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*A vigil outside Ed's Car Wash in Melcroft, Pennsylvania, the site of a quadruple murder-suicide in January. [AP Photo/Gene J. Puskar]*

## THE DRUMBEAT

# Murder-Suicide By Gun Is an Everyday Occurrence in America

**Through the first six weeks of 2018, there were at least 76 incidents and 171 deaths.**

by **Jennifer Mascia** · [@JenniferMascia](#) · February 13, 2018

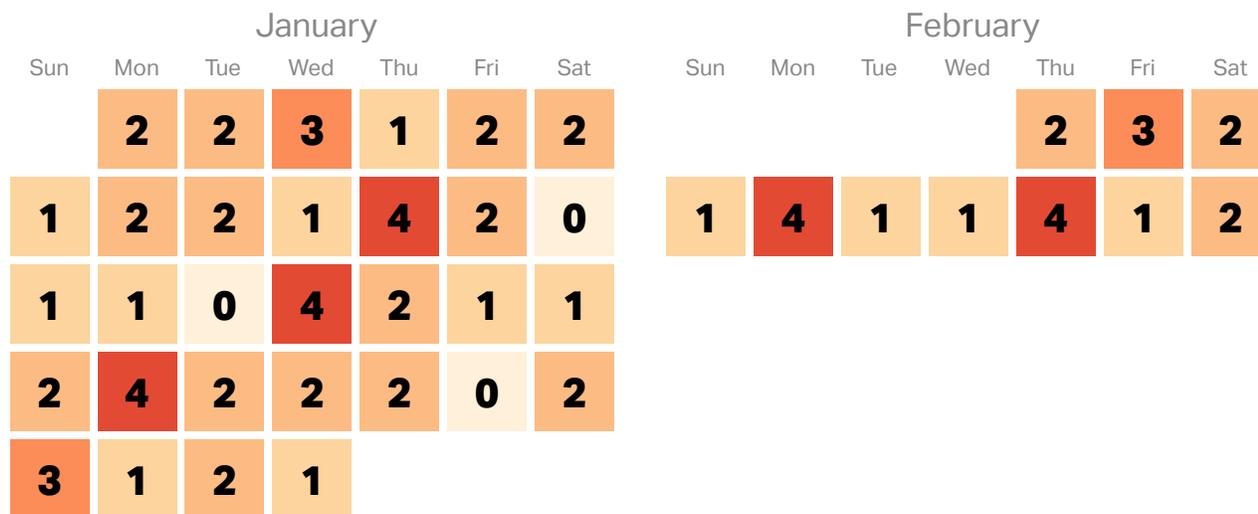
On Saturday, a 45-year-old man fatally shot his parents at their home in eastern Kentucky and then drove to an apartment where he shot and killed his girlfriend and her mother before turning the gun on himself.

Joseph Nickell, the gunman, had a history that included domestic violence and substance abuse charges. But the grisly murder spree still came as a shock to some who knew the family.

“What devastates me to the core, is I can visually see and hear her trying to talk her son down” before Nickell began his rampage, a friend of his mother’s posted on Facebook. “Like any family, they too fought their own demons, but Joe loved his family.”

Murder-suicide by gun occurs, on average, every day in America. Through the first six weeks of 2018, according to an analysis of Gun Violence Archive data, there were at least 76 instances in which someone shot and killed someone they knew and then killed themselves. At least 171 people died during this period. The attackers ranged in age from 17 to 86. In all but six cases, the shooter was male, and the vast majority of cases involved current or former romantic partners.

### Six weeks. Seventy-six murder-suicides.



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January 1, 2018

**SAINT CLAIRSVILLE, OHIO**

Barry Killeen, 53, fatally shot his wife, Stephanie Killeen, 46, and then himself at their home. Police were called a month earlier when he barricaded himself inside the home and threatened to harm himself.

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January 2, 2018

**BAKER, FLORIDA**

William Rust, 64, fatally shot his wife, Gretchen Rust, 64, at their home following an argument. William Rust had reportedly been diagnosed with a mental condition that left him prone to bouts of anger.

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**MEDFORD, OREGON**

Eric Hilsenbeck fatally shot his estranged partner, Charmaine C. Hilsenbeck, at their home, then killed himself.

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Source: [Gun Violence Archive](#);  
Graphic by Daniel Nass/The Trace

On New Year's Day, William Rust, 64, who had reportedly been diagnosed with a condition that left him prone to bouts of anger fatally shot his wife, Gretchen Rust, also 64, following an argument at their home in Baker, Florida. He then took his own life.

On January 9 in Appleton, Wisconsin, Robert Schmidt, 49, shot and killed his estranged wife, Sara, 38, then died by suicide. A week before, Sara Schmidt, who had just filed for divorce, told police that her husband had tied her to their bed and sexually assaulted her at gunpoint.

In Bronx, New York, on January 10, Jorge Vega, 52, shot himself after killing his ex-girlfriend and former Metropolitan Transit Authority co-worker Susan Trivano, 54, and her daughter, Suchari Guzman, 29. He died a day later.

Sonia Salari, a gerontologist at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, has spent the past decade studying murder-suicide among intimate partners. The result, which leaves the attacker dead, too, “interferes with people’s ability to have any justice, because there’s no trial,” she said.

Salari and her team researched 731 murder-suicides between 1999 and 2005 that resulted in 1,633 deaths. They found that roughly 90 percent of the deaths were from guns.

“In our dataset, we found 70 or so cases where we knew there was a protective order, and there was another handful where the woman tried for a protective order but was denied,” Salari said. “So we looked at those cases and said, ‘how did these people die?’ It was by gunfire.”

She added, “I think the impulsive people who have guns definitely have a greater chance of acting on what they’re thinking.”

