



Violence Policy Center

# American Roulette

MURDER-SUICIDE IN THE UNITED STATES

Third Edition

Road Trip Takes Tragic Turn

**Murder/suicide leaves  
city stunned on Sunday**

**Believe officer killed girlfriend,  
then turned gun on himself**

**Man kills wife, self at tag agency**  
**GOP IN MURDER  
SUICIDE**

Trip Takes Detour Into Murder And Suicide

**Father kills son, self**  
Maumelle mom killed child, then herself, police say

**HORROR AT  
THE RANCH**  
Mother of three kills  
two children, herself

**The Violence Policy Center** (VPC) is a national non-profit educational organization that conducts research and public education on violence in America and provides information and analysis to policymakers, journalists, advocates, and the general public. This report was funded in part with the support of The Herb Block Foundation and The Joyce Foundation. Past studies released by the VPC include:

- *Black Homicide Victimization in the United States: An Analysis of 2005 Homicide Data* (January 2008)
- *When Men Murder Women: An Analysis of 2005 Homicide Data* (September 2007)
- *An Analysis of the Decline in Gun Dealers: 1994 to 2007* (August 2007)
- *Drive-By America* (July 2007)
- *A Shrinking Minority: The Continuing Decline of Gun Ownership in America* (April 2007)
- *When Men Murder Women: An Analysis of 2004 Homicide Data* (September 2006)
- *American Roulette: Murder-Suicide in the United States* (May 2006)
- *Clear and Present Danger: National Security Experts Warn About the Danger of Unrestricted Sales of 50 Caliber Anti-Armor Sniper Rifles to Civilians* (July 2005)
- *Safe At Home: How D.C.'s Gun Laws Save Children's Lives* (July 2005)
- *The Threat Posed to Helicopters by 50 Caliber Anti-Armor Sniper Rifles* (August 2004)
- *United States of Assault Weapons: Gunmakers Evading the Federal Assault Weapons Ban* (July 2004)
- *Vest Buster: The .500 Smith & Wesson Magnum—The Gun Industry's Latest Challenge to Law Enforcement Body Armor* (June 2004)
- *Really Big Guns: Even Bigger Lies* (March 2004)
- *Bullet Hoses—Semiautomatic Assault Weapons: What Are They? What's So Bad About Them?* (May 2003)
- *"Officer Down"—Assault Weapons and the War on Law Enforcement* (May 2003)
- *Firearms Production in America 2002 Edition—A Listing of Firearm Manufacturers in America with Production Histories Broken Out by Firearm Type and Caliber* (March 2003)
- *"Just Like Bird Hunting"—The Threat to Civil Aviation from 50 Caliber Sniper Rifles* (January 2003)
- *Sitting Ducks—The Threat to the Chemical and Refinery Industry from 50 Caliber Sniper Rifles* (August 2002)
- *License to Kill IV: More Guns, More Crime* (June 2002)
- *The U.S. Gun Industry and Others Unknown—Evidence Debunking the Gun Industry's Claim that Osama bin Laden Got His 50 Caliber Sniper Rifles from the U.S. Afghan-Aid Program* (February 2002)
- *"A .22 for Christmas"—How the Gun Industry Designs and Markets Firearms for Children and Youth* (December 2001)
- *Kids in the Line of Fire: Children, Handguns, and Homicide* (November 2001)
- *Unintended Consequences: Pro-Handgun Experts Prove That Handguns Are a Dangerous Choice For Self-Defense* (November 2001)
- *Voting from the Rooftops: How the Gun Industry Armed Osama bin Laden, Other Foreign and Domestic Terrorists, and Common Criminals with 50 Caliber Sniper Rifles* (October 2001)
- *Hispanics and Firearms Violence* (May 2001)
- *Where'd They Get Their Guns?—An Analysis of the Firearms Used in High-Profile Shootings, 1963 to 2001* (April 2001)
- *A Deadly Myth: Women, Handguns, and Self-Defense* (January 2001)
- *Handgun Licensing and Registration: What it Can and Cannot Do* (September 2000)
- *Pocket Rockets: The Gun Industry's Sale of Increased Killing Power* (July 2000)
- *Guns For Felons: How the NRA Works to Rearm Criminals* (March 2000)
- *One Shot, One Kill: Civilian Sales of Military Sniper Rifles* (May 1999)
- *Cease Fire: A Comprehensive Strategy to Reduce Firearms Violence* (Revised, October 1997)

