Data Behind Extreme Risk Laws
A Look at Connecticut’s Risk-Warrant Law

Law enforcement and families are in desperate need of tools to temporarily suspend firearms access for at-risk individuals during periods of crisis. *Extreme Risk Laws* fill this need.

**Risk-Warrant in Connecticut**
In 1999, Connecticut became the first state to pass a law granting law enforcement the clear legal authority to temporarily remove firearms from individuals when there is probable cause to believe they are at a significant risk of harm to self or others (called a *risk-warrant*).

A dozen more states now have similar laws, though some also allow family members to petition for these orders.

A recent analysis of Connecticut’s risk-warrant law by Dr. Jeffrey Swanson of Duke University, with a team of nine other researchers, adds to the evidence for risk-based firearms removal laws by demonstrating that such policies are promising and effective tools to save lives. Their findings are detailed below.

**States with Extreme Risk Laws**

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**Reaching high-risk people and saving lives**
In the first 14 years of Connecticut’s risk-warrant law (1999-2013):
- 762 risk-warrants were issued, with increasing frequency after the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting.\(^3\)\(^4\)
- Police found firearms in 99% of cases.
- Police removed an average of seven guns per subject.

**Suicide Prevention**
- Typical risk-warrant subject was a middle-aged or older man - the same demographic that, nationwide, is most at risk for firearm suicide.\(^5\)
- Suicidality or self-injury was a listed concern in ≥61% of cases where such material was available.
- 21 risk-warrant subjects went on to die by suicide, a rate about 40 times higher than the adult suicide rate in Connecticut.
- 6 of 21 suicides were by firearm. Known case fatality rates\(^6\) of suicide methods were used to estimate that the 21 suicides likely represent 142 attempts, mostly by means less lethal than guns.
- In the absence of a risk-warrant and if firearms had been available and used in more of the risk-warrant subjects’ attempts, more would have died by suicide.
How did the researchers reach this conclusion?

Since attempted suicide with a firearm has such a high case fatality rate, reducing the percentage of suicide attempts with a firearm saves lives. The researchers developed a model to estimate how many suicides would likely be averted by limiting access to guns through risk-warrants.

1. Estimated the likelihood of choosing a gun in a suicide attempt:
   Used national data to estimate the likelihood that a matched population of gun owners would have chosen a gun in attempting suicide.

2. Applied this likelihood to develop a model that:
   Calculates how many more estimated suicide attempts would have been fatal had risk-warrant subjects still been in possession of firearms in the absence of the risk-warrant.

3. The resulting model:
   Considers various levels of risk and results in the range that for every 10 to 20 risk-warrants, one life is saved.

Access to Health Care

- Before risk-warrant: Most risk-warrant subjects (88%) were not known to Connecticut’s public behavioral health system when the warrants were served – despite their elevated risk of self-harm.
- After risk-warrant: Nearly one-third (29%) of subjects received treatment in the state system
- Significance: Risk-warrants provided a portal to critical mental health and substance abuse services.

Conclusion

This analysis by Swanson and colleagues shows that risk-warrants:
- Reached individuals who were at a dangerously elevated risk of suicide.
- Prevented additional suicide deaths by intervening in crises.
- Provided safe periods for subjects to obtain much-needed treatment services.
- Saved lives by shifting suicide attempt methods from firearms to less lethal means.

Research estimates for every 10-20 risk-warrants issued, one life is saved.

6 Case fatality rates (or ratios) represent the percent of people who die in a suicide attempt, in this case by specific methods.
7 29% is a conservative estimate; it is likely that additional risk warrant subjects sought private mental health and substance use treatment services that are not included in this figure.