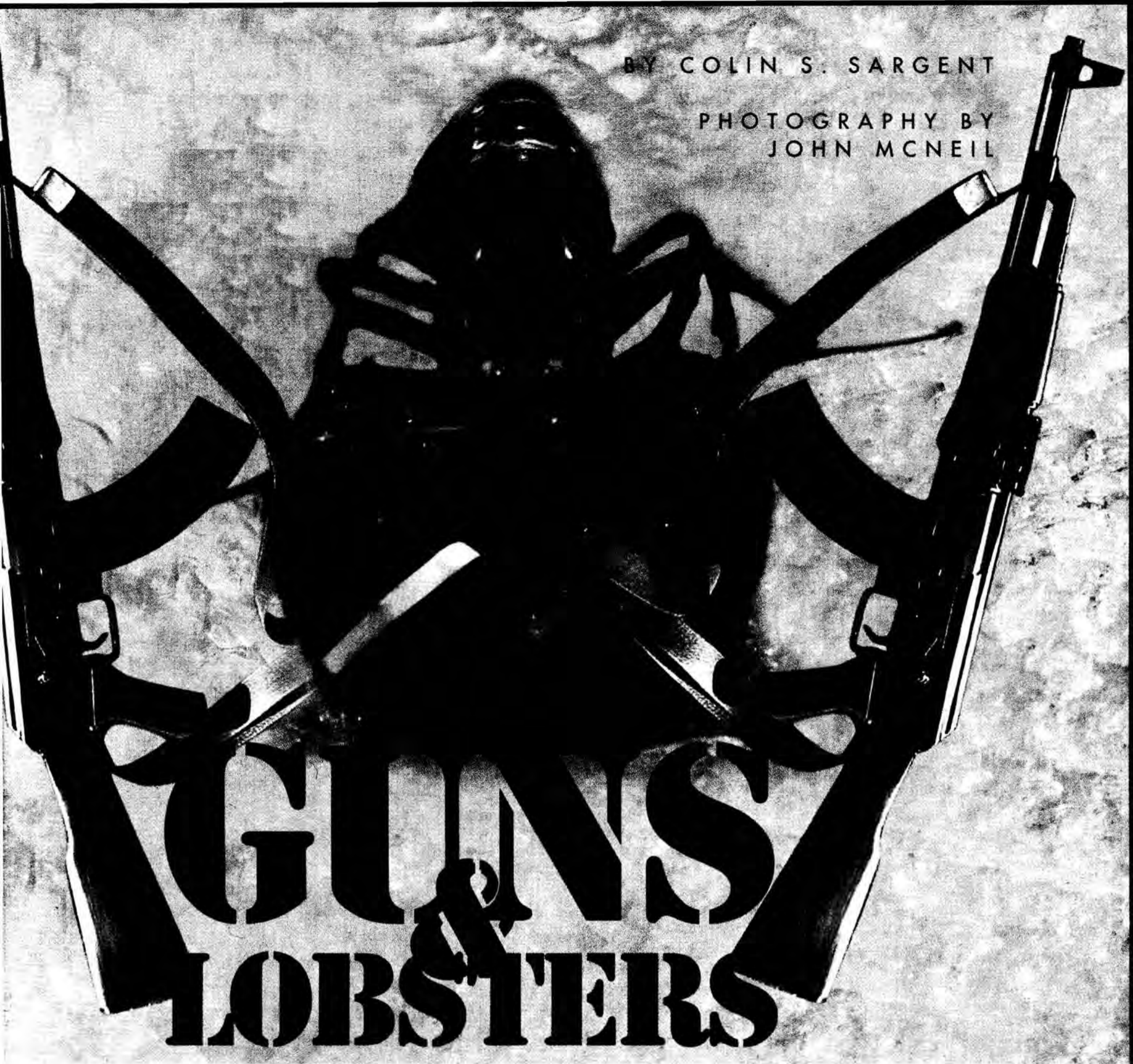


BY COLIN S. SARGENT

PHOTOGRAPHY BY  
JOHN MCNEIL



At 8 p.m., 11-year-old Jesse Sweeny bursts through the door of a neighbor's home in Casco, frightened and in tears. He had just seen his father wave his revolver and pull the trigger nine times, screaming, "Where's the bullets?" Sweeny's unemployed parents have been drinking and arguing since dinner. Jesse can't stand the waiting anymore. He runs back outside to check on his mother and meets a ranting Gary Sweeny walking down the road, screaming, "I can't believe how did that bullet get in there?" The neighbors call 911.

