



The Jed Foundation

# Lethal Means Reduction: A Practical Approach to School Safety and Suicide Prevention in Rural Communities

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Safe Schools Summit 2023





## The Jed Foundation

**The Jed Foundation (JED) works to protect emotional health and prevent suicide for our nation's teens and young adults**

Kurt D. Michael, Ph.D.

# Seize the Awkward



American  
Foundation  
for Suicide  
Prevention



- [Seize the Awkward Ad](#)





## Session Agenda

- An overview of the history, rationale, and effectiveness of the lethal means safety approach to suicide prevention.
  - The session will focus on implementing lethal means reduction approaches for youth and families in the context of K-12 schools.
  - The presenters will describe the concrete steps of promoting lethal means safety so participants can get a clearer picture of the implementation challenges and opportunities to better assess readiness in their settings.
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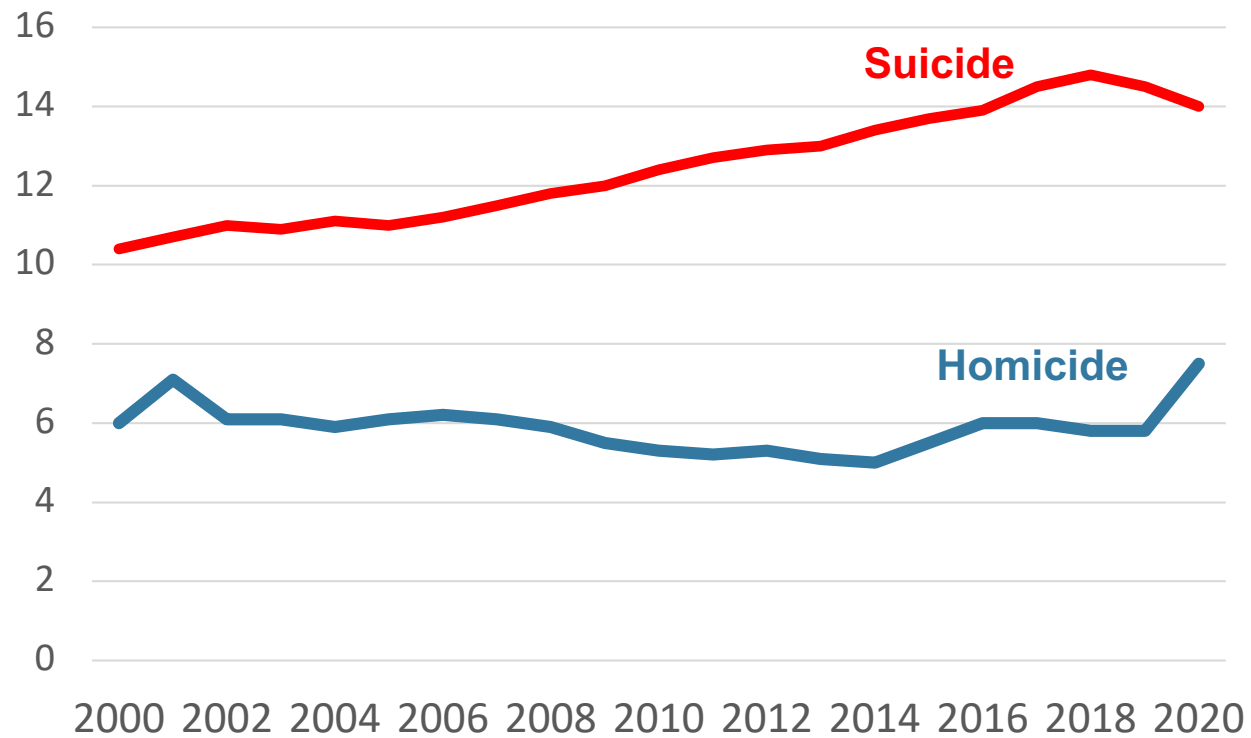


# The Scope of the Problem

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## US Suicide & Homicide Rates, 2000-2020



# Recent Trends Among Youth

Epidemiology 2001 - 2021



## Females between 10-14

**Rates increased over 300%  
(0.6 to 2.8 per 100k)**

## Females between 15-24

**Rates more than doubled  
(2.9 to 6.1 per 100k)**

## Males between 10-14

**Rates increased significantly  
(1.9 to 3.2 per 100k)**

## Males between 15-24

**Rates increased significantly  
(16.5 to 23.8 per 100k)**



# Recent Trends Among Youth by Race

15–19-year-old US teens between 2011 – 2021

## Black males

Rates more than doubled  
(6.9 to 14.3 per 100k)

## Hispanic males

Rates increased by 1.4  
(7.9 to 11.4 per 100k)

## White males

Rates increased by 1.2  
(14.3 to 16.8 per 100k)

## Black females

Rates almost tripled  
(2.0 to 5.6 per 100k)

## Hispanic females

Rates increased by 1.5  
(2.8 to 4.1 per 100k)