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## Introduction

Most Americans view school shootings, such as the April 1999 attack at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado,<sup>a</sup> or the April 2007 attack at Virginia Tech,<sup>b</sup> solely as mass murders. In the inevitable analysis following such tragic events, attention is rarely given to the fact that many such mass shootings are in fact murder-suicides: after the shooter has ended the lives of his victims, he then kills himself. Even when it is a component of a horrific event like Virginia Tech or Columbine, the phenomenon of murder-suicide garners little public attention as a significant contributor to gun-related death and injury. Yet, as one medical professional has observed, "because many murder-suicides result in the death or injury of family members and sometimes mass murder, they cause countless additional morbidity, family trauma, and disruption of communities."<sup>1</sup>

Murder-suicide is "a dramatic, violent event" in which a person, almost always a man, commits one murder or multiple murders, and then shortly after commits suicide.<sup>2</sup> What makes these acts particularly disturbing is that they involve more than one person and often involve a family. They almost always are committed with a firearm.

As of yet, no national database or tracking system exists to systematically document the toll in death and injury of murder-suicide in the United States.<sup>c</sup> In order to more fully understand the human costs of murder-suicide, starting in 2002 the Violence Policy Center (VPC) began collecting and analyzing news reports of murder-suicides, resulting in a series of studies titled *American Roulette: Murder-Suicide in the United States*. This is the third edition of the study.<sup>d</sup> For each analysis, the VPC tracked murder-suicide incidents over a six-month period using a national clipping service supplemented by Internet news reports. For this most recent edition of the

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<sup>a</sup> On April 20, 1999, Columbine High School students Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold shot and killed 13 people and wounded 23 more before taking their own lives.

<sup>b</sup> On April 16, 2007, Cho Seung-Hui shot and killed 32 people and wounded more than 20 more before taking his own life.

<sup>c</sup> The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS) compiles and combines data from medical examiners, coroners, police, crime labs, and death certificate registrars and includes such information. Originally started as a pilot project by the Harvard University School of Public Health with the support of six foundations, the National Violent Death Reporting System is now overseen by the CDC and operates in 17 states. For more information, see <http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/profiles/nvdrs/default.htm>.

<sup>d</sup> Prior editions were issued in April 2002 (<http://www.vpc.org/studies/amerintr.htm>) and May 2006 (<http://www.vpc.org/studies/amroul2006.pdf>). For a chart comparing the key findings of each of these two editions as well as this most recent edition, please see page eight.

report, news reports of murder-suicides were collected for the period January 1, 2007, through June 30, 2007. To be included in the study, both the murder and subsequent suicide had to occur within 72 hours of each other and within this six-month time period. So while there is no official data to ensure all incidents that actually occurred were included, this study provides the most accurate portrait possible of murder-suicide in America and is most likely the largest and most comprehensive analysis currently available.

Medical studies estimate that between 1,000 and 1,500 deaths per year in the United States are the result of murder-suicide.<sup>3</sup> This VPC analysis reveals that in the first half of 2007:

- There were 554 murder-suicide deaths, of which 234 were suicides and 320 were homicides.
- Using these figures, nine murder-suicide events occurred in the United States each week during the study period.
- Of the 234 suicides, 218 were male, 11 were female, and five were of unidentified gender.
- Of the 320 homicides, 227 victims were female and 74 victims were male, and 19 were of an unidentified sex.
- Forty-five of the homicide victims were children and teens less than 18 years of age.
- Forty-four children and teens less than 18 years of age were survivors who witnessed some aspect of the murder-suicide.

By doubling the total number of fatalities during the six-month period for a yearly estimate, there were an estimated 1,108 murder-suicide deaths in 2007. This is within the standard range of estimates for murder-suicides. Due to the necessary limitations of our incident-collection method, this is most likely an underestimate. Anecdotal evidence suggests that our study may have missed a small percentage of murder-suicides. Whether this would be the result of an incident not being reported, not being reported as a murder-suicide, not falling within our self-imposed time frame, or not being published in a local newspaper is not known. In the absence of a national surveillance system, there is no means available for a complete and accurate count. However, once again, the VPC study is most likely the most recent, complete, accurate, and detailed accounting undertaken.

## Trends Identified from the Study

Listed below are murder-suicide trends and characteristics as identified from the VPC analysis. Following each subsection is an incident taken from the news reports collected for the study illustrating the subsection's findings. At the end of this section, on page eight, is a chart comparing key findings of this study with those from the prior two editions.