At 4:30 a.m., Sweeny is arrested for manslaughter after a lengthy interrogation by state police. After 13 dry fires,

**One of every 100 people you pass by on the streets of Portland may be concealing a hand gun. Unless, of course, he isn't concealing it.**

Christine Pepin has been shot in the left side of the head with the 14th and final squeeze of the trigger.

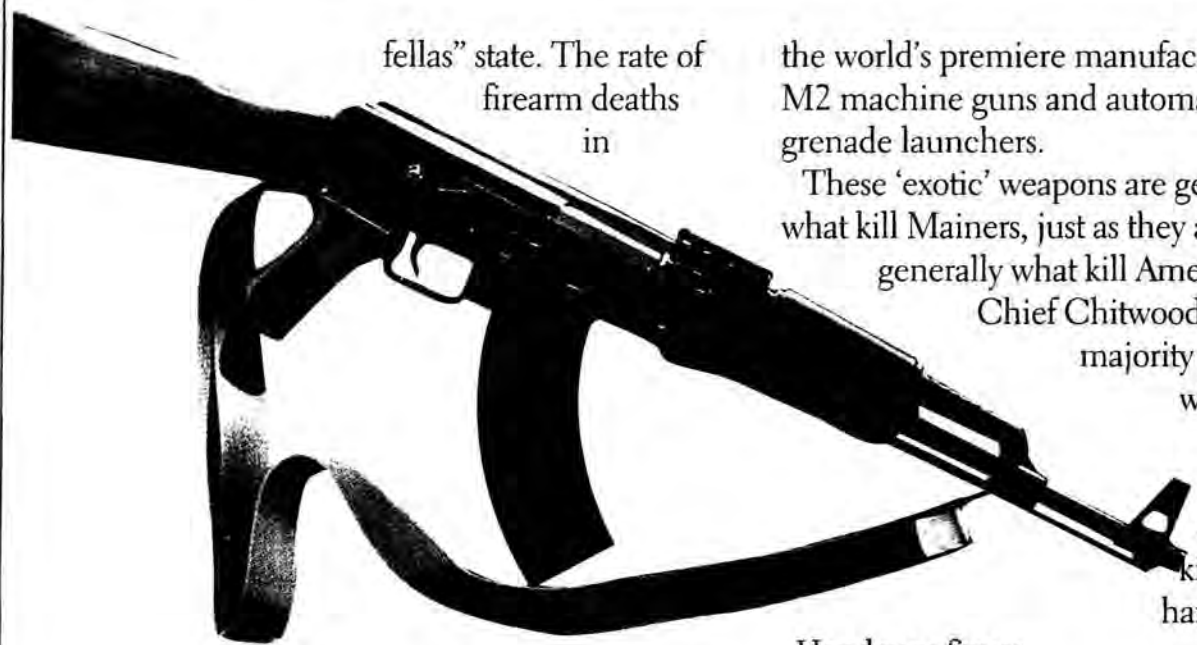
State police detectives begin compiling evidence from the home where Sweeny and Pepin have spent their last 20 years. Police believe that Sweeny did not intend

to kill his common-law wife, but instead just wished to wave the gun in her face.

Maine, with a population of about 1.25 million, lost 113 people through death by firearms in 1999, nearly twice as many as in all of Great Britain, where only 68 out of a population of 59 million died facing a gun. In France, the figure was 255 out of 59 million; in Germany, 381 out of 82 million. One hundred sixty-five Canadians suffered gun deaths out of 30 million. Japan, with 126 million, had 39 firearms-related deaths. Put another way, a citizen of Japan is 290 times less likely to die from a gunshot than a Mainer.

Maybe even more surprising is a direct comparison with New York, the "Good-





fellas" state. The rate of  
firearm deaths  
in

the world's premiere manufacturers of  
M2 machine guns and automatic  
grenade launchers.

These 'exotic' weapons are generally not  
what kill Mainers, just as they are not  
generally what kill Americans.

Chief Chitwood says, "The  
majority of Mainers  
who die in  
firearm-  
related  
deaths are  
killed by  
handguns.

Maine, 9.0 in  
100,000, is half again as high as the rate  
of firearm deaths in New York, 5.6 in  
100,000.

"In my experience, there are more guns  
in Maine, in general, than in the rest of  
the nation," says Portland police chief  
Michael Chitwood, who spent his early  
days on the streets of Philadelphia.

"In Portland, there are roughly 600  
people with concealed weapons permits,"  
Chitwood says. "About one in every 100  
people" you pass here on the street has a  
permit to pack a gun.

