

Promoting Firearm Safety among Veterans – Findings from the National Firearm Survey

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- None to disclose

Outline

- Veteran suicide epi 101
- The role of firearms
- Findings from the 2015 NFS
- Implications for:
 - Clinicians
 - Researchers

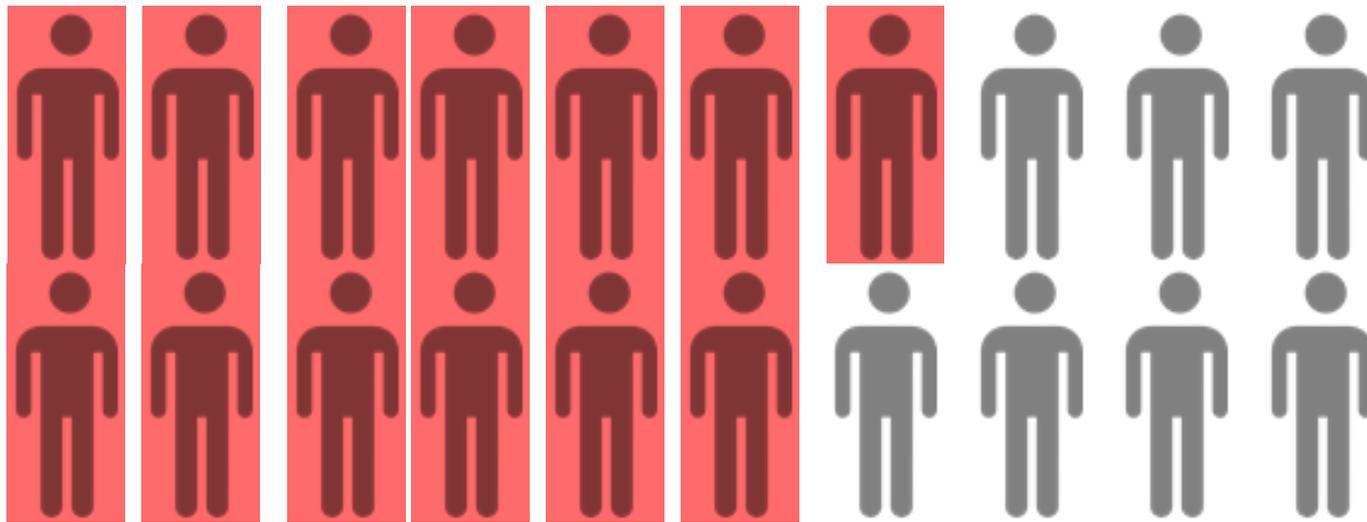
Epi 101

- Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the US
 - 44,000 Americans in 2015
 - Rates increasing since 1999
- Risk of suicide among Veterans ~20% higher
 - Highest rate among younger Vets
 - Though most suicides among older Veterans

An average day...

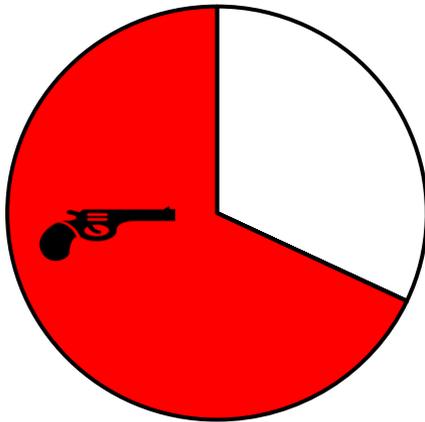


An average day...

