

**Project Title:** Moving the Needle: Conversations About Firearm Safety and Suicide Prevention

**Location:** El Paso County, Colorado, United States

**School:** Colorado College

**Students:** Fer Juárez Duran and Maddi Schink (United States, Colorado College 23')

**Mission Statement:** To promote peace by reducing the risk of suicide by firearms in El Paso County through free public firearm safety workshops and a digital media campaign geared toward parents.

**Project Background:** Historically, El Paso County has reported not only the highest number of deaths by suicide in Colorado but suicides involving firearms.<sup>1</sup> In fact, more people in the county die by suicide involving a firearm than both homicides and motor vehicle accidents combined,<sup>2</sup> and in 2020, 54.5% of suicides were completed with a firearm, making guns the leading lethal means used in suicide.<sup>3</sup> Further studies have identified firearms as nearly 90% lethal when used in suicide attempts, which is far greater than with other methods.<sup>4</sup> With this background in mind, local suicide prevention advocates encourage firearm safety education to move the needle on suicide. Knowing that people are more likely to survive a suicide attempt if they do not have access to a firearm during a crisis, there is a meaningful opportunity to employ collaborative place-based suicide prevention that acknowledges the unique social and political landscape of the community to promote peace and save lives. Thus, we propose collaborating with diverse stakeholders to deliver free firearm safety workshops and an accompanying digital media campaign geared toward parents, with the ultimate goal of building community and generating long-term awareness in El Paso County about the importance of securing firearms to reduce the risk of suicide.

**Project Description:** This project will consist of free public gun safety workshops and a digital media campaign intended for parents who are gun owners, since they are likely to be more receptive to messages about safety and responsible gun ownership. We will facilitate both of these elements by working alongside community partners (*in bold and italicized*) such as the state-wide gun violence prevention organization **Colorado Ceasefire** and local suicide prevention and firearm safety experts through the **Suicide Prevention Collaborative of El Paso County**. Specifically, through this collaborative, we will be coordinating with the **Lethal Means Safety Working Group**, which has done extensive research on how to effectively communicate about firearm safety in the region and has committed to guiding us in the development of our training concepts and social media outreach to produce a program suitable for El Paso County. Additionally, we will collaborate with the **Pikes Peak Suicide Prevention's gun safety advocate**, who works closely with firearm retailers and has valuable insight into the current climate surrounding this issue. By bringing together diverse stakeholders to create workshop and social media materials, we are ensuring this project reaches folks across the political spectrum and that it acknowledges the controversial nature of this topic given its proximity to second amendment rights. This project is also promoting peace by opening critical channels of communication between organizations and encouraging future conversations about firearm violence and mental health.

**1) Free Public Gun Safety Workshops:** Over the course of two weeks, we will organize a series of six, two-hour free gun safety workshops offered to the public in libraries and community centers throughout El Paso County, with the goal of 20-30 participants at each session. Three of these workshops will be offered throughout Colorado Springs, and the remaining three will take place in Fountain, Monument, and the Security-Widefield area; one workshop will be in Spanish. While these workshops will be open to the public, we will specifically advertise to parents in nine school districts throughout El Paso County, by contacting the PTOs and PTAs of the major high schools, as well as faith communities and patrons of gun shows and shooting ranges. Our focus on high schools was selected knowing that 20% of high school students reported having easy access to a handgun.<sup>5</sup> These workshops also intentionally take place

---

<sup>1</sup> Colorado Center for Health & Environmental Data. Department of Public Health & Environment. [https://cohealthviz.dphe.state.co.us/t/HSEBPublic/vies/CoVDRS\\_12\\_1\\_17/Story1?%3Aembed=y&%3AshowAppBanner=false&%3AshowShareOptions=true&%3Adisplay\\_count=no&%3AshowVizHome](https://cohealthviz.dphe.state.co.us/t/HSEBPublic/vies/CoVDRS_12_1_17/Story1?%3Aembed=y&%3AshowAppBanner=false&%3AshowShareOptions=true&%3Adisplay_count=no&%3AshowVizHome).

<sup>2</sup> "Lethal Means Safety." Suicide Prevention Collaborative of El Paso County, 2021. <https://spcollab.org/lethal-means-safety/>.

<sup>3</sup> Rep. *El Paso County Coroner's Office 2020 Annual Report*. Accessed November 28, 2021. <https://www.elpasocountyhealth.org/sites/default/files/El%20Paso%20County%20Coroner%27s%20Office%202020%20Annual%20Report.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Conner, Andrew, Deborah Azrael, and Matthew Miller. "Suicide Case-Fatality Rates in the United States, 2007 to 2014." *Annals of Internal Medicine* 171, no. 12 (2019): 885. <https://doi.org/10.7326/m19-1324>.

