



NATIONAL VIOLENCE  
PREVENTION NETWORK

**The National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS):  
Linking Data. Saving Lives.**

**Written Public Testimony  
Submitted by the National Violence Prevention Network  
to the  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Committee on Appropriations  
Subcommittee on Labor, Health & Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies**

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Each year, 50,000 Americans die violent deaths. Homicide and suicide are, respectively, the third and fourth leading causes of death for people under 40 years of age. Nearly 1,500 children die each year as the result of abuse or neglect. An average of 80 people take their own lives every day.

Before the National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS) was created, federal and state public health and law enforcement officials collected valuable information about violent deaths, but didn't combine it into one comprehensive reporting system. Instead, data was held in a variety of different systems, and policymakers lacked the clear picture necessary to develop effective violence prevention policies.

When it was created in 2002, NVDRS promised to capture data that is critical to identifying patterns and developing strategies to save lives. With a clearer picture of why violent deaths occurs, law enforcement and public health officials can work together more effectively to identify those at risk and provide effective preventive services.

Currently, NVDRS funding levels only allow the program to operate in 17 states: Alaska, California, Colorado, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Utah, Virginia, and Wisconsin. Eight additional states, plus the District of Columbia, were previously approved for participation in the NVDRS, but were unable to join due to funding shortfalls: Connecticut, Illinois, Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, New York, Ohio, and Texas. Several other states have expressed interest in joining once new funding becomes available.

While NVDRS is beginning to strengthen violence and suicide prevention efforts in the 17 participating states, many other states have been forced to sit idle. With an appropriation of at least \$10 million in FY 2008, NVDRS will be able to expand to additional states and continue its incremental growth toward national implementation.



### **NVDRS Provides Critical Data for Suicide Prevention**

Although it is preventable, more than 30,000 Americans die by suicide each year, and another 1.4 million Americans attempt it, costing more than \$3.8 billion in hospital expenses and \$13 billion in lost earnings.

In the U.S. today, there is no comprehensive national system to track suicides. Because NVDRS includes information on all violent deaths, however – including deaths by suicide – information from the system can be used to develop effective suicide prevention plans at the community, state, and national level.

Among the ways NVDRS data is being used to inform suicide prevention programs: NVDRS data from 13 states uncovered significant racially- and ethnically-based differences in mental illness diagnoses and treatment among those who died by suicide. Specifically, whites were more likely to have been diagnosed with depression or bipolar disorder, while blacks were more likely than other groups to have been diagnosed with schizophrenia. Hispanics were less likely to have been diagnosed with a mental illness or to have received treatment at all, although the family reports of depression were comparable to other racial groups. NVDRS also data suggests that 19 percent of all completed suicides are veterans, who make up only 11 percent of the population.

With such information available for the first time, officials in participating states are using NVDRS data in myriad ways. For example,

- With the sixth-highest rate of elder suicide in the nation, Oregon tailored its NVDRS data to develop an epidemiological profile of victims and establish an elder suicide prevention plan. NVDRS data indicated that most victims of elder suicide in Oregon had been suffering from physical illness, and that 37 percent had visited a doctor in the 30 days prior to their death. As a result, the state developed an elder suicide prevention plan that calls for better integration of primary care and mental health services so that potential suicide victims can be better identified and treated.
- NVDRS data found that one in four of Virginia's suicide victims had served in the military. Among male victims over 65, more than 60 percent were veterans. These findings indicate that the state's suicide prevention and education efforts must extend to veterans' hospitals and service providers.
- NVDRS data is providing state health officials in South Carolina with vital information that indicates behavior patterns, and enables health officials to identify individuals at risk and to intervene early with appropriate preventive measures. After NVDRS data showed that more than 40 percent of suicide victims were currently or formerly receiving mental health treatment or tested positive for psychiatric medication, the state established its first ever suicide prevention plan, which also included the formation of a Suicide Prevention Task Force.



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### **NVDRS Provides Critical Data to Protect Children and Adolescents**

Child abuse and other violence involving children and adolescents remains a problem in America, and it is only through a comprehensive understanding of its root causes that many needless deaths can be prevented. Studies suggest that between 3.3 and 10 million children witness some form of domestic violence annually. In addition, nearly 1,500 children died as a result of abuse or neglect in 2004, according to the US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth, and Families.

Children are most vulnerable and most dependent on their caregivers during infancy and early childhood. Sadly, NVDRS data has shown that young children are at the greatest risk of homicide in their primary care environments. Combined NVDRS data from Alaska, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Oregon, South Carolina, and Virginia determined that African-American children four years old and under are more than four times more likely to be victims of homicide than Caucasian children, and that homicides of children four and under are most often committed by a parent or caregiver in the home. NVDRS data also shows that household items, or “weapons of opportunity,” were most commonly used, suggesting that poor stress responses may be factors in these deaths. Knowing the demographics and methods of abusers can lead to more effective, targeted prevention programs.