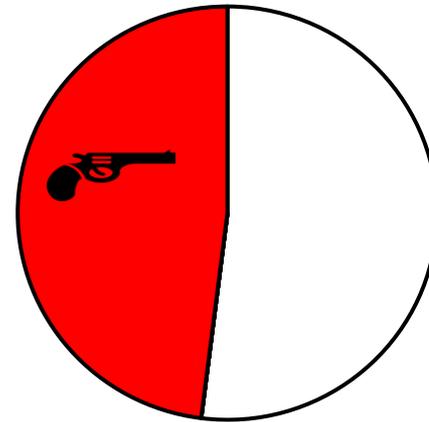


Firearm suicide

Veterans



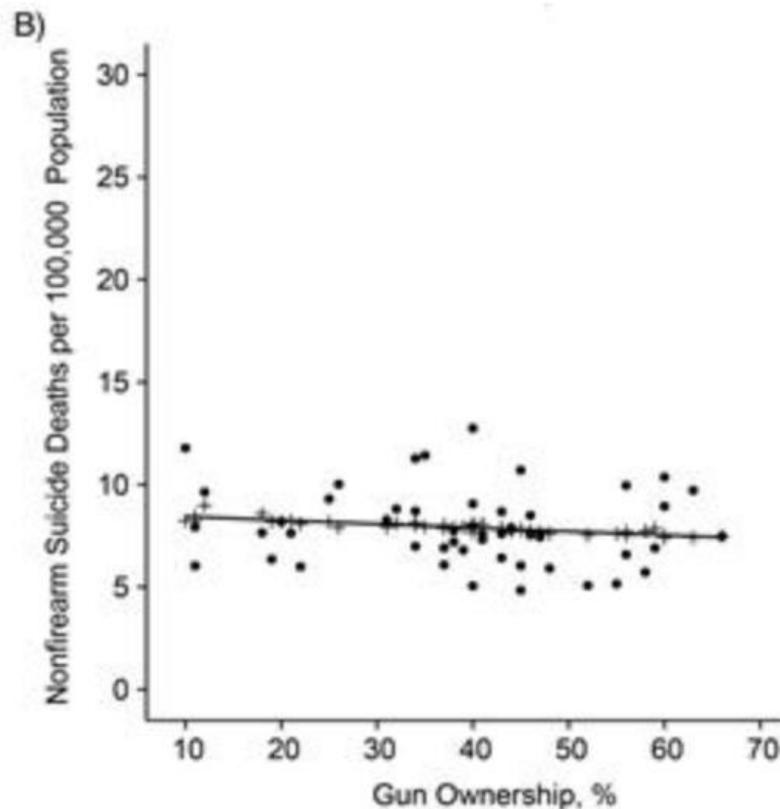
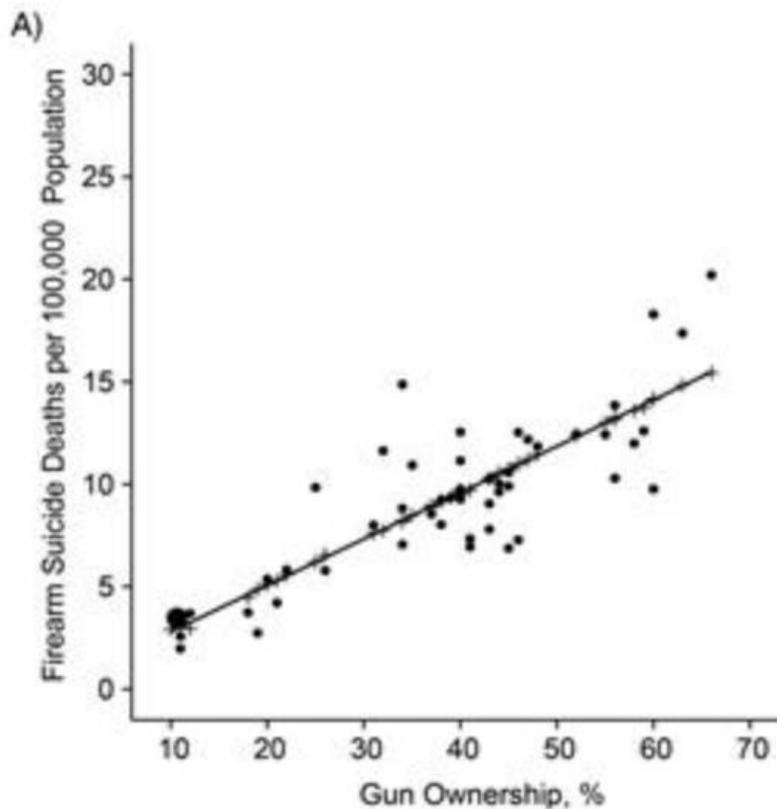
Non-Veterans



Firearm access & suicide risk

- More than 15 U.S. case-control and cross-sectional studies have found that firearm access is an independent risk factor for suicide
- Not explained by differences in other suicide risk factors