<sup>5</sup> Milzer, Julia. "One in Five Colorado High School Students Has Access to Firearms." Colorado School of Public Health, 2021.

<https://coloradosph.cuanschutz.edu/news-and-events/newsroom/research-news/public-health-main-site-news/one-in-five-colorado-high-school-students-has-access-to-firearms>.

during the back-to-school season, which is typically characterized by more programming - which we plan to advertise at - and greater parent engagement. Some workshops will be offered from 12 - 2 pm and others from 6:30 - 8:30 pm to accommodate varying schedules. Each workshop will have a raffle for a gun safe and trigger locks and will be catered as incentives to attend. The general schedule of each workshop will be a welcome and personal story about the impact of firearm-related suicide followed by a firearm safety presentation from a combination of Colorado Ceasefire representatives, local suicide prevention advocates, and respected firearm owners in El Paso County - including stats and demonstrations on how and why to lock up firearms - before concluding with a community conversation based on questions from the audience. Due to the topic of suicide, a mental health provider will be present at each workshop.

**2) Digital Media Campaign:** The accompanying digital media campaign will be geared toward parents and gun owners in El Paso County, using social media accounts we make on Instagram and Facebook to spread the message about gun safety. We strategically selected these platforms for both their applicability in sharing our intended messages as well as their high usage amongst adults over age 30. In 2021, social media usage in the U.S. reached a high of 72% of the adult population, so we plan to capitalize on this online audience.<sup>6</sup> On these platforms, we will advertise the workshops, share videos about how to lock up guns, and explain why safe gun storage is important for suicide prevention. The hope is that when we share this information with parents, they will also initiate important conversations about gun safety and suicide with their family and friends so that we can reach people who would not otherwise attend the workshops. It is important to note that we will work closely with our community partners and receptive high school PTOs to share our posts, as well as pay to promote our content through Facebook and Instagram ads. Additionally, we plan to create posters that we will post at community events and hubs parents are likely to frequent (i.e., community centers with youth programs/sports, such as the YMCA).

**Timeline:** Social media and workshop content development with our partners will occur from March to June 2022. The digital media campaign will begin in July. Four weeks (July 25 - August 22) will be spent intentionally preparing for the workshops and advertising with posters. We will then organize six two-hour workshops during the weeks of August 22 and August 29 as the digital media campaign continues.

**Qualifications:** Fer and Maddi have both been personally impacted by gun violence, which motivates them to pursue this project. As the VP of Internal Affairs on CC's Student Government Association, Fer managed the social media accounts and learned how to create and post effective content. Fer also has experience serving as liaison between stakeholders, speaking in front of large groups, and organizing grassroots campaigns as the Publicist of the Native American Student Union, which prepared them for planning and advertising these workshops. Maddi served as the director of a student service club, where she learned about community engagement best practices and how to advertise events with physical and digital media. She also worked on a project in 2020 assessing youth suicide prevention resources in El Paso County, which resulted in conversations with local leaders about the pressing role of firearms in suicide, inspiring this project. Fer and Maddi are fluent in Spanish, which will help in translating the workshop, and they are enrolled in a Zero Suicide course about access to lethal means.

**Sustainability + Safety:** Through this project, all community partners will gain access to workshop and digital media resources crafted from diverse stakeholders that they can continue using to generate conversations about gun safety and suicide prevention in El Paso County. Furthermore, Colorado Ceasefire plans to use the materials we develop to deliver additional gun safety and suicide prevention workshops throughout the state. Importantly, this project will help Colorado Ceasefire build their capacity and lasting relationships in areas of the state that have historically been resistant to their presence while equipping the Suicide Prevention Collaborative of El Paso County with a new ally and specialist in gun violence prevention to support their ongoing lethal means safety efforts. The social media campaign has potential to extend beyond this project through Maddi's senior CC Community Engaged Leaders project, as well as by sharing the digital materials with local gun safety and suicide prevention advocates to continue posting. Considering the pandemic, we will also plan to adapt the workshops to a virtual format or outdoor venue and continue observing local public health guidelines to ensure the safety of all parties.

---

<sup>6</sup> "Demographics of Social Media Users and Adoption in the United States." Pew Research Center, November 23, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/?menulitem=4abfc543-4bd1-4b1f-bd4a-e7c67728ab76>.