## White females

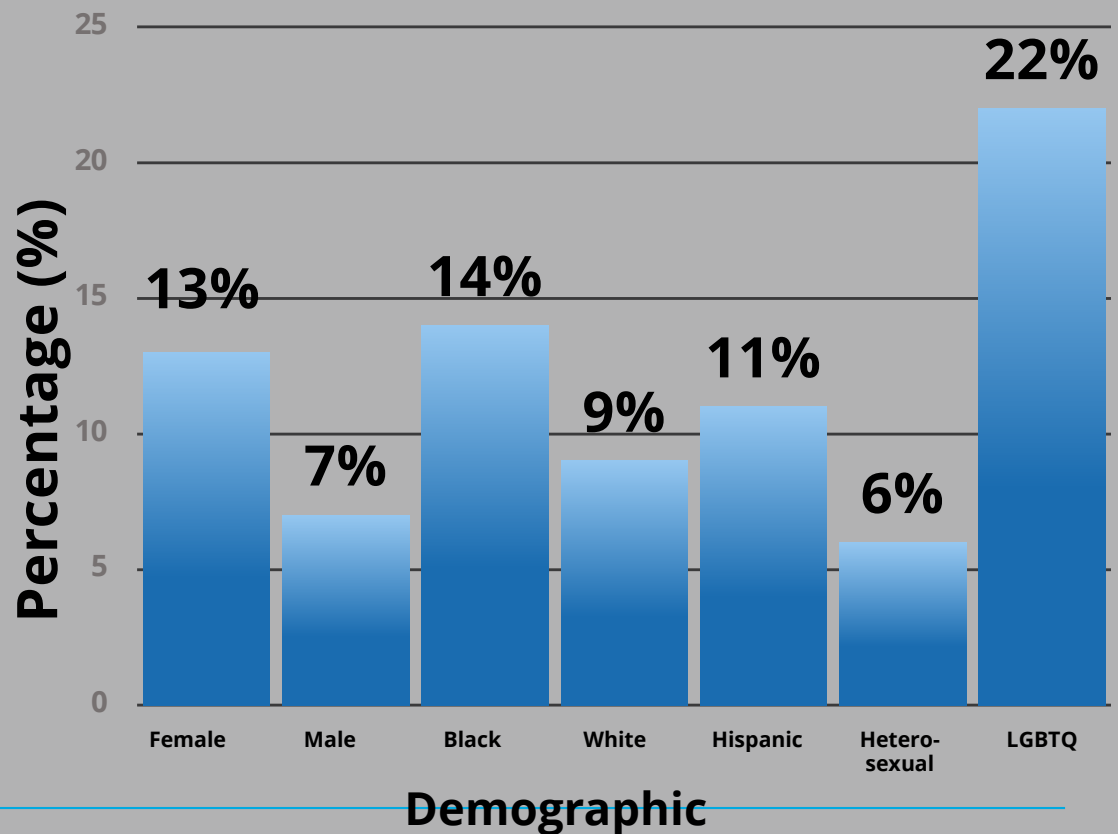
Rates increased by 1.3  
(3.8 to 5.1 per 100k)



# US High School Student Suicide Attempt Rate: 2021 YRBS



**10% of Adolescents in Grades 9-12 Reported Making at Least One Attempt**



Source: Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance 2021 CDC; Data from a sample of 17,232 students

# JED's Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health Promotion & Suicide Prevention

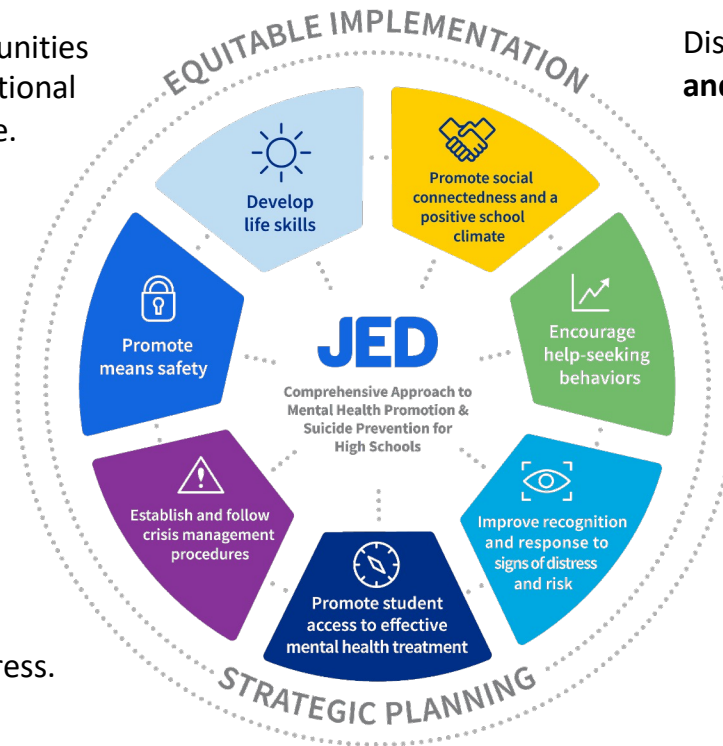


District/school provides opportunities for students to **develop** foundational **life skills** for success in adult life.

District/school proactively educates and **promotes means safety** to the high school community (staff, families, caregivers, students).

District/school **establishes and follows crisis management procedures** for students in distress.

District/school **promotes access to effective mental health treatment** and better connections to mental healthcare in the community.



District/school **promotes social connectedness and a positive school climate.**

District/school strengthens efforts to **encourage student help-seeking behavior**

District/school implements a proactive, comprehensive approach for **improved recognition and response to warning signs of distress and risk.**

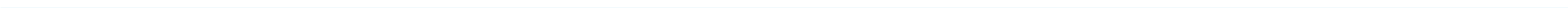
# Problem statement and call to action regarding lethal means safety



- In 2020, **24,292** Americans took their lives with a gun, accounting for **54%** of all firearm-related deaths.
  - The leading method of suicide is by firearm and young people between 10 and 19 are particularly vulnerable, especially those in rural America where the odds of dying by suicide are **twice** the rate than for those who live in urban places. Rural teens also report perceiving easier access to a gun (36%) compared to their urban peers (18%).
  - We can reduce youth suicides if we focus on the “how” of suicide, which is at the heart of the “lethal means safety” movement and based on several scientific findings.
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# The science behind lethal means safety

- First, suicidal crises are often brief. Feelings of despair, isolation, and depression, ebb and flow. It is normal for young people to experience major fluctuations in mood and behavior. The overall goal is for them to survive these crises.





# The science behind lethal means safety

- Second, the transition from suicidal thoughts to an attempt is difficult to predict and suicidal crises often escalate quickly. In a study of individuals hospitalized after a suicide attempt, nearly half reported the time that elapsed from thinking about making that attempt to the actual attempt was ten minutes or less.
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# The science behind lethal means safety

- Third, even when individuals become acutely suicidal, they are often ambivalent about wanting to die. In one study of suicidal individuals, a higher percentage changed their minds and opted not to follow through with the attempt compared to those that attempted.
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# International and Local Examples



THIS

IS SUICIDE  
PREVENTION.



Learn to connect at [LiveOnUtah.org](https://www.LiveOnUtah.org)



## Pesticides and Sri Lanka

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- Sri Lanka had one of the world's highest suicide rates in mid-1990s; pesticides were the leading method.
- The most highly human-toxic pesticides were banned in the mid- to late-'90s.
- Suicide rate dropped 50% from 1996 to 2005, saving 20,000 lives.
- The drop was driven by a decline in pesticide suicides.
- Suicides by other methods did not drop. Nor did nonfatal pesticide attempts.
- The *behavior* (trying to die) didn't appear to change.
- What changed was the lethality of that behavior.





