

The Meaning of Guns to Gun Owners in the U.S.: The 2019 National Lawful Use of Guns Survey



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Introduction: A better understanding of the lawful use of guns and the symbolic meaning of guns to gun owners is essential to bridge the divide in public opinion regarding policies to reduce gun violence in the U.S.

Methods: A national, prerecruited Internet panel of U.S. adults in 2019 was used to survey gun owners ($n=2,086$) to ascertain their gun-related attitudes and practices. Data were analyzed in 2020.

Results: The primary reason given for owning a gun was defense (59.4%), followed by recreation (26.8%). A minority of the gun owners in the sample (22.9%) reported taking part in any gun-related activity more than rarely. The proportion of respondents who agreed that guns are an important part of their identity was just 10.0%. The majority of the gun owners viewed gun control advocates as wanting to take away all guns (58.5%). Nearly 70% of gun owners reported that a reason for their reluctance to engage in gun violence prevention was that they feel alienated because they perceive gun control advocates as blaming them for the gun violence problem, not understanding gun ownership, and not understanding much about guns.

Conclusions: For most of the gun owners, gun ownership plays a practical role as a method of self-protection and has a symbolic association with freedom. Public health practitioners must develop novel communication strategies that avoid alienating gun owners by creating a perception that the ultimate aim is to take their guns away.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2018, firearm violence caused 39,740 deaths in the U.S.¹ Despite the magnitude of the problem, the Congress has not enacted any gun control legislation in decades.² The overwhelming majority of gun owners support firearm policies such as universal background checks.³ This discrepancy between the nearly universal support for basic firearm policies and the failure of the Congress to enact such policies has been largely explained as being due to the influence of the National Rifle Association (NRA) and opposition from gun-rights supporters.⁴ However, as most gun owners support a wide variety of gun violence prevention policies, why is it that the gun-owning community is perceived as publicly opposing these policies? This paradox suggests that the visible and outspoken opponents of gun violence prevention legislation are not representative of all gun owners and that the overwhelming

majority of gun owners are reluctant to share their views publicly. There are no previous national studies that have assessed potential reasons why many gun owners do not engage in gun violence prevention political activities despite their strong support for many of the most commonly debated policies.

Although there have been several previous national surveys of gun owners, few have been designed specifically to measure not only gun ownership and political attitudes but also gun owner identity and the symbolic meaning of guns to gun owners. Metz⁵ has suggested that to achieve effective gun policy in the light of the

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perceived political divide, the public health community must begin to communicate directly with the gun-owning community, and to do so effectively, one must understand what guns and gun ownership mean to gun owners. As Metzl stated: “Improving such communication requires understanding the complex valences that guns accrue for people and communities when these guns are not shooting bullets or causing mortal wounds; in other words, focusing not just on death data but on life data as well.”⁵ Similarly, sociologist Yamane⁶ has called for more scholarship on “the lawful use of firearms by legal gun owners,”⁶ not merely on the unlawful uses (i.e., gun violence).

This paper presents the results from the most recent national survey of gun owners: the 2019 National Lawful Use of Guns Survey. This study contributes uniquely to the existing literature by (1) explicitly studying the lawful use of guns by gun owners, (2) aiming to understand not only the reasons for gun ownership and policy attitudes but also the symbolic meaning of guns to owners and the degree of their social identity as a gun owner, and (3) exploring the reasons why many gun owners who support gun policies do not engage in any political activity in support of these policies. The broader aims are to understand more extensively than in previous surveys the deeply held values that motivate legal gun ownership and ultimately to identify effective ways of communicating with gun owners to bring them together with nongun owners to engage in gun violence prevention.

METHODS

Study Sample

A national survey of 2,086 gun owners was conducted by Ipsos using the probability-based KnowledgePanel, the largest national Internet panel whose members were selected using representative sampling techniques. The panel was recruited by address-based probability sampling using the Delivery Sequence File of the U.S. Postal Service, which contains every delivery address in the U.S. Hispanic and other minority groups are oversampled into the panel. The study was deemed exempt from human subjects review by the Boston University Medical Center IRB because the investigators did not collect any personally identifiable data.