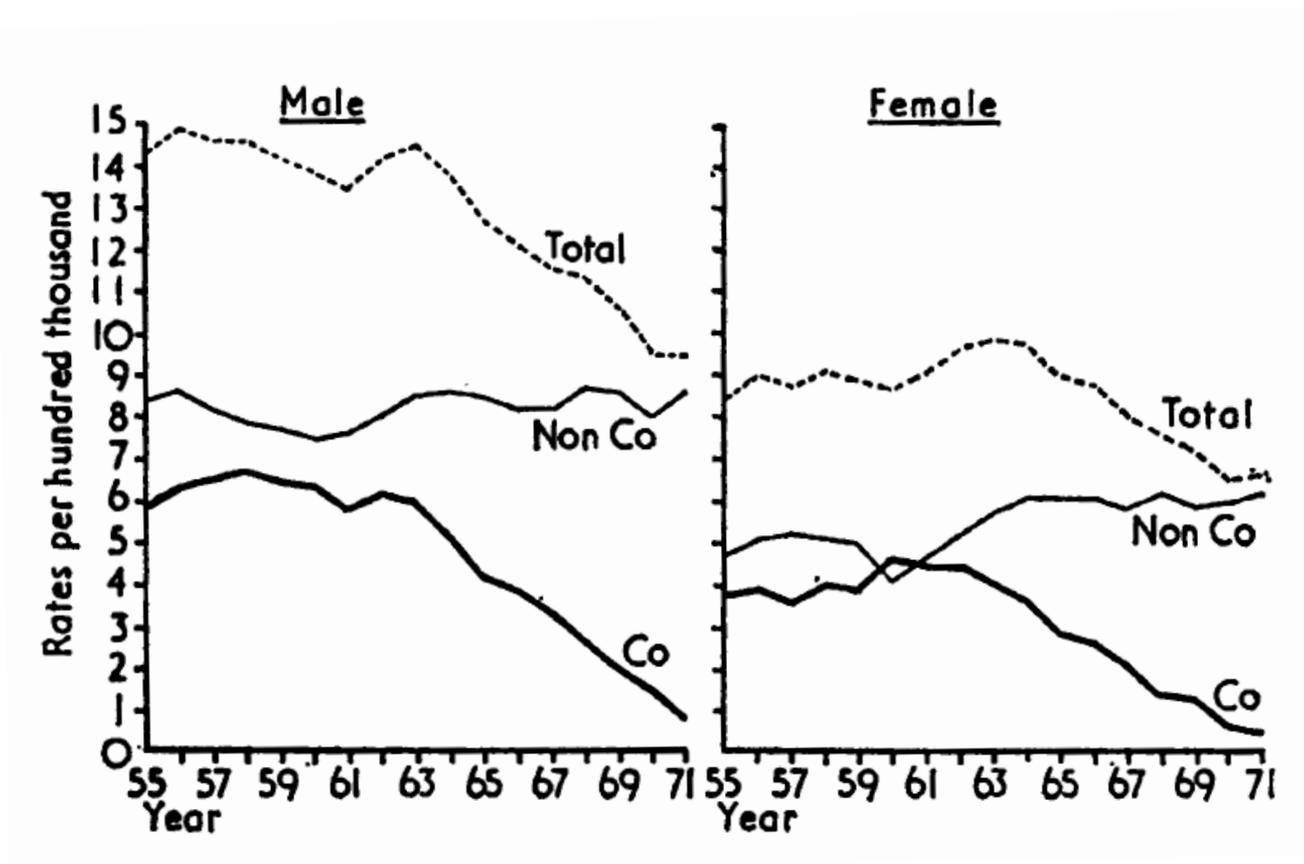
Gun ownership & firearm/non-firearm suicide



POLL QUESTION 1 of 2

- What percentage of US adults own a firearm?
- 20% - CORRECT ANSWER
- 25%
- 30%
- 35%
- 40%

Suicide by method, England 1955-1971



Suicide prevention within VHA

- Leading clinical priority
- No evidence-based firearm safety interventions available to clinicians
 - Considered essential to effective, evidence-based suicide prevention programs
- Scant available data on firearm ownership among Veterans
 - 2004 BRFSS
 - Studies with small samples of Vets

2015 National Firearm Survey

- **Aim:** Assess prevalence of firearm ownership and firearm-related behaviors and perceptions among a nationally representative sample of US Veterans

Methods

- Web-based survey
- Survey firm: Growth for Knowledge (GfK)
- Sampling frame
 - 55,000 US adults
 - Address-based, equal probability sampling
 - Veterans oversampled
- Weights account for nonresponse and under/over coverage imposed by study design based on Census data

Sample

- NFS Sample
 - Nationally representative sample of US adults
 - Excluded active military
- We included:
 - Self-reported Veteran status
 - Reporting owning a firearm

Measures

- Firearm ownership
- Firearm storage practices
- Firearm-related risk perceptions
- Self-reported use of VHA healthcare services
- Self-reported mental health and substance use diagnoses

POLL QUESTION 2 of 2 – NO CORRECT ANSWER

- Please rate your agreement/disagreement with the following statement:

“Having a gun in the home increases suicide risk among household members”

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Neither
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Findings

Findings

- The sample largely represented the known Veteran and VHA-enrolled population
 - 95% male
- 19% of non-VHA utilizing Veterans had a self-reported mental health or substance condition
- 49% of VHA-enrolled Veterans had a self-reported mental health or substance condition

* In general, almost no differences between VHA and non-VHA enrolled Veterans in our findings