# Israeli Defense Force (IDF):

## An International Example of Means Reduction through Policy Change

JED

**In the early 2000s, IDF focused on preventing suicides.**

Most were by firearm, many on weekends while soldiers were on leave.

**In 2006, IDF required soldiers to leave weapons on base during weekend leaves.**

**The suicide rate decreased  
by 40%.**

**Weekend suicides dropped  
significantly.**

**Weekday suicides  
did not.**

**Why?**

Source: Lubin, SLTB 2010

## Why Do Means Matter?

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Not everyone who *becomes* suicidal *remains* suicidal.



Have you had  
thoughts of suicide?  
can save a life.

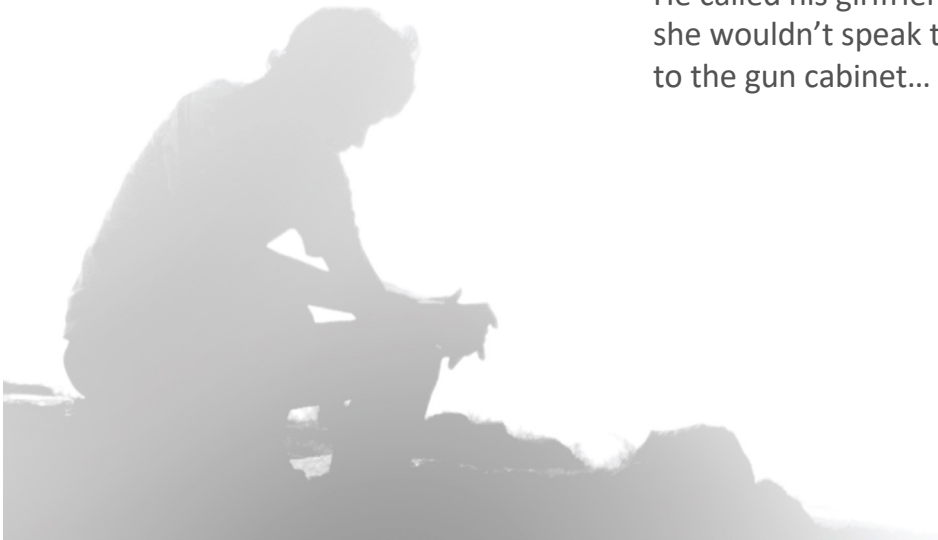
live  
on.

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## A Suicide...

Hunter is a 16 year-old struggling with a recent breakup. Lately, he has been missing school, withdrawing from friends, and drinking alcohol. His parents contacted the counselor at his school and urged him to speak with her. He refused.

He called his girlfriend, hoping to get back together, but she wouldn't speak to him. Feeling desperate, he went to the gun cabinet...



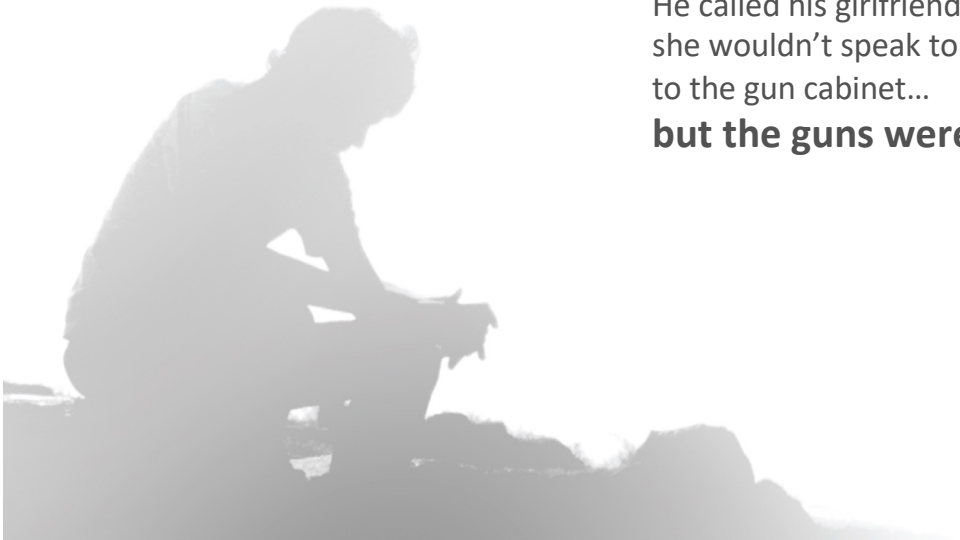
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**but the guns were gone.**



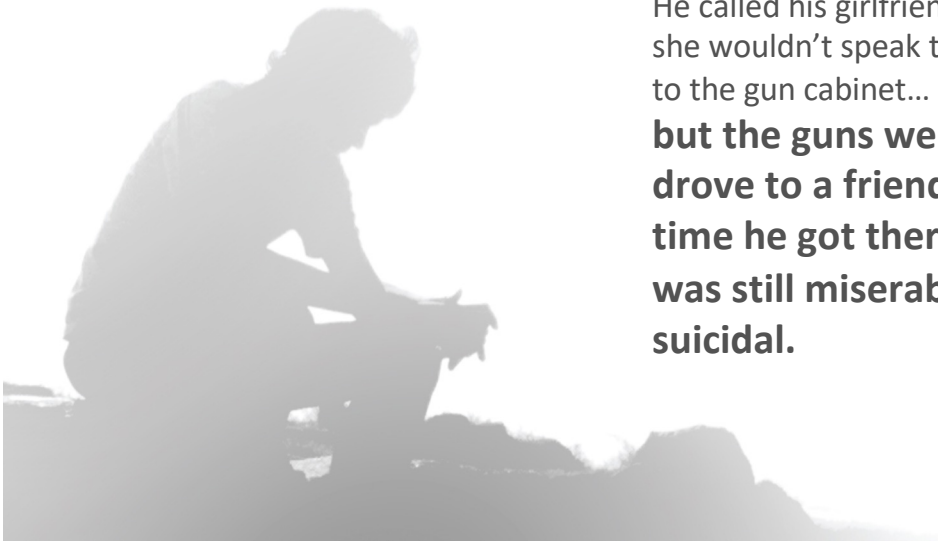
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He called his girlfriend, hoping to get back together, but she wouldn't speak to him. Feeling desperate, he went to the gun cabinet...

