



POLICY BRIEF

FIREARM SUICIDE AT THE POINT OF SALE: EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY OPTIONS FOR MILWAUKEE AND BEYOND

Suicide continues to be a significant driver of early mortality in the US, and Wisconsin is no exception to this reality. Guns are easy to access in the dairy state and are particularly effective at killing quickly (Pallin & Barnhorst, 2021). As a result, over half of the more than 900 suicides in Wisconsin in 2023 were committed with a gun. In Milwaukee County alone, over 60 individuals used a firearm to take their own lives. (Johns Hopkins, 2025).

Firearm suicide rates are highest among men aged 25-64. Rates among black men in particular have skyrocketed in recent years, but Native Americans remain the most disproportionately affected (Violence Policy Center, 2025). In 2015, Wisconsin repealed its 48-hour handgun purchase waiting period and firearm suicides increased by 6.5%, disproportionately affecting urban and minority communities (Oliphant, 2022). Some efforts are in motion to address the firearm suicide crisis, but more can be done to help save Milwaukee and Wisconsinites as a whole.

POLICY OPTIONS FOR MILWAUKEE TO CONSIDER IN ADDRESSING FIREARM SUICIDE AT THE POINT OF SALE:

- 01** Advocate for the return of the 48 hour waiting period at the state level to restrict at-risk buyers from obtaining a gun quickly.
- 02** Required distribution of suicide prevention materials at gun shops to connect buyers to helpful resources.
- 03** Mandatory education for firearm dealers to ensure they are well-equipped and motivated to help prevent suicide among customers.

KEY DETERMINANTS OF FIREARM SUICIDE

One of the strongest determinants is impulsivity paired with immediate firearm access. Research consistently shows that many suicide attempts are made within minutes of the decision. Firearms are used in 5% of suicide attempts but account for half of suicide deaths. As a result, 90% of suicide attempts with firearms result in death (Pallin & Barnhorst, 2021). Even short delays significantly reduce death risk because individuals rarely substitute alternative methods during a crisis (Luca et al., 2017).

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A second determinant involves knowledge gaps among firearm retailers, who serve as a frontline point of contact. Most retailers do not know that suicide is the leading type of firearm fatality, and many underestimate how frequently customers may be at risk (Walton & Stuber, 2020).

Finally, cultural and community-specific risks, especially within Native American communities, contribute to highly disproportionate suicide burdens in Wisconsin. These disparities are caused by structural factors including historical trauma, inequitable access to mental health care, and higher baseline firearm access (Wisconsin Suicide Prevention Plan, 2025).



FEDERAL CONTEXT

At the federal level, firearm regulation provides minimal suicide-prevention infrastructure, leaving states responsible for most interventions that reduce access during periods of crisis. The National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) screens for disqualifying criminal and mental health records but does not assess acute suicide risk, does not impose waiting periods, and does not require retailers to provide safety materials or counseling (FBI, 2024). Federal law also does not require firearm purchasers to complete any training related to suicide risk or safe storage, despite strong evidence that secure firearm storage reduces suicide risk among both adults and youth (CDC, 2024).

Effective suicide prevention policies must be enacted at the state or local level, where policymakers can implement waiting periods, retailer training, or safe-storage initiatives that address the clear gaps left by the federal framework.

CURRENT WISCONSIN POLICY

There is currently no waiting period to buy a firearm in Wisconsin, and no significant requirements for sellers to engage in suicide prevention efforts. Two years ago, a bill failed that would have given money to dealers for training in understanding suicide risk factors and implementing temporary safe storage (Senate Bill 205, 2023). Wisconsin's 2025 suicide prevention plan focuses largely on expanding risk factor screening and improving access to behavioral health care (Prevent Suicide Wisconsin, 2025).

There are currently no significant requirements in Wisconsin for retailers to engage in suicide prevention efforts.

SUCCESSFUL POLICIES AMONG THE STATES

- States like Illinois and California have implemented purchase waiting periods. They vary in length but generally require at least 48 hours between purchase and retrieval of a gun. Studies show these policies have resulted in up to an 11% drop in suicides by making it harder for at-risk customers to get a gun quickly (Arnold & Priestly, 2025; Luca et al., 2017).
- Gun Shop Training Programs have been implemented in several states, including Wisconsin (limited to Dane County), educating retailers on suicide risks and ways to intervene. They have seen success helping retailers recognize suicide warning signs among customers while expanding engagement with prevention services and options for safe storage of firearms (Wright-Kelly et al., 2024).