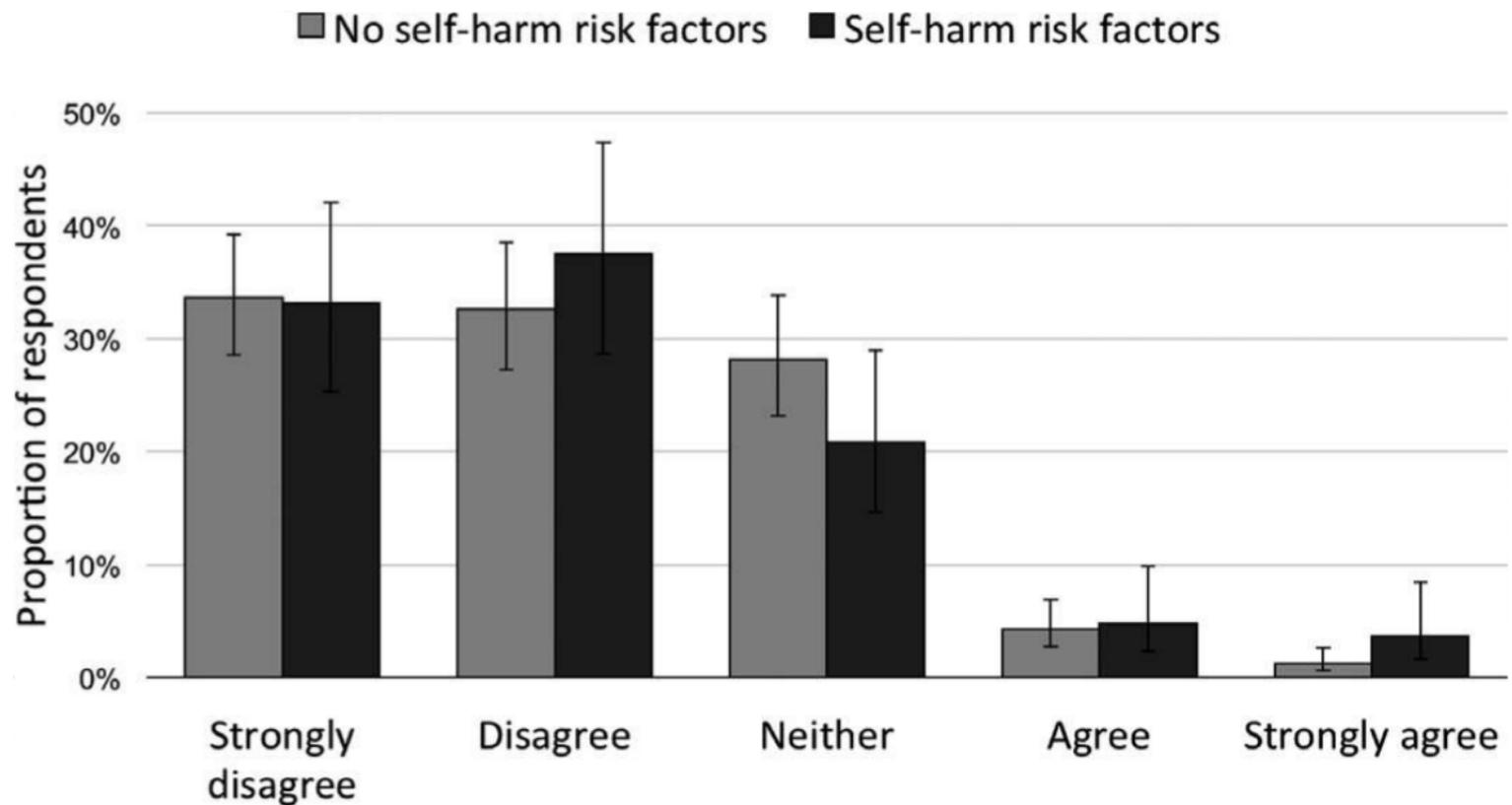
Findings

- 45% of US Veterans own at least one firearm
 - 47% of males
 - 24% of females
- 4% don't consider themselves owners but live in a household with a firearm