**but the guns were gone. Frustrated, Hunter drove to a friend's to borrow a gun. By the time he got there he had calmed down. He was still miserable, but no longer acutely suicidal.**





Why did Hunter survive?

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## Why Means Matter

1. The acute phase of a suicidal crisis is *often* brief.
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## Suicidal Crises

People seen in the hospital following a suicide attempt were asked when they had *first* started thinking specifically about making **that** attempt.

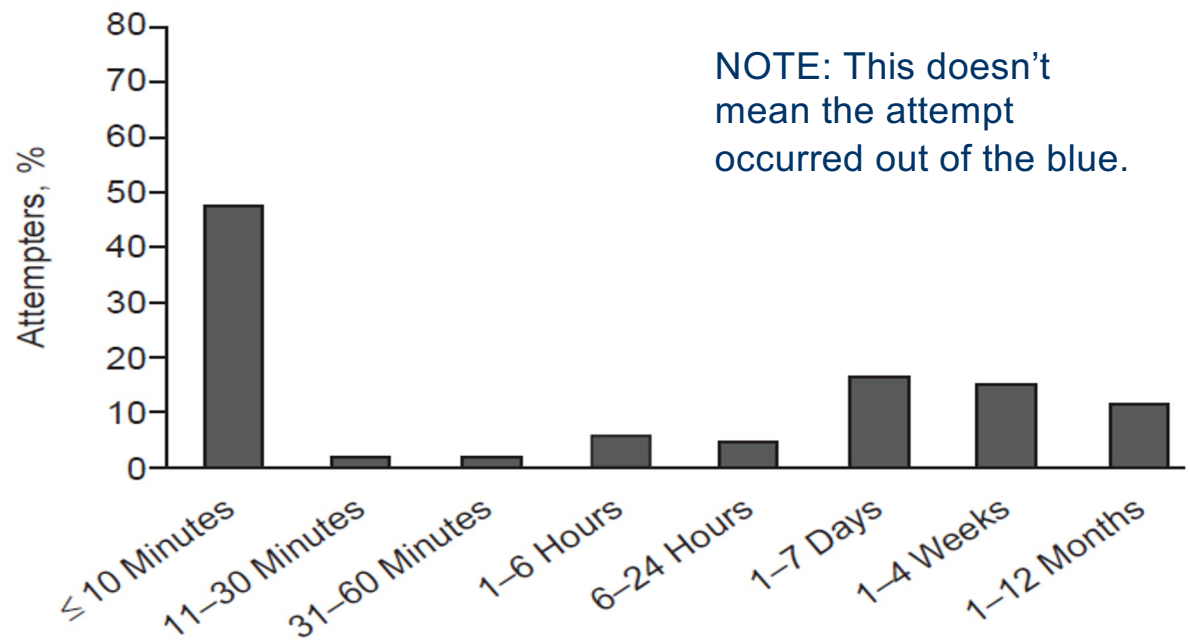
What percent do you think said  
within **10 minutes prior** to attempting?





# Suicidal Crises

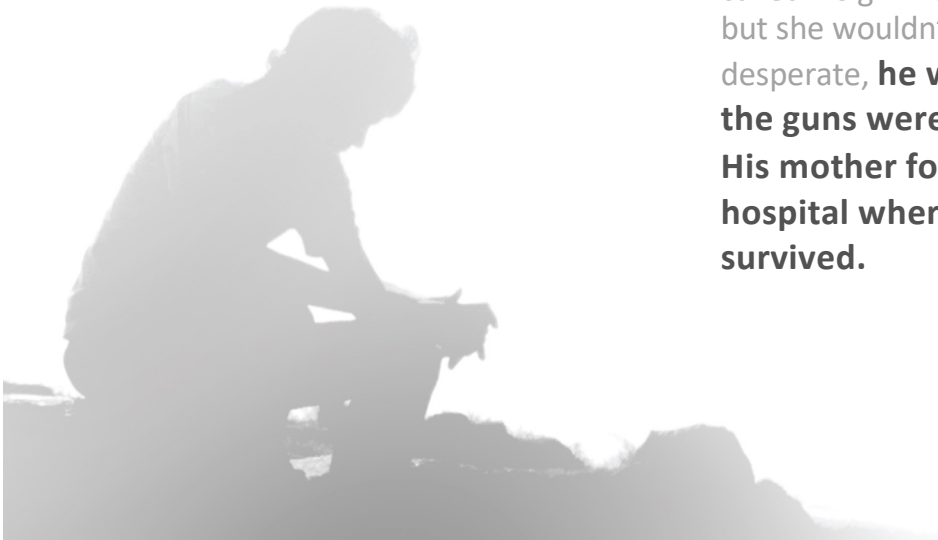
48% said within 10 minutes of the attempt.



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## ...or a Life Saved?

Hunter is a 16 year-old struggling with a recent breakup. Lately, he has been missing school, withdrawing from friends, and drinking alcohol. His parents contacted the counselor at his school urged him to speak with her. He refused. He called his girlfriend, hoping to get back together, but she wouldn't speak to him. Feeling desperate, **he went to the gun cabinet, but the guns were gone. He slashed his wrists. His mother found him and took him to the hospital where he was treated and survived.**





Why did Hunter survive?