**B**ushmaster Firearms, on 999  
Roosevelt Trail in Windham,  
manufactured the semi-automatic  
M-16 copy used in the 13 murders com-  
mitted by the D.C. Snipers. The very  
weapon they held in their hands was built  
in Windham, then sold directly to Bulls-  
Eye Shooter's Supply in Tacoma, Wash-  
ington, where it was later reported stolen.

Bushmaster, which pumps out almost  
40,000 rifles a year, is not the only major  
arms manufacturer here. Smith & Wes-  
son makes 20,000 pistols a year in Houl-  
ton, Maine. General Dynamics Arma-  
ment Systems has a facility in Saco (for-  
merly Saco Defense, Inc.) that is one of

Handguns figure  
first in crimes, too.

"I have never seen a Kalashnikov. Long  
guns are sometimes confiscated, but  
they're very rarely used in crimes."

Confiscation occurs only in high-risk  
situations: when a concern about a  
mental illness leads police to believe a  
person may be a threat, when there is a  
danger of domestic abuse, when someone  
is reported to be a suicide risk, or  
whenever a gun is used in a crime.

"We confiscate around 100 guns a year,  
and most are not returned. Every three  
years or so, when we've built up a lot, we  
destroy them. During the last ten years,  
we've destroyed around a thousand  
weapons. We ship them off to get melted  
down and turned into boat anchors,"  
Chitwood says. "A fair amount of other  
[police] departments in Maine sell guns  
used in crimes at auction or to gun shops.  
They use them as a tool to plug gaps in  
their budgets."

So who's killing who? Mainers aren't  
killing each other; we're killing ourselves.

Eighty-one percent of Maine's 113  
firearm deaths were suicides.

"The most depressing firearm-related  
deaths that we see are people killing  
themselves. People on impulse just shoot  
themselves in the head, in the mouth, or  
in the chest, and that can be very hard on  
us. If people are bent on suicide, they'll  
do it by any means - pills, hanging,  
drowning - but guns are the most  
effective. Our 'successful' suicide  
rate would

be  
lower if it  
weren't so  
easy.

"It's important  
to realize that we  
live in a state in

which gun violence is prevalent.

I think that people should have a right  
to bear arms, to hunt, to recreate with  
firearms, as long as they do it in a lawful  
way with common sense," Chitwood says.  
And if you think it's a 'gangsta' thing  
coming in from larger urban areas, think  
again: Maine's young people are  
emphatically not the ones who are dying  
from the shootings.

Below age 25, the number of young  
people dying in firearm-related crimes  
and incidents sharply drops to 5.6 in  
100,000 from 11.5 in 100,000 for those  
above 25.

### MAINE FIREARM DEATHS BY AGE

Age Group	Population (1999)	Firearm Deaths
0-14	234,821	3
15-19	90,383	6
20-24	188,148	15
25-44	384,752	41
25-64	281,882	30
64+	175,357	24

COMPILED BY HELP  
(Handgun Epidemic Lowering Plan).

Then who's getting hit the most? People  
over 65: 13.7 in 100,000.

All but one of those firearm deaths for  
Maine senior citizens were suicides.

**M**aine has no registration laws  
and bans only those weapons  
banned nationally. The only  
limitation on gun ownership here is that  
a permit is required to carry a concealed  
weapon, and the only criteria for one of  
these permits is that an applicant not have  
a felony record.

Even *this* can be waived. Any Mainer  
can buy a firearm and keep it at home  
without any state interference. No fire-  
arms safety course must be taken in order  
to receive a concealed carry permit. It is  
easier to legally carry a concealed weapon  
in Maine than it is to drive to Cum-  
berland Farms or fish for rainbow trout  
on Sebago Lake.

