



## POLICY BRIEF

# SAFE FIREARM STORAGE: A TARGETED STRATEGY TO PREVENT SUICIDE AND INJURY IN WISCONSIN

Gun injuries are a top cause of preventable death in Wisconsin, with suicide making up two out of every three firearm deaths in Wisconsin (Everytown for Gun Safety, 2023; Wisconsin Department of Health Services, 2024).

A key risk factor that we can change is unsafe gun storage at home. Having easy access to a gun during a moment of stress, impulse, or curiosity can quickly lead to a life-changing tragedy. Doctors and public health experts recommend keeping guns unloaded, locked, and stored separately from ammunition (Safe Storage of Firearms). However, only 28.5% of gun owners follow all three of these safety practices (Haag et al., 2025).

This gap between what we know is safe and what people do is a significant public health threat. It leads to unnecessary death, family trauma, and a burden on communities across the state. This especially impacts youth and young adults, where suicide is the second leading cause of death in Wisconsin (Wisconsin Department of Health Services, Wisconsin Vital Records Data Dashboard, n.d)

## KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

There are easy and practical ways to help people move from wanting to be safe to actually storing guns safely. In addition to local education, this plan can save lives, reduce injuries, and promote responsible gun ownership across Wisconsin.

### STATE-LEVEL POLICY

- Pass a stronger safe storage law that makes it a legal duty to lock up guns.
- Require and fund the inclusion of a secure lock or safe with every gun sold.

### LOCAL INITIATIVES

- Fund subsidies for quick-access options.
- Require a suicide prevention sticker on every storage or locking device for firearms.
- Ensure children do not have access to or cannot access the method to unlock the firearm lock or storage device.

## OWNERSHIP & STORAGE MOTIVATIONS & BEHAVIOR

Adolescents and young adults aged 15–30 years represent a critical population for firearm suicide and injury prevention in Wisconsin. Suicide risk is elevated in this age group due to developmental factors, higher impulsivity, and increased likelihood of experiencing acute mental health crises.

Access to unsecured firearms in the home significantly increases the risk that a suicide attempt among adolescents and young adults will result in death. Data show that 71% of suicides occur within 60 min of a suicidal thought (Duration of Suicidal Crises, 2025) and nearly 75% of suicides occur in a house or apartment (Wisconsin Violent Death Reporting System, 2025)

Policies that promote secure firearm storage are therefore particularly relevant for preventing suicide in this population (Wisconsin Department of Health Services, 2024; Everytown for Gun Safety, 2023).




## OWNERSHIP & STORAGE MOTIVATIONS & BEHAVIOR

Good policy must understand why owners store guns in an unsafe manner.

Self-Defense is a Main driver of Ownership: Many owners, especially in cities, keep guns for protection and want to access them quickly. This group is 60% less likely to store guns safely (Haag et al., 2025).

Type of Lock Matters: While cheap cable locks are the most commonly owned, they are used infrequently (36% use them regularly). On the other hand, owners of quick-access locks (using biometric data or a keypad) are more likely to use them regularly (73%). This is because these locks balance security with fast access for the owner (Haag et al., 2025).

Cost is a Major Barrier: Affordability is the deciding factor for 65% of owners. Quick-access locks (which cost \$80 or more) are often too expensive. This creates a gap between the desire to store a gun safely and the ability to afford it (Haag et al., 2025).

Cable or Trigger Locks	Gun case or Lock Box
<p data-bbox="215 1310 352 1384">Basic \$5 to \$25</p> 	<p data-bbox="533 1310 707 1384">Basic \$10 to \$100</p> 
<p data-bbox="145 1646 424 1720">Specialty/Biometric \$20 to \$60</p> 	<p data-bbox="504 1646 738 1765">Quick Access or Biometric \$100 to \$300</p> 

## THE POLICY GAP: WISCONSIN'S REACTIVE LAW IS INSUFFICIENT

Wisconsin's current law is insufficient to encourage safe storage and prevent crises.

**Reactive Rather than Preventive:** State law (Wis. Stat. 948.55) only gives a penalty after a child under 14 gets a loaded gun and causes injury or shows it in public. This "after-the-fact" approach does nothing to stop the incident from happening.

**Local Laws are Preempted:** State law (Wis. Stat. 66.0409) precludes municipalities from adopting stricter rules. Policy changes can only be made at the state level.

This legal situation means Wisconsin lacks the tools to promote secure storage practices that have been proven to save lives.



## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Evidence indicates that stronger firearm safe storage policies are associated with meaningful reductions in youth firearm suicide and injury, with studies estimating up to a 12% reduction in youth firearm suicides and 6–32% of youth firearm deaths preventable through robust storage requirements. These effects are significant given the rising firearm suicide rates among Black youth and other disproportionately affected populations (Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions, 2023; CDC, 2023).