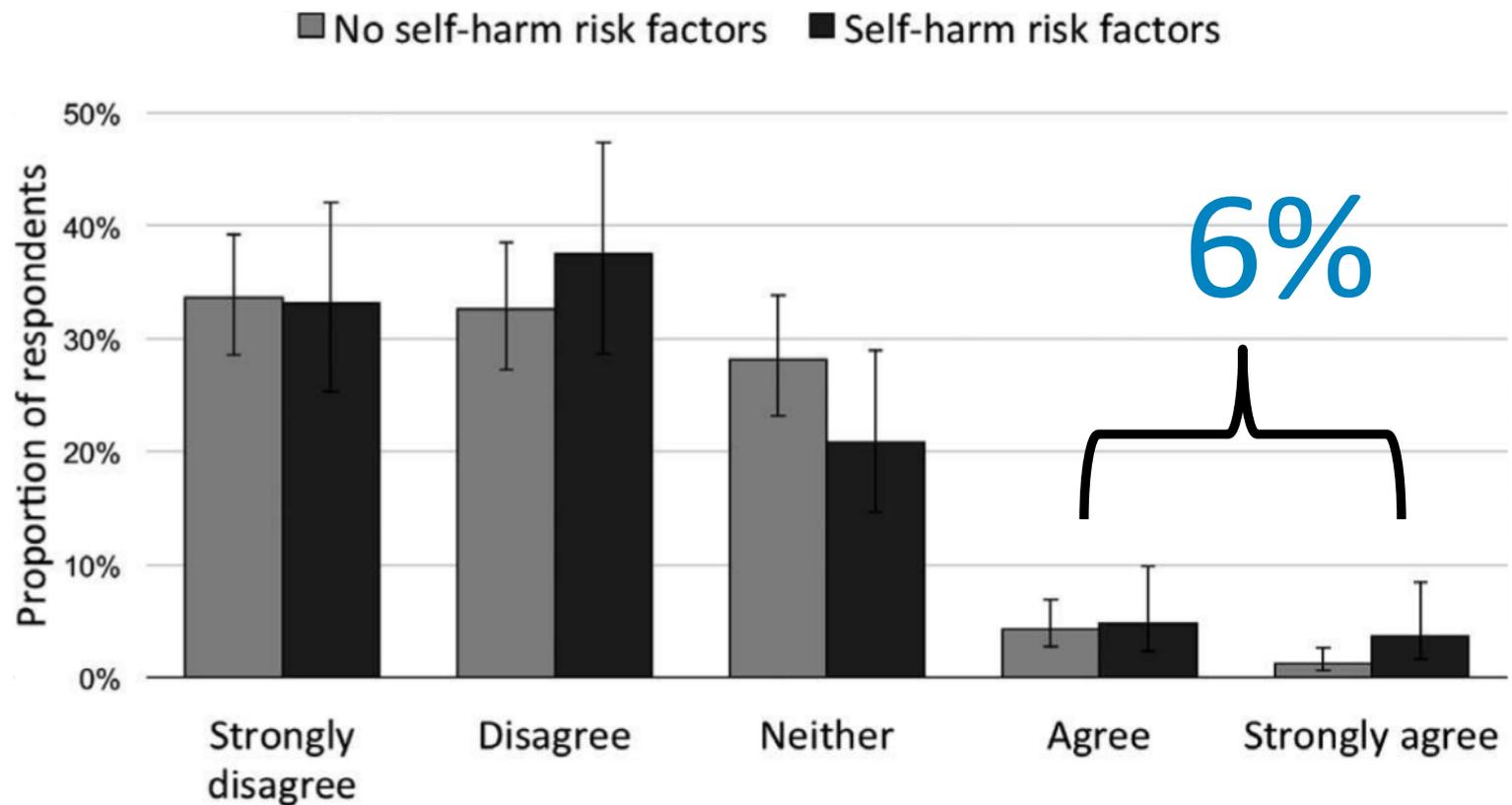
Findings

- 66% have at least 1 unlocked firearm
- 1 in 3 Veteran firearm owners stores at least 1 firearm loaded with ammunition & unlocked
- Average # of firearms owned = 6

Veteran firearm owners



Veteran firearm owners



If a household member were suicidal?

If a household member were suicidal?