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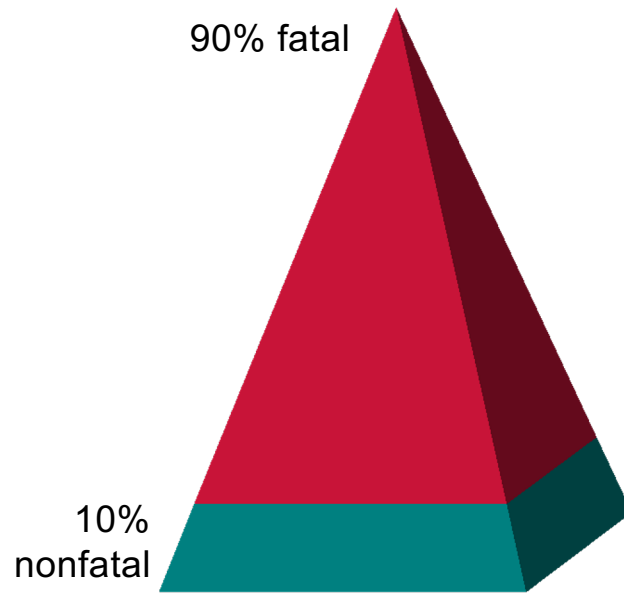


2. Some methods are far less lethal than others.

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# Lethality of Suicide Methods

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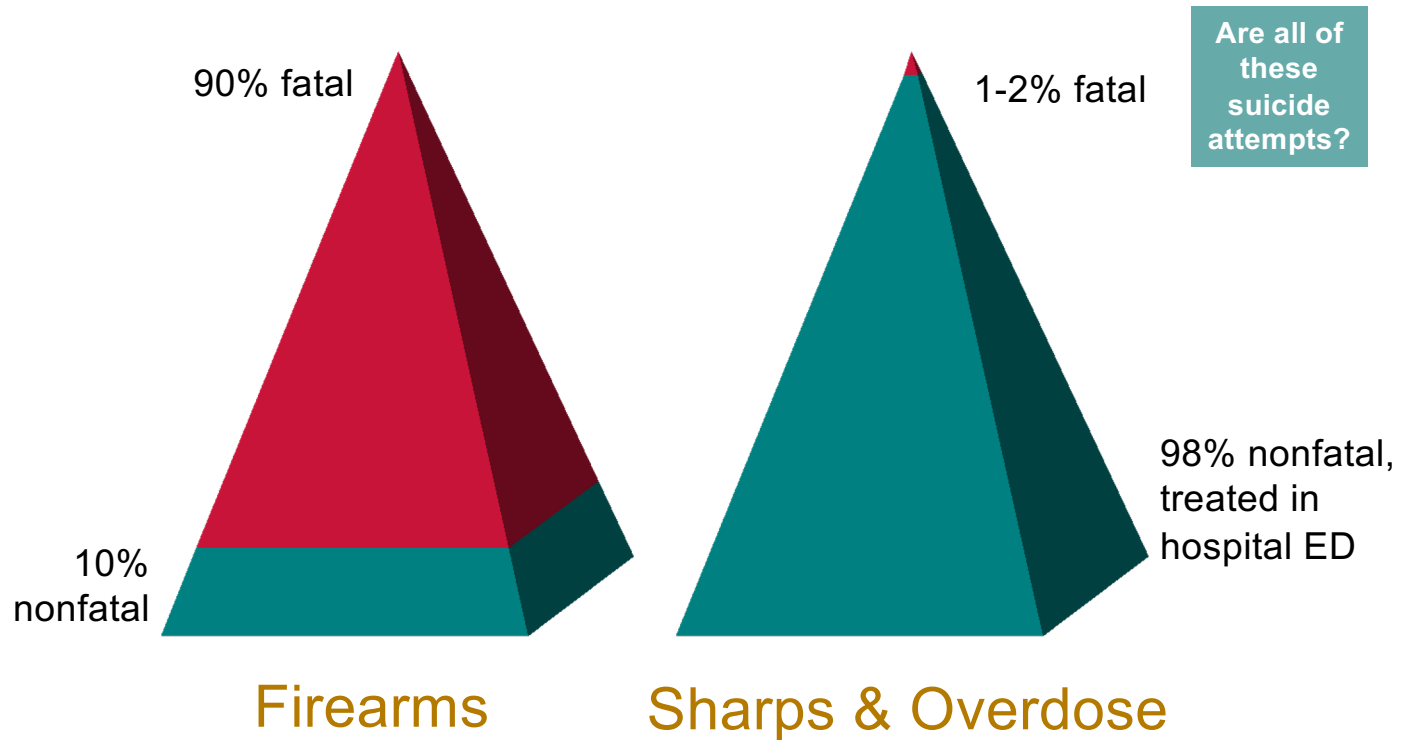


What were his odds of dying using sharps or overdose?  
(Both are about the same)

1-2% 10% 25% 35%

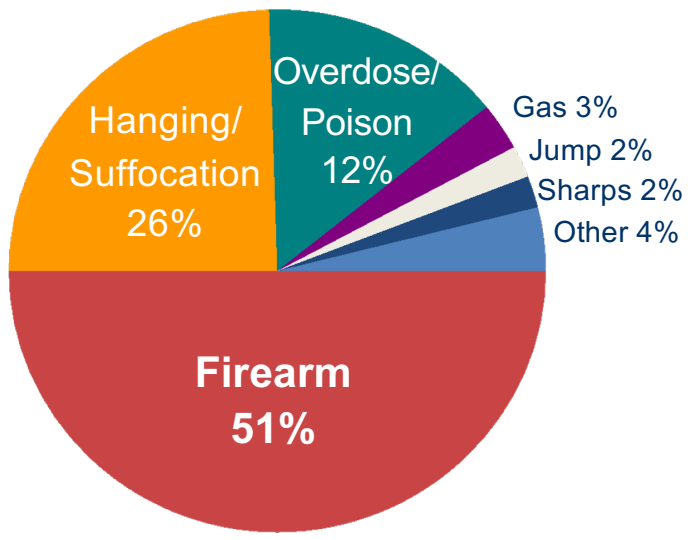
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# Lethality of Suicide Methods

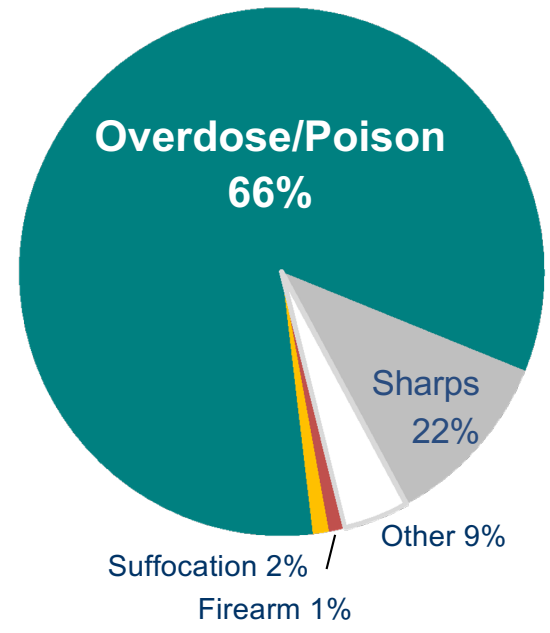


NOTE: We caution against informing your patients about the very low fatality for sharps and overdose. The perception that these methods are more lethal than they usually are may save lives.

