encourage safe storage, and caseworkers travel with cable locks that make guns impossible to fire when locked. Experts say that limiting a person's ability to quickly access "lethal means" in a time of crisis can be the deciding factor in whether a person dies by suicide or not.

## There were 47 homicides and 373 suicides involving firearms in Vermont from 2011 through 2016.

Thomas Delaney, an assistant professor in the Department of Pediatrics at the University of Vermont Larner College of Medicine, says it's a common misconception that someone who is suicidal will find a way to end their life even if they don't have quick and easy access to lethal means.

**Read:** 'This Is About Safety': Preventing Gun Suicides In Vermont

"So most of the people — we know this from a few studies — ... who survive even really serious attempts at taking their lives actually don't go on to die by suicide," he said.

**Questions? Comments?**

To explore the full data set and share your thoughts, **click here.**

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