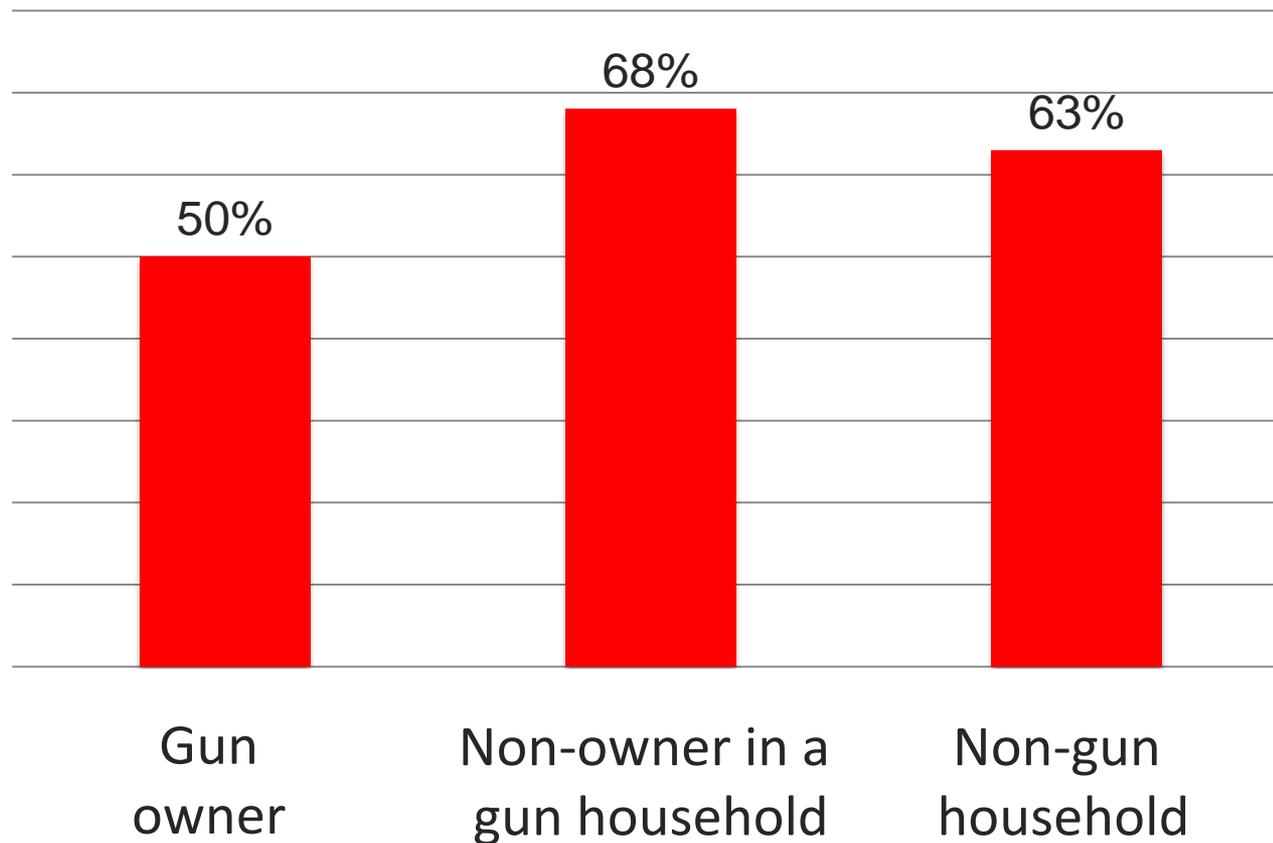


82% would make sure he/she couldn't
access a firearm in the home

Balancing risk vs. benefit of gun ownership

- 66% keep firearms for protection
 - More likely to agree that a firearm is not useful for protection if stored safely
 - Less likely to store firearms safely
 - 46% had loaded/unlocked gun (compared to 9% of others)

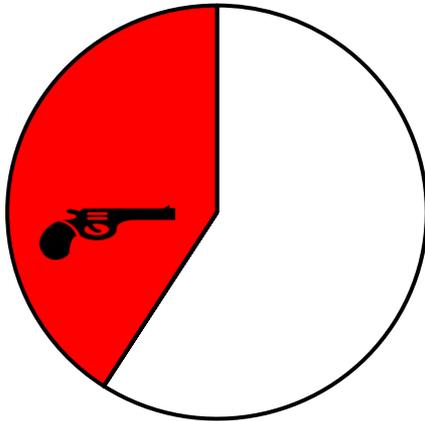
Is it “*at least sometimes*” appropriate to discuss firearms in clinical settings?



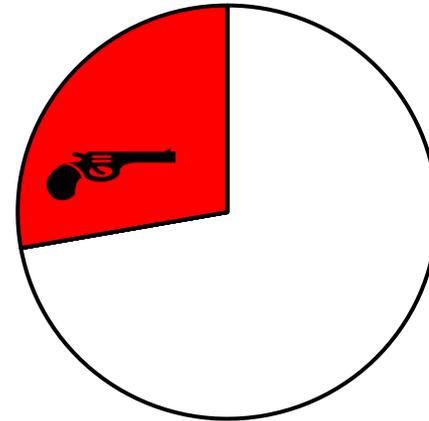
Discussion

Firearm ownership

Veterans



Non-Veterans



Comparisons to 2004 BRFSS

- 49% of Veteran males report the presence of a household firearm in 2004
 - 36% of non-Veteran males
- 31% of Veteran females reported the same
 - 26% of non-Veteran females
- ~18% reported that at least one was loaded & unlocked
- **Caveat:** BRFSS assessed this among those residing with (and not necessarily owning) firearms

Clinicians

- What does this mean for us?

Clinicians

- What does this mean for us?
 - Every 2nd patient we see has a firearm at home (on average)
 - Every 6th patient we see has a firearm at home that is unsecured and loaded with ammunition (on average)