# Suicide Methods, U.S.



Fatal

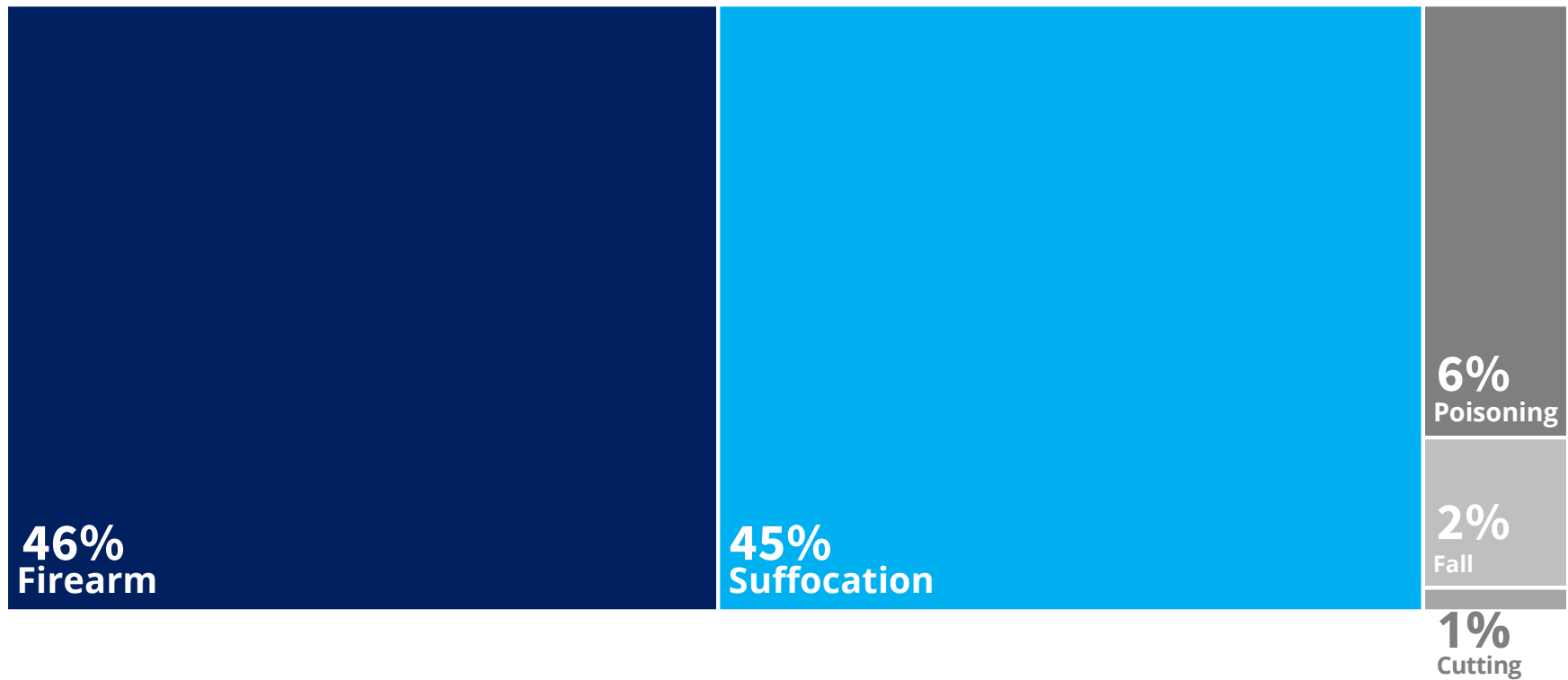


Nonfatal



In U.S. 10- to 19-year-olds (1999 to 2019)