Other examples of how NVDRS data is informing programs to protect children and adolescents from violence include the following:

- Data from several NVDRS pilot sites found that almost 30 percent of suicide victims aged 17 years and under told someone they felt suicidal. Many teen suicides also appear to be linked to recent events in their lives, with nearly one-third of suicides taking place on the same day as a crisis and almost half within the same week. This data underscores the importance of developing community-based programs to rapidly respond to the warning signs of suicide.
- With data generated by NVDRS, state health officials in Massachusetts have been able to monitor suicides and homicides more accurately among specific populations, such as foster children and youths in custody. The NVDRS data has been used to secure grants for violence prevention programs for these special populations, about whom data had previously been impossible to obtain.

### **NVDRS Provides Critical Data to Prevent Intimate Partner Violence**

While intimate partner violence has declined along with other trends in crime over the past decade, thousands of Americans still fall victim to it every year. Women are much more likely than men to be killed by an intimate partner. Intimate partner homicides accounted for 33.5 percent of the murders of women and less than four percent of the murders of men in 2000, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics.



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Although the program is still in its early stages, NVDRS is providing critical information that is helping law enforcement and health and human service officials allocate resources and develop programs in ways that target those most at risk for intimate partner violence. For example, NVDRS data shows that while occurrences are rare, most murder-suicide victims are current or former intimate partners of the suspect, and a substantial number of victims were the suspect's children. In addition, NVDRS indicates that women are about seven times more likely than men to be killed by a spouse, ex-spouse, lover, or former lover, and the majority of these incidents occurred in the women's homes.

Examples of how state officials are using NVDRS data to better understand and prevent intimate partner violence include:

- Based on an analysis of NVDRS data, the Kentucky Injury Prevention Research Center concluded that among women killed by an intimate partner, only 39% had filed for a restraining order or been seen by or reported to Adult Protective Services. This finding underscored a perceived need in the community to improve outreach linking potential victims to local protective services.
- Working with the state's NVDRS program, the Alaska Department of Law and Public Safety found there is a high risk for intimate partner violence, both homicide and suicide, when one partner is attempting to leave the relationship. Findings such as this one are molding the state's strategy for domestic violence prevention.

### **Strengthening and Expanding NVDRS in FY 2008**

At an estimated annual cost of \$20 million for full implementation, NVDRS is a relatively low-cost program that yields high-quality results. While state-specific information provides enormous value to local public health and law enforcement officials, national data from all 50 states, the U.S. territories and the District of Columbia must be obtained to complete the picture and establish effective national violence prevention policies and programs.

That is why the National Violence Prevention Network, a coalition of national organizations who advocate for health and welfare, violence and suicide prevention, and law enforcement, is calling on Congress to provide no less than \$10 million for NVDRS for FY 2008. The cost of *not* implementing the program is much greater: without national participation in the program, thousands of American lives remain at risk.

We thank you for the opportunity to submit this written testimony. Your commitment to NVDRS in previous years is to be applauded. We look forward to working with you secure an appropriation of at least \$10 million in FY 2008.



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The following organizations — representing a diverse alliance of health and welfare, suicide and violence prevention, and law enforcement advocates — call on Congress to provide at least \$10 million to strengthen and expand the National Violent Death Reporting System in FY 2008:

Ambulatory Pediatric Association  
American Academy of Pediatrics  
American Association of Suicidology  
American College of Emergency Physicians  
American College of Physicians  
American College of Preventive Medicine  
American Pediatric Society  
American Psychiatric Association  
American Psychological Association  
American Public Health Association  
Association of Medical School Pediatric Department Chairs  
Child Welfare League of America  
Children's Healthcare Is a Legal Duty (CHILD)  
Coalition for American Trauma Care  
Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists  
Emergency Nurses Association  
Family Violence Prevention Fund  
National Association of County & City Health Officials  
National Association of Medical Examiners  
National Association of Pediatric Nurse Practitioners  
National Black Police Association  
National Organization of People of Color Against Suicide  
National School Safety Center  
New York Academy of Medicine  
The Police Foundation  
Society for Adolescent Medicine  
Society for Pediatric Research  
Society for Public Health Education  
Stop Family Violence  
State and Territorial Injury Prevention Directors Association  
Suicide Awareness/Voices of Education (SAVE)  
Suicide Prevention Action Network USA (SPAN USA)  
Voices for America's Children