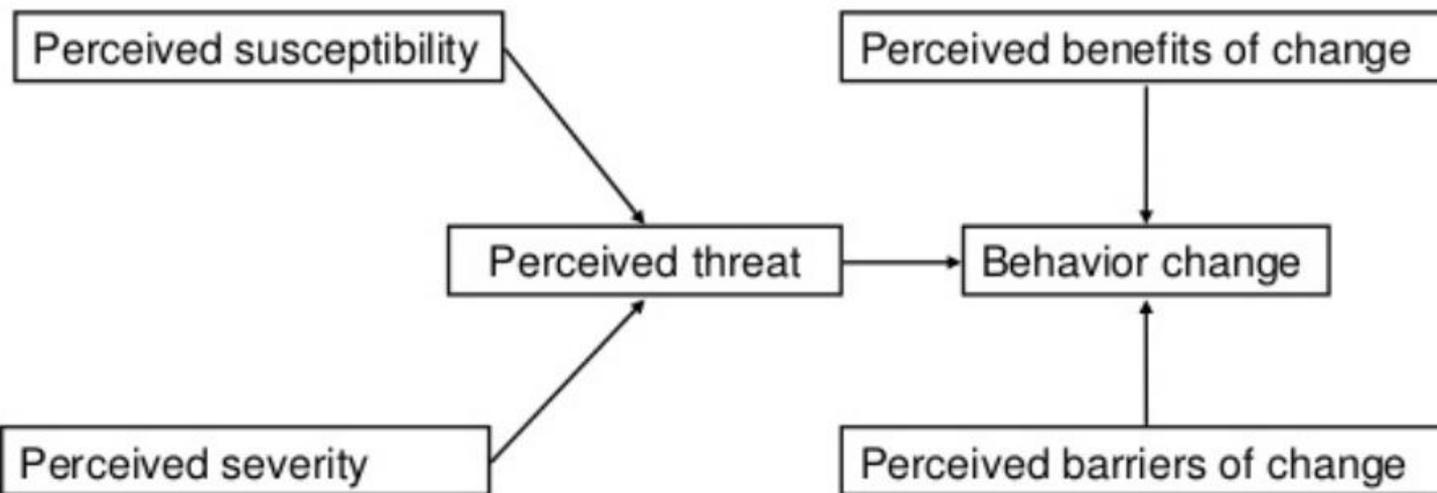
Clinicians

- 50-68% of Veterans reported it was at least sometimes appropriate to discuss guns
 - Think SBIRT for unhealthy alcohol use
- Importantly:
 - No study has ever shown that our patients are upset by these discussions