### *ENACT AN EXPANDED SAFE STORAGE LAW*

Strengthen Wisconsin's current gun-storage laws. First, require gun owners to store firearms with a cable or trigger lock, or in a lockbox or gun safe when not in use. Create penalties for storing a gun without a cable or trigger lock, or in a lockbox or gun safe. Increased penalties for guns that are not stored safely when there is a person under 18 in the household, even if the child did not gain access. Focus the law on negligence and not recklessness.

- Closes Deadly Gaps: This builds on the previous child-access law but does not wait for a child to gain access to apply.
- Reduces Suicide: Secure storage is a proven suicide prevention method. It adds a crucial "time and effort" barrier during a short, severe crisis. Studies from other states with similar laws show they are linked to lower gun suicide rates (Rowhani-Rahbar et al., 2020).
- Legally Sound: These "negligent storage" laws have repeatedly been found constitutional. They regulate dangerous behavior to prevent harm without taking away the right to own a gun (Giffords Law Center, 2024).

## IMPORTANT LEGAL TERMS

### NEGLIGENCE

A person should be aware that there is a risk. Negligence is easier to prove in a court of law.

### RECKLESSNESS

A person is consciously aware that a risk exists. Proving a person is aware of the risk and acted recklessly is difficult in a court of law.

## OTHER TARGETED PREVENTION STRATEGIES:

Veterans are another community that has a disproportionately high risk of suicidal ideation and mental health issues. The Veterans Administration has leveraged both community- and clinic-based approaches to reduce this risk, including:

### CLINICALLY BASED

- Same-day therapy through primary care
- Psychotherapist implementation (CBT, DBT, and problem-solving therapy)
- ER suicidal intervention program
- Universal screening

### COMMUNITY-BASED: TAILORED & LOCAL

- Community and veteran-to-veteran coalition building
- Partnering with veterans to drive programs in the local community

(Carroll et al., 2020)

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS CONTINUED:

### *REQUIRE STORAGE WITH FIREARM SALES*

Require that every gun sold in Wisconsin include a secure storage device (lock or safe). Create a state program to help defray the cost of higher-priced quick-access locks, thereby encouraging their adoption.

- **Creates a Barrier:** Providing a storage device with the gun ensures every new owner immediately has a safe way to store it. This prevents forgetting to buy a lock later.
- **Promotes Technology that Aligns with Buyer Motivation:** By using subsidies to prioritize quick-access locks, the policy aligns with what self-defense owners want. Data shows 73% of quick-access safe owners use them all the time, making this the most effective tool (Haag et al., 2025).



## LOCAL ACTIONS FOR A SAFER MILWAUKEE

State-level policy change can take many years; however, the Milwaukee Health Department can drive safer gun storage in the meantime.

### *REQUIRE STORAGE WITH FIREARM SALES*

Subsidies or grant programs will help offset the higher cost of the quick-access gun storage devices. People who buy guns for protection are more likely to use these storage options regularly. These programs will save money over the long term. The small cost of a subsidy program is tiny compared to the enormous medical and social costs of just one prevented suicide or accidental shooting (Miller et al., 2022).

### *PREFIX SUICIDE PREVENTION LABEL ON FIREARM STORAGE AND LOCKS*

There are two possible paths for this solution:

1. **Municipal law requiring labels on firearm storage and locks:** The Wisconsin firearm law preemption statute (Wis. Stat. 66.0409) applies to weapons and does not currently address municipal regulation of storage devices. While there is a legal requirement to label storage devices, such a requirement is likely to be challenged in court.
1. **Partner with gun shops to affix a suicide prevention label on gun storage or locks, or offer labels for the devices.** This is a less litigious option, but likely less effective due to a lack of compliance with gun shops.

## LOCAL ACTIONS FOR A SAFER MILWAUKEE CONTINUED:

### CONTINUE TO PROMOTE THE VOLUNTARY SAFE STORAGE AT GUN SHOPS

Currently, there are over 70 gun shops in the Milwaukee area, and approximately 25 are part of the free or reduced storage program. The program “Live Today—Put It Away!” gives friends or family members a place to house a gun when someone is having suicidal ideation or a mental health crisis (Live Today—Put It Away! 2024)

### A NOTE ON SCOPE

While safe storage is very effective at preventing gun injury and suicide, it works best when combined with other community support like better mental health care, good jobs, and safe neighborhoods—that also help reduce violence (Branas et al., 2021).

## CONCLUSION

Unsafe gun storage is a solvable part of Wisconsin's preventable injury and death problem. By passing a proactive safe-storage law and ensuring people can obtain effective locks, state leaders can respect legal gun ownership while fulfilling their basic duty to protect public health. These specific policies, done together with local education, will reduce gun suicides, prevent accidents, and build a lasting culture of safety and responsibility.

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*This policy brief was created by Sakshi Malhotra and Michelle Prager as a part of PH779 - Public Health Policymaking and Analysis at the UWM Zilber College of Public Health.*



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