Murder-suicide is a category of gun violence that often includes public gun rampages, like last year’s mass shooting on the Las Vegas Strip. In 2017, there were 592 instances of murder-suicide, resulting in 1,381 deaths and 507 injuries, according to an analysis of Gun Violence Archive data. That tally includes mass shooting casualties in Bronx, New York; Las Vegas; Sutherland Springs, Texas; and Corning, California. Public mass shootings accounted for the high injury toll last year — the Las Vegas gunman shot 480 people, 58 fatally, before killing himself. Without accounting for high-profile mass shootings, injuries in murder-suicide incidents in 2017 totalled 47.

One in three people shot in the United States dies; if the shooting is a murder-suicide, our analysis found, the mortality rate is far higher.

Because FBI data does not link murder and suicide, tracking the two together is difficult, and the phenomenon is ripe for future study, Salari said. But one thing she’s found is that the need for control can be a driving factor. “For some perpetrators, it’s an enmeshment,” she said. “They don’t see the woman as an autonomous being, who can exist outside of their life span.”

That yearning for control is especially evident when several family members are killed in a single incident, which has happened six times since the start of this year. “Sometimes [the assailant] will call 911 and say, ‘You might want to come over and see a situation here, send police,’” Salari said. Ultimately, she said, the perpetrators want someone to discover the scene, and to recognize their horrific act.

“It’s almost like they’re trying to make it so their end is as controlled as they wanted it to be,” Salari said.

## **RESOURCES**

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### **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline**

1-800-273-8255

[suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

### **National Domestic Violence Hotline**

1-800-799-7233

[www.thehotline.org](http://www.thehotline.org)

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## Incidents in Which Several Family Members Were Killed

On **January 5** in Santa Clarita, California, Michael Birnkrant, 51, a driver for a movie studio, fatally shot his wife, Amy Birnkrant, 47, and their children, Drew Birnkrant, 20, and Sean Birnkrant, 11, at their home, then killed himself. Their bodies weren't discovered for several days. Police still aren't certain of a motive.

On **January 7** in Redding, California, Teresa Mae Wilson, 68, killed herself after fatally shooting her husband, Gary Lynn Wilson, 69; their son, Ellis Leroy Wilson II, 44; and Ellis's wife, Zoe Lynn Burnett Wilson, 20, at the home where they all lived. Wilson also killed the family's three dogs, then set fire to the home. Surviving family members said there had been long-simmering tension in the household.

At a hotel in Galveston, Texas, on **January 8**, Flor De Maria Pineda Canas, 37, fatally shot her husband, Mauricio Morales Canas, 39, and their children, David Morales, 5, and Mauricio Morales Jr, 10, then died by suicide. A friend said the woman had sought treatment for mental illness in a psychiatric hospital at some point, and had recently bought a handgun without her husband's knowledge.

On **January 18**, Anthony Wayne Parker, 49, shot and killed his 12-year-old son, Rusty Parker; his 19-year-old daughter, Heather Parker; and Heather's fiancé, Brandon Roberts, 20, at his home in Piedmont, Alabama, then drove to a nearby store and killed himself. The victims had dropped by to deliver groceries. Before splitting with his wife in 2010, Anthony Parker had been arrested for violating a protective order she had obtained against him.

On **February 2** in St. Louis, Mary Jo Trokey, 32, fatally shot her husband, Matthew Trokey, 33, and their 3-month-old daughter, Taylor Rose Trokey, then killed herself. Mary Jo Trokey reportedly bought a gun the day before the killings. Her family said she was suffering from postpartum depression.

On **February 10** in Paintsville, Kentucky, Joseph Nickell, 45, shot and killed his mother, Arlene Nickell, 70; his father, Wayne Nickell, 75; his girlfriend, Lindsay Vanhooose, 41; and her mother, Patricia Vanhooose, 57, then killed himself. Nickell had a history of substance abuse problems, and his sister died of an overdose last summer.

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## Incidents Involving People Aged 70 and Older

On **January 11** in Whittier, California, Columbus Garrett, 74, fatally shot his wife, Iva Garrett, 75, then killed himself. Their daughter called 911. Police said the couple were in poor health.

On **January 17**, Robert Lewis, 72, shot and killed his wife, Louise Lewis, 73, on the front porch of their home in Clairton, Pennsylvania. He then went into the basement, turned on the gas, and fatally shot himself. Shocked neighbors said they were "a great family, great people."

On **January 24** in Granite Falls, North Carolina, Johnny Clark, 72, fatally shot his wife, Nancy Clark, also 72, at their home, then killed himself. Neighbors said Nancy Clark had been suffering from dementia.

In West City, Illinois, on **January 25**, Billie Gene Aaron, 86, fatally shot his wife, Wilma Louise Aaron, 86, at their home, then killed himself. According to a suicide note, both of them were having health issues.

On **February 1** in Phoenix, Sanford Babson, 77, shot and killed his wife, Rebecca Babson, 77, at their home, then turned the gun on himself.

On **February 3** in South Bend, Indiana, Phillip Wilmes, 81, killed himself after fatally shooting his wife,

Barbara Wilmes, 80, at the farm where they'd lived for nearly 50 years.

On **February 6** in Greenville, North Carolina, Lloyd Hardee, 82, fatally shot his wife, Sybil Hardee, 78, at their home, then killed himself.

On **February 8** in Tucson, Arizona, Margaret Hoyt, 71, shot and killed her husband, Bill Drake, 85, at their home, then killed herself. Hoyt left several notes saying that her husband was suffering from medical problems.

On **February 9** in Henderson, Nevada, an 82-year-old man fatally shot his 81-year-old wife, called 911 to report it, then killed himself.

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