Following this section is an appendix that lists the number of murder-suicides by state. Separately, documents containing the news reports collected for the study, arranged alphabetically by state and then chronologically by month and day within that state, are available from the VPC. States with no reported murder-suicides during the six-month period are also listed in the appendix.

Nine states had 10 or more murder-suicides in the six-month period of the study. In order, these states were: Florida (24), Texas (24), California (17), Pennsylvania (14), Arizona (12), Georgia (12), New York (11), North Carolina (10), and Ohio (10).

### ***Most murder-suicides involve a firearm***

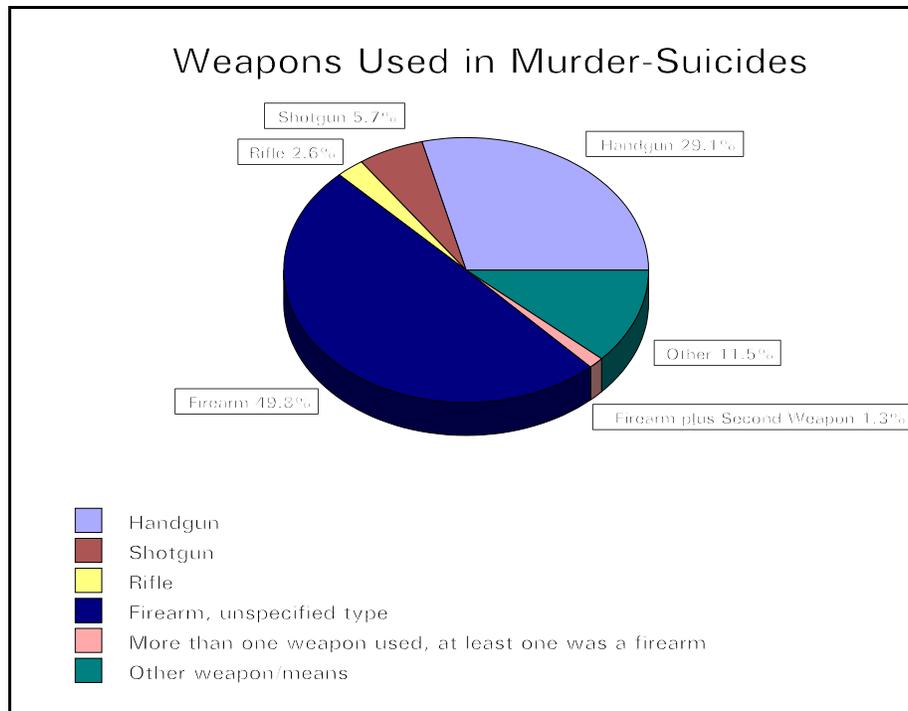
In the analysis, 88.5 percent of murder-suicide incidents involved a firearm. For *all* murder-suicides:

- 29.1 percent involved a handgun,
- 2.6 percent involved a rifle,
- 5.7 percent involved a shotgun,
- 49.8 percent involved a firearm which was not identified more specifically than "a gun,"
- 1.3 percent involved more than one weapon, but one of the weapons was a firearm, and,
- 11.5 percent involved other weapons/means.<sup>e</sup>

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<sup>e</sup> The 11.5 percent involving other weapons/means consisted of 26 incidents in which the weapon(s)/means could be identified. For these 26 incidents, the weapons/means used were: seven knife, five hanging, four arson, four strangulation, two zip tie, one carbon monoxide poisoning, one

The chart below, "Weapons Used in Murder-Suicides," illustrates the weapons used from the VPC analysis of incidents in which the weapon(s) could be identified, including a distribution of firearm murder-suicides in regard to firearm type.



All major murder-suicide studies in the United States completed since 1950 have shown that firearms are by far the most common method of committing homicide, with the offender choosing the firearm for suicide as well.<sup>4</sup> Estimates range from firearms being used in 80 percent to 94 percent of cases, but many other weapons, including aircraft, have been used.

**WISCONSIN:** In June, Ambrosio Analco, 23, entered the home where his girlfriend Nicole McAfee and three children were staying and opened fire. He killed Nicole, 19, their six-month-old twin sons, Nicole’s sister Ashley Lynn Huerta, 21, and family friend Vanessa Iverson, 19, before turning the gun on himself. Analco and McAfee’s 19-month-old daughter was found wounded in a minivan in front of the home. Police were alerted to the situation when Gaspar Huerta, Ashley’s husband, escaped from a second-story window to call 911. McAfee left Analco a year before because he had started abusing her. The two were recently involved in court proceedings involving child support payments. Analco threatened to kill Nicole and the children shortly before the shooting took place.

antifreeze poisoning, one car, one aircraft, one power saw, one bodily force, one hammer, one iron pipe, one blunt object, and one suffocation. The total amount of murder weapons/means exceeds the number of incidents because multiple weapons/means were used in four cases.