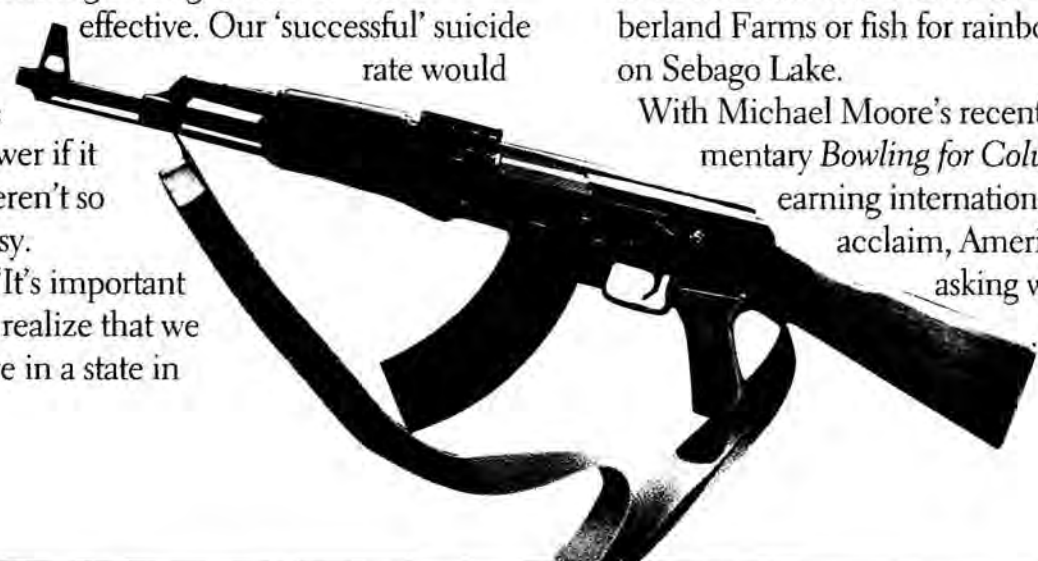
With Michael Moore's recent docu-  
mentary *Bowling for Columbine*  
earning international  
acclaim, Americans are  
asking what is  
behind  
firearm

### FIREARM DEATHS AND POPULATIONS

(1999)

Country	Population: (millions)	Firearm Deaths
Germany	82.1	381
France	58.7	255
Canada	30.6	165
United Kingdom	58.8	68
Japan	125.6	39
Maine	1.25	113

COMPILED BY HELP  
(Handgun Epidemic Lowering Plan).





**B.34 Vault**

**"During the last 10 years, we've destroyed about 1,000 weapons. We ship them off [to Seaboard Foundry in Johnston, Rhode Island] to get melted down and turned into boat anchors."**



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John Doyle  
Class of 1968, Valedictorian  
Attorney

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violence and what can be done about it. Is it a national disease?

Many Mainers' livelihoods rest on perfectly legal target sports. Further north in Canada, a higher rate of gun ownership is coupled with a much lower rate of firearm deaths. Some think it is too easy to purchase a weapon and wave it in another's face. "If I could write one law for Maine, it would be to require a waiting period for any kind of gun," Chitwood says. "You have to wait for a

**The very Bushmaster assault rifle the D.C. Snipers held in their hands was built in Windham, Maine, then sold directly to Bulls-Eye Shooter's Supply in Tacoma, Washington. Maybe lobsters aren't our most famous export after all.**

driver's license, for a passport, for a loan. Why shouldn't you have to wait to buy a firearm?"

The opinions of Mainers on this sensitive issue vary widely across a state in which shooting sports are a multimillion dollar industry. The largest problem with firearms violence in Maine, suicide, is considered to be a different issue by pro-gun and anti-gun groups. William Harwood, the President of the Maine Citizens Against Handgun Violence, says "It's tragic and depressing to lose more than 100 Maine citizens a year to gun violence. Our firearms violence problem is in our homes: suicide and domestic confrontation. It's challenging to try to reduce suicide, and suicide is a complex issue, but access to firearms is a significant contributing factor to the suicide rate in Maine. Firearms are a very easy way

**MAINE FIREARM DEATH CAUSES  
(1999)**

Cause	Firearm Deaths
Suicide	91
Homicide	15
Unintentional	4
Undetermined	1

81% of Maine gun deaths are suicides, which is much higher than the rest of the United States. 57% of all gun deaths in the United States are suicides.

There were 16,889 suicides with guns in the United States in 1999.

**COMPILED BY HELP  
(Handgun Epidemic Lowering Plan).**

**It is easier to carry a concealed weapon in Maine than it is to drive to Cumberland Farms or fish for rainbow trout on Sebago Lake.**

to commit suicide, and easy access to firearms can accelerate escalation of domestic issues."

George Fogg, the former secretary of the Pine Tree

State Rifle & Pistol

Association, disagrees.

"The majority of firearm deaths in Maine are suicides. In the United States, the tool that one most often uses for suicide is a gun. As Dr. John Macintosh says, "once people make the final decision to commit suicide, the tool is immaterial. I just did some research for the Sportsman's Alliance of Maine to put together a brief on guns and crime and violence in Maine, and we found that Maine does not have a problem with gun violence. Guns cause violence as often as matches cause arson."

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