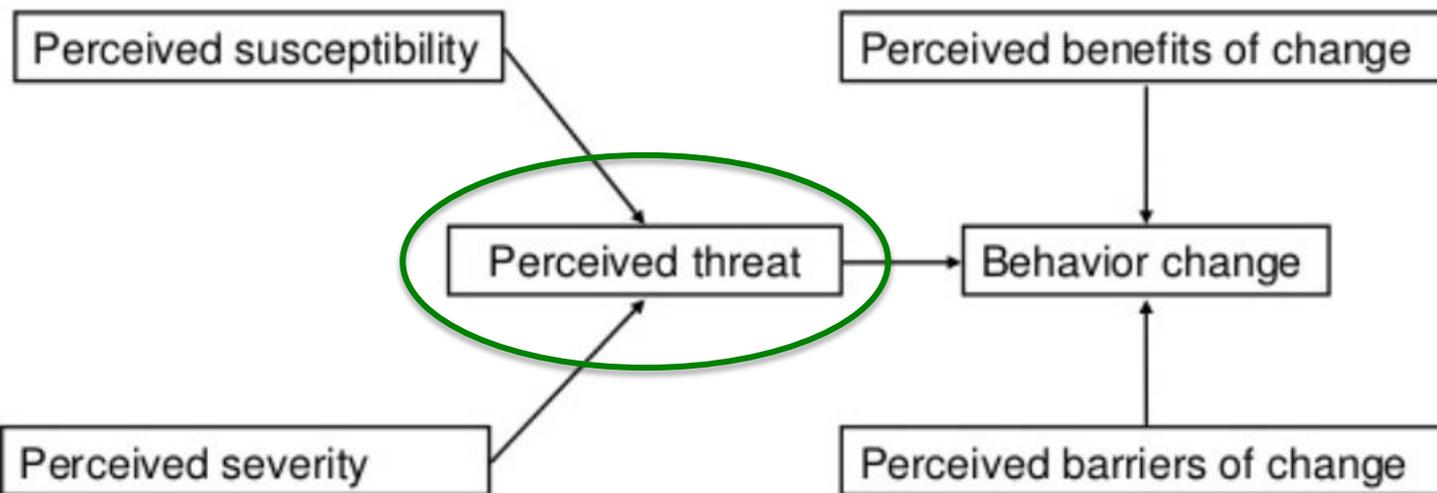
Investigators

- 6% of Veteran firearm owners agree that a firearm increases suicide risk

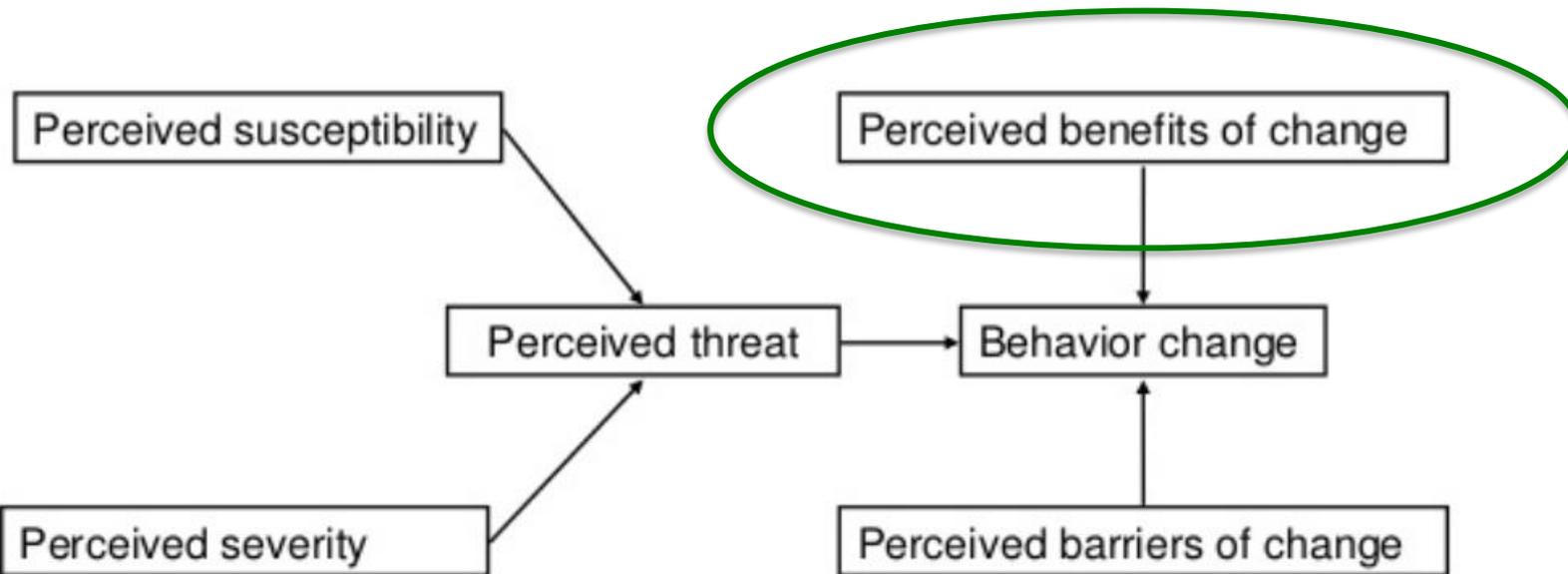
The Health Belief Model



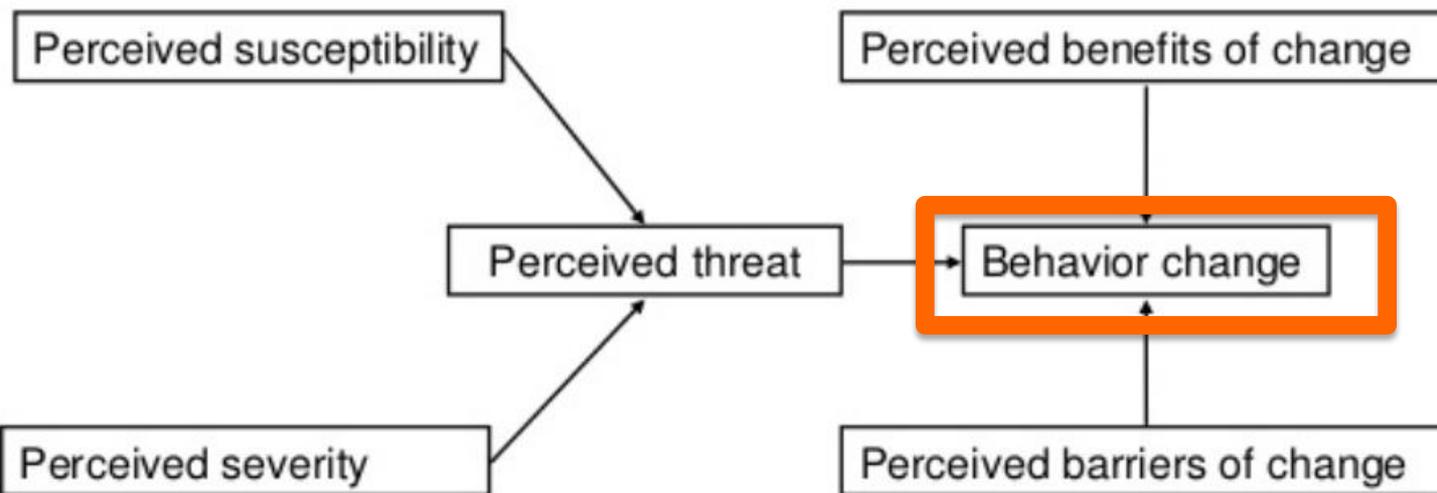
The Health Belief Model



The Health Belief Model



The Health Belief Model



Investigators

- But what does it mean that 82% would still limit firearm access for a suicidal household member?

Wrapping up

- Suicide is the leading clinical priority in VA
- VA has a unique opportunity to address suicide & further general knowledge
- To do so, we'll need to address firearms

Conclusions

- Firearm access is common
- 1 in 3 has a loaded/unlocked firearm at home
- Clinicians have some leeway to discuss firearms
- Risk (mis)perceptions are the challenge at hand

Thank you!

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