### ***Most murderers in murder-suicides are male***

In this study, 95 percent of the offenders were male. Other studies analyzing murder-suicide have found that most perpetrators of murder-suicide are male—more than 90 percent in recent studies of the United States.<sup>5</sup> Another study which only looked at murder-suicides *involving couples* noted that more than 90 percent were perpetrated by men.<sup>6</sup> This is consistent with homicides in general, in which 89 percent of homicides are committed by male offenders.<sup>7</sup> However, most homicides involve male victims killed by male offenders (65 percent), whereas a male victim being specifically targeted by a male offender in a murder-suicide is relatively rare.

CALIFORNIA: In June, Kevin Morrissey, 51, shot and killed his wife, Dr. Mamiko Kawai, 40, and their two children, Nikki, eight, and Kim, six, in a parking lot. Morrissey left a note explaining that the failing business he and his wife owned was at a financial breaking point that could not be remedied. Morrissey purchased the handgun used in the incident less than two months earlier at a gun store near the location of the company. Morrissey's brother and neighbors claimed he had once been employed by the CIA. A friend said, "They were the family we all want to be a part of."

### ***Most murder-suicides involve an intimate partner***

The most prevalent type of murder-suicide was between two intimate partners,<sup>f</sup> with the man killing his wife or girlfriend. Such events are commonly the result of a breakdown in the relationship.<sup>8</sup> The average age difference between the offender and primary victim was 6.0 years. Overall, the age difference ranged from none to 23 years. (Other studies on fatal violence for spouses have found that there is a greater risk of homicide victimization as the age difference between the husband and wife increases.<sup>9</sup>) In this study, 73 percent of all murder-suicides involved an intimate partner. Of these, 94 percent were females killed by their intimate partners.<sup>9</sup>

CALIFORNIA: In March, 28-year-old Fredy Melara shot and killed his girlfriend of four years, 24-year-old Gabriela Gonzalez. He also shot his two daughters, aged three and 13 months, in the head before killing himself. Family members noted that Melara, a security guard, had been more controlling of Gonzalez after their recent move to the neighborhood. The couple was heard shouting and arguing just before the incident.

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<sup>f</sup> An intimate partner or intimate acquaintance is defined as a spouse, common-law spouse, ex-spouse, or girlfriend/boyfriend.

<sup>9</sup> In comparison, in 2005—the most recent data available—for all murders (where the relationship could be determined) 17 percent of murder victims were killed by an intimate partner. Of these, 79 percent were females killed by their intimate partners. Data from the 2005 FBI Supplementary Homicide Report. Analysis by the Violence Policy Center.

***Most murder-suicides with three or more victims involve a male “family annihilator”—a subcategory of intimate partner murder-suicide***

Most multiple-victim murder-suicides involving a male murderer and a large number (three or more) of victims are perpetrated by family annihilators. Family annihilators are murderers who kill their wives/girlfriends and children, as well as other family members, before killing themselves. In many cases, a family annihilator is suffering from depression and has financial or other problems and feels the family is better off dying with him than remaining alive to deal with the problems at hand.<sup>10</sup>

NEBRASKA: In January, Dick Wilkinson, a 62-year-old grandfather shot and killed his daughter, 26, son-in-law, 35, and two grandchildren, three and six, in their beds at the home in which they all lived. There were years of tension between Dick Wilkinson and his daughter, Jaime Lee, which involved allegations of she and her husband Darrell stealing cash from Wilkinson and allegations of abuse between Wilkinson and Jaime. In 2003, the court granted Jaime Lee a protective order against her father for one month before being dropped. The application for the protective order cited that Wilkinson kept guns and knives at home. The family had moved out of the home for a week because tension was so high. They returned the night of the shooting with plans to move out permanently within 48 hours.