POLICY OPTIONS FOR WISCONSIN

REINSTATE A STATEWIDE 48-HOUR WAITING PERIOD

Option one is to reinstate 48-hour waiting period:

- Provides Wisconsin with a practical mechanism to reduce firearm suicide by creating time for potential warning signs to be recognized.
- Does not rely on the buyer self-identifying as being in crisis.

Waiting periods are effective in introducing a population level safeguard (Anestis & Anestis, 2015). Creating delay and physical barriers significantly decreases suicide mortality, even when the delay is brief (Harvard School of Public Health, 2024).

Waiting periods also offer administrative advantages. They require limited infrastructure once enacted and can be uniformly applied across all firearm retailers. Public opinion data further indicate strong national support for waiting periods (Pew Research Center, 2023). By establishing a consistent buffer during high-risk periods, a reinstated 48-hour waiting period would provide Wisconsin with an evidence supported policy that complements other point-of-sale strategies without imposing long-term barriers to lawful firearm ownership.

POINT-OF-SALE SUICIDE PREVENTION MATERIAL

Option two is requiring firearm retailers to provide suicide prevention materials:

- Provides Wisconsin with a highly feasible, low cost strategy that enhances buyer awareness and promotes safer behaviors without restricting firearm access.
- Point-of-sale materials provide individuals with essential resources at a moment when they may be most needed.

Research shows that firearm owners are more likely to adopt safe-storage practices and engage with prevention resources when information is presented in a manner aligned with their reasons for ownership, such as protection or personal security (Sokol et al., 2023). This intervention does not require risk screening or impose delays, it is widely acceptable to retailers and buyers while still strengthening the statewide infrastructure for firearm suicide prevention.



MANDATORY SUICIDE PREVENTION TRAINING FOR RETAILERS

Option three is to require gun retailers to undergo suicide prevention training, including:

- Enhanced understanding of suicide prevalence among firearm buyers.
- Strategies for identifying suicide risk factors in buyers and declining sales to them.
- Education on where customers can be referred for help with struggles that lead them to consider suicide.
- Advice on safe gun storage and how to share that information with buyers.

A community better educated on safe storage is likely to have fewer firearm suicides (Runyan et al, 2019). Having these conversations at the point-of-sale can help persuade buyers to store their guns safely, even those purchasing for personal protection (Densley et al., 2025). Evidence also suggests that retailers are generally willing to learn about suicide and prevention efforts, and the more they know, the more likely they are to engage in these efforts with buyers (Walton & Stuber, 2020).



NEXT STEPS

The presented policies act on the key determinants of immediate access to firearms by at risk individuals and the limited knowledge of gun shop retailers who can play an outsized role in preventing suicide.

The 48-hour waiting period will likely need to be instituted at the state level due to gun control preemption laws preventing stricter regulations locally than what the state allows (Wisconsin Legislative Council, 2022). The same may be true for mandatory dealer training, but these are untested waters.

A limitation of these options is that they focus on the point of sale, so they are less equipped to address the population who already possess firearms and are not in the process of buying another.

There is a duty to do what is possible to give Wisconsinites the time and resources to seek help before it is too late.

To address this population, there are a couple more localized options that the city could consider:

- Partnering with local health centers to distribute safe firearm storage kits.
- Conducting a municipal public awareness campaign targeting groups disproportionately affected (youth, Native American communities, men aged 25-64).

But we still believe the primary policy options in this brief are the most well-suited to impact firearm suicide rates meaningfully.

Milwaukee should evaluate these three primary options for the difference they could make in the community, and for Wisconsin as a whole. Firearm suicide is addressable, and there is an inherent duty to do what is possible to give Wisconsinites the time and resources necessary to seek help before it is too late.

This policy brief was created by Brook Miller and Evan Trevithick, as a part of PH779 - Public Health Policymaking and Analysis at the UWM Zilber College of Public Health.

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