# Mechanism of Suicide Death



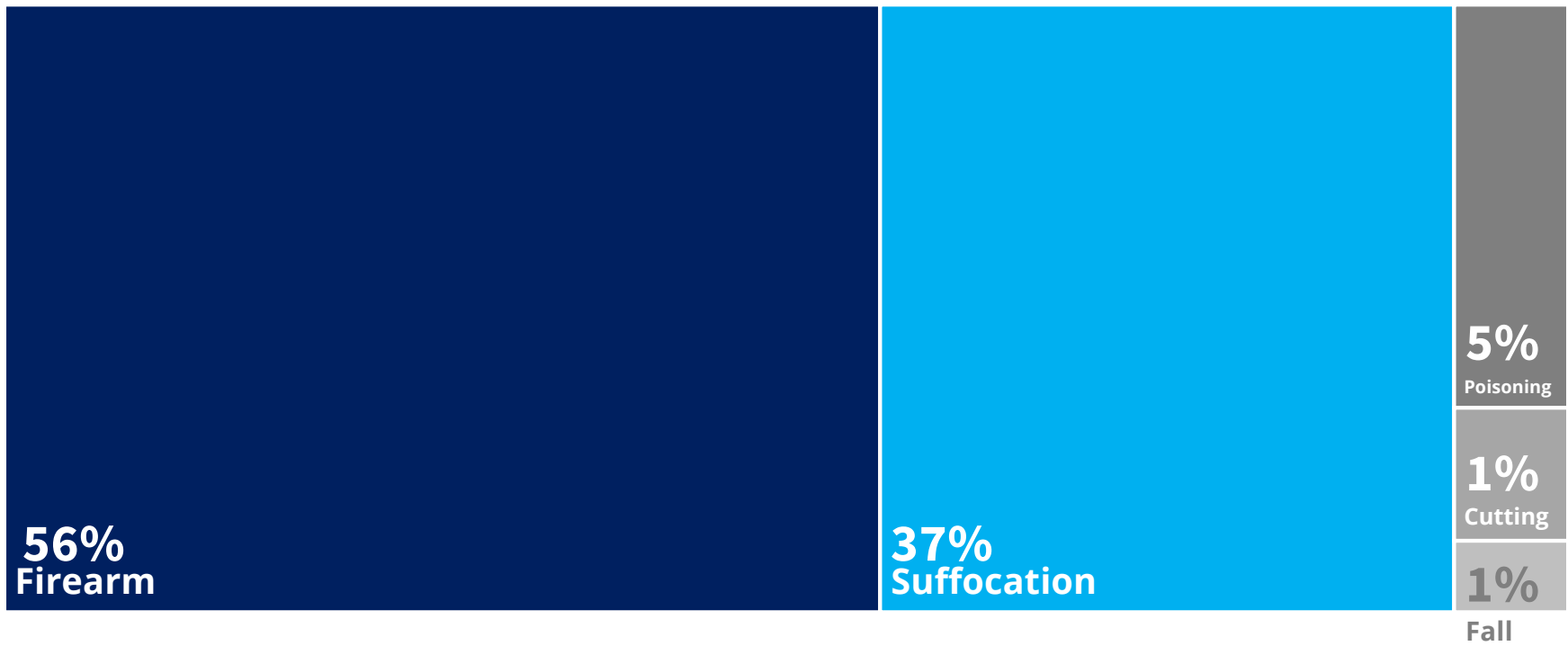
Source: CDC WONDER, accessed 2021





In U.S. 10- to 19-year-olds in rural areas (199 to 2019)

# Mechanism of Suicide Death



Source: CDC WONDER, accessed 2021

# Lethality of Suicide Method

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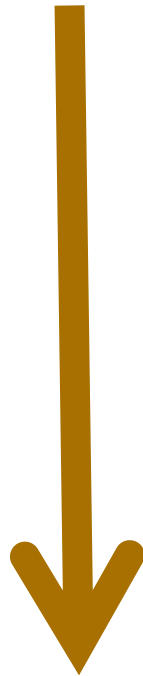
**HIGH**  
Lethality

Firearm  
Jump from very great height

Carbon monoxide  
Hanging/suffocation

**LOW**  
Lethality

Overdose/poisoning  
Cutting





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## A Life Saved

Hunter is a 16 year-old struggling with a recent breakup. Lately, he has been missing school, withdrawing from friends, and drinking alcohol. His parents contacted the counselor at his school urged him to speak with her. He refused. He called his girlfriend, hoping to get back together, but she wouldn't speak to him. Feeling desperate, he went to the gun cabinet, but the guns were gone.

**Hunter swallowed pills. As he began to feel their effects, he realized he didn't want to die and called 911.**





## Long Term Survival

Hunter survived his attempt. But was this simply a suicide delayed or a life saved?

Put another way, what percent of people who attempt suicide and survive do NOT eventually die by suicide?

15

40

75

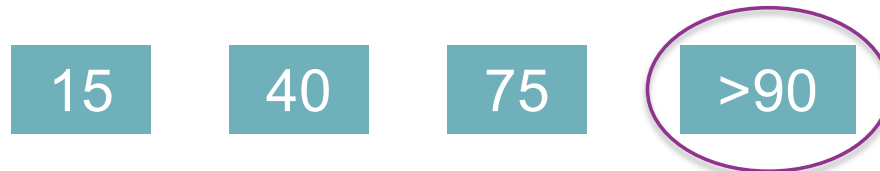
>90

## Long Term Survival

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Hunter survived his attempt. But was this simply a suicide delayed or a life saved?

Put another way, what percent of people who attempt suicide and survive do NOT eventually die by suicide?





3. Over 90% of people who attempt suicide and survive do NOT go on to die by suicide.

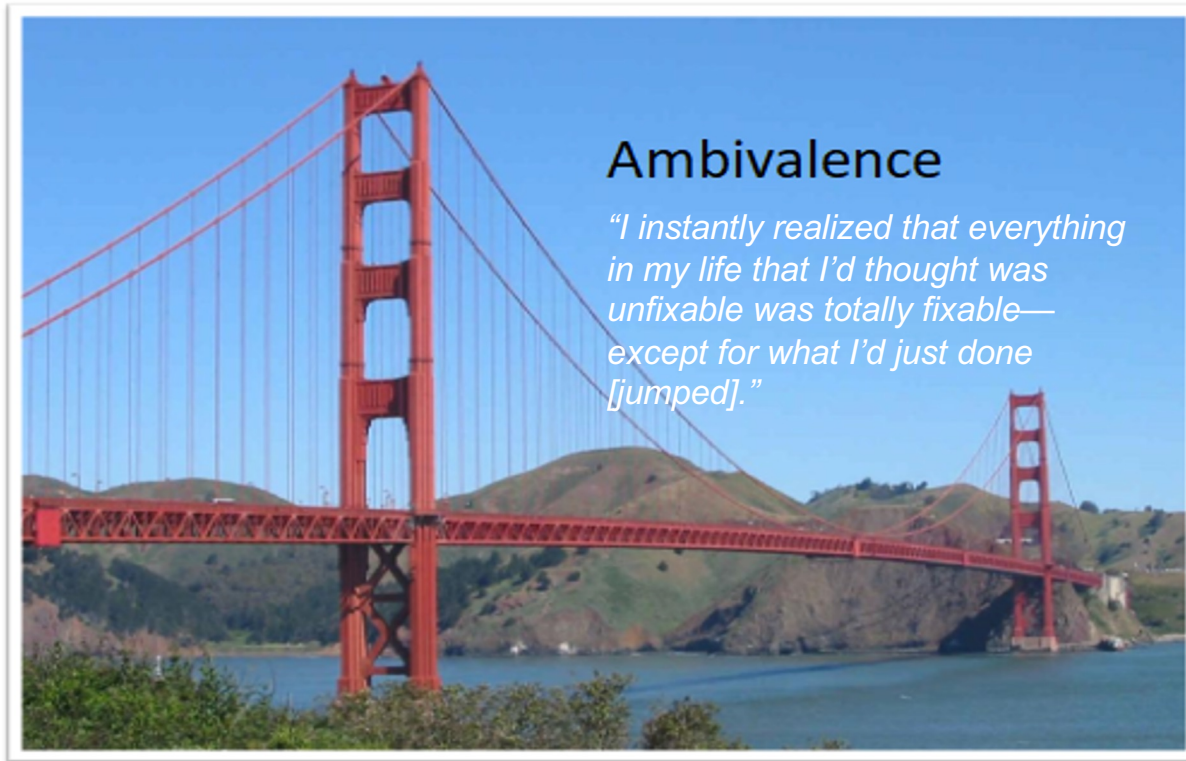
...A life saved in the short run is usually a **life saved**.