***Most murder-suicides occur in the home***

In this study, 75 percent of murder-suicides occurred in the home. For intimate partners, however, 80 percent of incidents occurred in the home. Though not specified in most studies, available data confirm that the home of the offender and/or victim is the most likely place for murder-suicide. Studies show that within the home, more murder-suicides are committed in the bedroom than any other room.<sup>11</sup>

FLORIDA: In January, relatives entered a home “festooned with holiday decorations” to find David Bryant, 58, and his wife Cathy, 53, shot to death. Sheriff’s officials determined David shot his wife and then took his own life in the couple’s bedroom. The couple retired from the corrections division of the Sheriff’s office in 2004 and had just adopted a dog the week prior to the incident. A former colleague at the Sheriff’s department said, “They were a happy couple as far as anybody knows....Sometimes things happen to people behind closed doors.”

### ***Children are often victims of, and witnesses to, murder-suicide***

Forty-five of the homicide victims were children and teens less than 18 years of age. Forty-four children and teens less than 18 years of age were survivors who witnessed some aspect of the murder-suicide.<sup>h</sup>

MICHIGAN: In March, newlyweds James Hawkins and Allynn McDade were found dead in their home. Hawkins, 49, shot and killed his wife, 26, with a handgun as they argued while their four children prepared for school. A family friend saw the children, ages three, six, seven, and nine, looking out the window, went inside to investigate, and found the couple's bodies. Hawkins shot his wife and had fired at the oldest child before killing himself.

### ***Unique factors may drive murder-suicide among the elderly***

In this study, 27 percent of murder-suicides involved a murderer 55 years of age or older. This is relatively consistent with the fact that 23 percent of the U.S. population is aged 55 years or older.<sup>12</sup> Older people rarely commit homicide. If most murder-suicides involve family turmoil, a smaller, discrete category involves older people where the declining health of either the victim, the offender, or both is an issue. In 2005, only 5.4 percent of known homicide offenders were 55 years of age or older.<sup>13</sup> Suicide, however, is disproportionately represented in this age group, with 29.5 percent of suicide victims being 55 years of age or older.<sup>14</sup>

KANSAS: In June, 89-year-old Dewey Durham shot his wife Leona, 88, as she lie in their bed. Dewey was found lying next to his wife with a self-inflicted gunshot wound. The couple was found after a call to 911 was made from the address with the caller hanging up. Neighbors told police that Leona had been in and out of the hospital recently and was very ill.

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<sup>h</sup> One study noted that children of the victim and/or perpetrator witnessed the murder-suicide, were in the immediate vicinity, found their parents' bodies, or were killed in 43 percent of the cases studied. E. Morton, C.W. Runyan, K.E. Moracco, J. Butts, "Partner homicide-suicide involving female homicide victims: a population-based study in North Carolina, 1988-1992," *Violence and Victims* 13, no. 2 (1998): 91-106.

*American Roulette: Select Comparisons for  
2002, 2006, and 2008 Editions of Study<sup>i</sup>*

<b>Category</b>	<b>2002 Findings</b>	<b>2006 Findings</b>	<b>2008 Findings</b>
<i>Murder-suicide incidents involving a firearm</i>	94.5%	92.0%	88.5%
<i>Murder-suicide incidents in which the killers were male</i>	90%	94%	95%
<i>Murder-suicide incidents that involved intimate partners</i>	74%	74%	73%
<i>Average age difference in intimate partner killings</i>	6.6 years	6.3 years	6.0 years
<i>Murder-suicide incidents that occurred in the home</i>	76%	75%	75%
<i>Number of children killed in murder-suicides</i>	N/T	47	45
<i>Number of children who witnessed murder-suicides</i>	N/T	N/T	44
<i>Murder-suicide incidents among the elderly</i>	21%	23%	27%

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<sup>i</sup> N/T = Not tabulated.

## Conclusion

Most people think of suicide as a solitary act, affecting only one person. Yet, the effects of murder-suicide go far beyond the shooter: family, friends, co-workers, and absolute strangers are among those who are killed as a result of these acts of desperation. Moreover, murder-suicide often leaves children parentless. During the six-month period tallied in this study, there were 234 suicides—yet the *total* number of deaths was 554. More people died from murders associated with the suicide—320—than from the suicides themselves. These numbers call into grave question the common belief that suicide, especially firearms suicide, is a solitary act that affects only the shooter.

A nationwide database to track murder-suicide should be established or integrated into existing data collection mechanisms. In order to better understand the phenomenon and develop effective prevention strategies, the data collected should be detailed and include: the gender, sex, age, ethnicity, and profession of the perpetrator and victim(s); the type of weapon used, including the make and model of firearm; the specific location of the event, e.g. workplace, specific room in residence; and, any available information regarding the motivation of the murderer.

Domestic violence is associated with a very significant number of murder-suicides. Therefore stronger domestic violence legislation may be one avenue of intervention, including programs that assist men with coping with issues of control and separation. Moreover, experts have suggested that more research should be focused on the impact that domestic violence murder-suicides have on the families in which they occur.

Depression and the strain of providing care for a failing spouse have been cited by experts as a significant contributing factor to murder-suicide among older persons.<sup>15</sup> Health care options that provide aid to older caregivers and that aim to monitor and treat depression in such cases may be one useful intervention.

The most common catalytic component in murder-suicide is the use of a firearm. Firearms allow shooters to act on impulse. Every major murder-suicide study ever conducted has shown that a firearm—with its unmatched combination of lethality and availability—is the weapon most often used to murder the victims, with the offenders then turning the gun on themselves.<sup>16</sup> In this study, access to a gun was the critical component for almost all of the murder-suicides. Of the 40 murder-suicides with more than one homicide victim, 31 were firearm-related. The presence of a gun allows the offender to quickly and easily kill a greater number of victims. If there had not been easy access to a firearm, these deaths may simply have been injuries or may not have occurred at all. Efforts should be made to restrict access to firearms where there is

an increased risk of murder-suicide, for example where an individual has a history of domestic violence and/or has threatened suicide. State and local officials, including judges, should aggressively enforce laws that currently prohibit individuals with a misdemeanor domestic violence conviction or who are the subject of a restraining order for domestic violence from purchasing or possessing a firearm.

## Appendix: Murder-Suicides by State

This appendix lists murder-suicides by state and the District of Columbia. This chart includes the number of murder-suicide incidents recorded during the six-month study period, as well as the total number of people who died. It is important to note that lack of a murder-suicide during the first half of the year is in no way an indicator of whether or not there will be any reports of murder-suicide in the second half of the year.

State	Number of Murder-Suicide Events in the First Half of 2007	Number of People Dead from Murder-Suicide Events in the First Half of 2007
Alabama	4	8
Alaska	0	0
Arizona	12	27
Arkansas	4	11
California	17	42
Colorado	6	12
Connecticut	2	7
Delaware	0	0
District of Columbia	0	0
Florida	24	50
Georgia	12	27
Hawaii	0	0
Idaho	2	5
Illinois	3	6
Indiana	5	10
Iowa	0	0
Kansas	2	4

<b>State</b>	<b>Number of Murder-Suicide Events in the First Half of 2007</b>	<b>Number of People Dead from Murder-Suicide Events in the First Half of 2007</b>
Kentucky	4	9
Louisiana	5	11
Maine	0	0
Maryland	2	5
Massachusetts	7	16
Michigan	4	10
Minnesota	3	6
Mississippi	2	4
Missouri	2	4
Montana	0	0
Nebraska	3	9
Nevada	3	6
New Hampshire	2	4
New Jersey	9	21
New Mexico	0	0
New York	11	25
North Carolina	10	21
North Dakota	2	4
Ohio	10	21
Oklahoma	6	15
Oregon	2	4
Pennsylvania	14	32
Rhode Island	0	0

<b>State</b>	<b>Number of Murder-Suicide Events in the First Half of 2007</b>	<b>Number of People Dead from Murder-Suicide Events in the First Half of 2007</b>
South Carolina	1	2
South Dakota	0	0
Tennessee	2	4
Texas	24	50
Utah	0	0
Vermont	1	2
Virginia	5	41
Washington	4	8
West Virginia	1	2
Wisconsin	2	9
Wyoming	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>234</b>	<b>554</b>



## Endnotes

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14. Data from the CDC National Center for Injury Prevention and Control's WISQARS program ([www.cdc.gov/ncipc](http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc)).

15. J.E. Malphurs and Donna Cohen, "A statewide case-control study of spousal homicide-suicide in older persons," *American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry* 13, no. 3 (2005): 211-7.

16. Alan R. Felthous and Anthony Hempel, "Combined Homicide-Suicides: A Review," *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 40, no. 5 (1995): 846-856. See, for example, R.D. Comstock, S. Mallonee, E. Kruger, K. Rayno, A. Vance, and F. Jordan, "Epidemiology of homicide-suicide events: Oklahoma, 1994-2001," *American Journal of Forensic Medicine and Pathology* 26, no. 3 (2005): 229-35.