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4. Most people who are suicidal are ambivalent.

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## Summary: Why Means Matter

- Suicidal crises are **often brief**.
- Some methods, especially guns, are **far more lethal** than others.
- >90% of those who attempt and survive **do not go on to die by suicide**.
- Many people who are suicidal are **ambivalent**.

**Putting time and distance between a suicidal person and a highly lethal means – especially a gun – can save a life.**

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## What Made the Difference for Hunter?

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When Hunter's parents contacted the school, the counselor reviewed treatment options and ways to support their son. She also suggested that they store any guns away from home for now while Hunter is struggling and helped them make a specific plan for taking that action step.

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# Lethal Means Counseling



**Assess suicide risk** using standardized risk assessment tools.

**Explain risk to patient and parent/support person** suicidal feelings can come and go; reducing access to lethal means—especially firearms—can help the patient stay safe.

**Collaborate on a plan** to reduce access to firearms (leading suicide method) and medications (leading method of attempt), as well as on any method on which ideation focuses.

**Agree on roles and timetable and document the plan** in the chart (e.g., patient's parents agree to lock up pain relievers).

**Follow up** within 24 hours (or the next school day in school settings) and at next appointment.

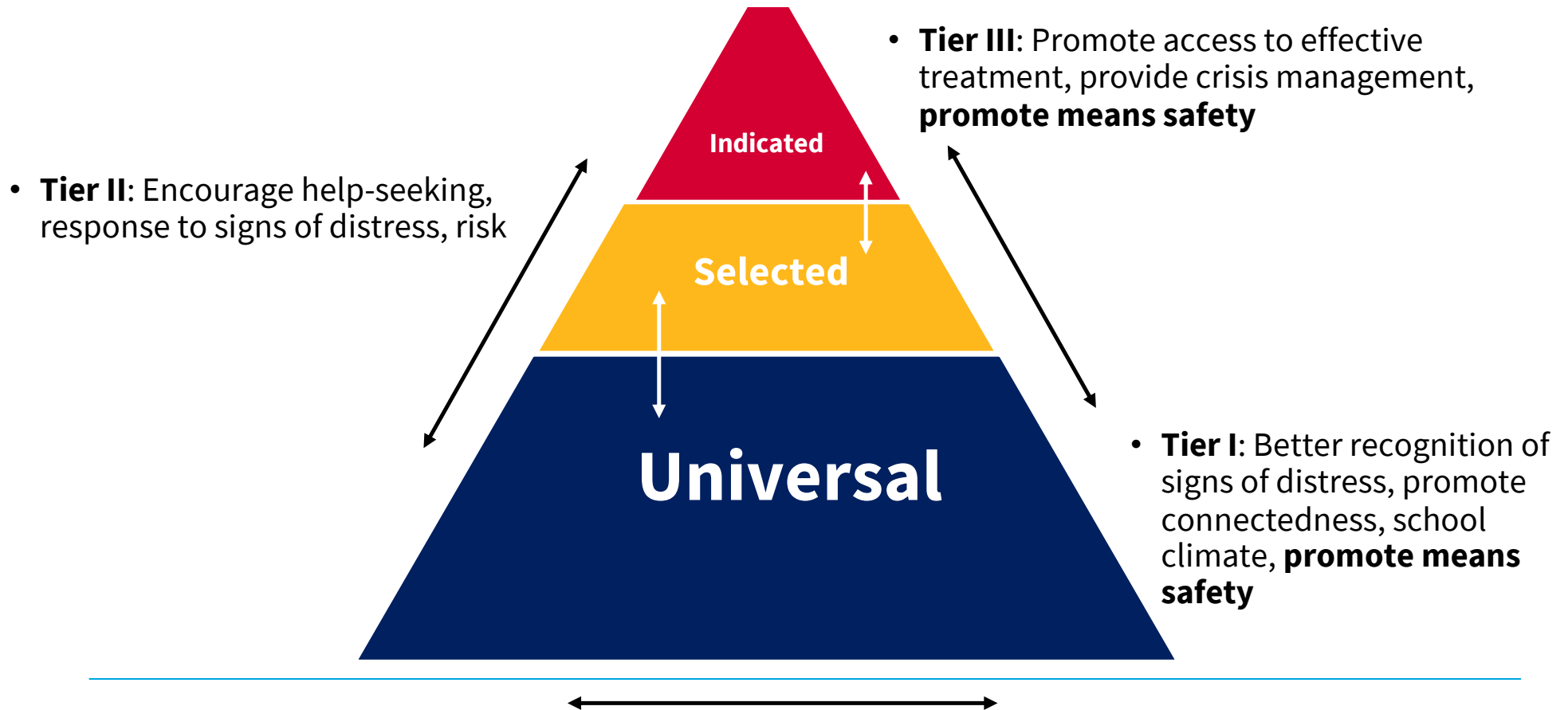
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# Skill Application and Information Dissemination



- We must teach families and youth to anticipate fluctuations in mood and behavior and give them tools to make their environments safer. The conversation focuses on safety and preventing death.
  - Provide information
  - Make tangible recommendations
  - Follow-up
  - Document
-

# Summary: Strategic Mental Health Solutions Across the Tiers of Support



## Final Take-Aways

- Reducing access to lethal means is not about confiscation, it's about safety.
- As providers, we can offer practical suggestions and information on how to reduce the risk of suicide death.



# Utah HB 481 Firearm Safety and Suicide Prevention Education Requirements (2023)

Requires schools to provide to a parent of a child who has threatened suicide or has been involved in an incident of bullying or other abusive conduct:

- ❖ Suicide prevention materials and information
- ❖ Information on ways to limit the student's access to fatal means (firearms and medication)
- ❖ Requires USBE to collaborate with the DHHS State Suicide Prevention Coordinator to choose materials and information that schools will then provide to parents

**Materials** are in development and will be released on **August 1, 2023**. Updating Utah Administrative Code.

LEAs to update their parent notification procedures and school suicide prevention policies.

Contact [cathy.davis@schools.utah.gov](mailto:cathy.davis@schools.utah.gov) for more information.



# Thank you!

For handouts, slides, and other  
docs, email:

[Kurt@jedfoundation.org](mailto:Kurt@jedfoundation.org)



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