A random sample of 3,698 KnowledgePanel members who reported owning a gun upon recruitment to KnowledgePanel were sent an e-mail inviting them to participate in the survey. Of these, 2,321 (62.8%) responded by clicking on the link to go to the screener page, which contained a consent form explaining the study. Of the 2,321 individuals who were screened, a total of 2,086 (89.9%) completed the survey. Thus, the overall completion rate was 62.8% × 89.9% or 56.5%.

Ipsos constructed final survey weights that combined presample weights to account for selection probabilities and poststratification weights to account for survey nonresponse. The use of

these weights aims to make the results representative of all U.S. adult gun owners in 2019.

Measures

The survey included measures of gun ownership, gun-related activities, gun owner identity, the symbolic meaning of guns, opinion toward firearm policies, attitudes toward the gun control movement, and civic engagement with gun violence prevention. The [Appendix](#) (available online) summarizes the survey structure and sample items. Gun ownership identity and emotional and moral attachment to firearms were assessed using previously validated measures, described below. The order of items within each survey module was randomized to avoid response order effects.⁷

A scale developed by Lacombe et al.⁸ was adapted to measure gun owner social identity. The scale is based on 10 items ascertaining the level of agreement with statements such as *I act like a typical gun owner* or *When I talk about gun owners, I usually say “we” rather than “they”* ([Appendix](#), available online, provides a list of all the 10 items). In addition, the degree of respondents’ agreement with the statement: *Guns are important to my overall identity* was assessed directly.

A scale developed and validated by Mencken and Froese⁹ to assess the extent to which guns have a symbolic meaning to gun owners was adapted for use. This is an eight-item scale assessing the extent of agreement with the statements: *Owning a gun makes me feel* (1) *safe*, (2) *responsible*, (3) *confident*, (4) *patriotic*, (5) *in control of my fate*, (6) *more valuable to my family*, (7) *more valuable to my community*, and (8) *respected*. An additional item was added: *the right to own guns is essential to my sense of freedom*.

All analyses were conducted in 2020 using Stata, version 15.

RESULTS

The overall demographics of the gun owner sample were quite similar to those of gun owners in the nationally representative 2018 General Social Survey conducted by NORC at the University of Chicago ([Appendix Table 1](#), available online).¹⁰ There were no significant differences in age, race, sex, education, income, urban status, or political party. There was a slight skew toward respondents who reported having a conservative political ideology.

To assess potential nonresponse bias, the demographics of survey respondents and nonrespondents were compared. The respondents were significantly more likely to be older, male, and white ([Appendix Table 2](#), available online). However, there were no significant differences in education, income, urbanicity, political party, or political affiliation.

Overwhelmingly, the primary reason given for owning a gun was defense (59.4%), followed by recreation (26.8%), with only 7.9% of respondents reporting their primary reason being to exercise their constitutional rights or to give them a feeling of power ([Table 1](#)).

Few of the gun owners in the sample reported taking part in any gun-related activities more than rarely

Table 1. Characteristics of Adult Gun Owners in the U.S., 2019 (*n*=2,086)

Characteristics	<i>n</i>	% (95% CI)
Sex		
Male	1,518	68.7 (66.4, 71.0)
Female	568	31.3 (29.0, 33.6)
Age, years		
18–29	115	8.7 (7.2, 10.5)
30–44	419	28.9 (26.5, 31.3)
45–59	601	27.7 (25.7, 29.9)
≥60	951	34.7 (32.6, 36.9)
Race		
White, non-Hispanic	1,740	76.3 (73.8, 78.6)
Black, non-Hispanic	136	8.2 (6.8, 9.7)
Other, non-Hispanic	42	4.1 (3.0, 5.6)
Hispanic	113	10.1 (8.4, 12.1)
≥2 races, non-Hispanic	55	1.4 (1.0, 1.8)
Region		
Northeast	258	11.0 (9.6, 12.5)
Midwest	497	22.2 (20.3, 24.2)
South	855	43.9 (41.5, 46.4)
West	476	22.9 (20.9, 25.0)
Annual income, \$		
<24,999	167	8.1 (6.8, 9.6)
25,000–49,999	329	16.0 (14.3, 17.9)
50,000–99,999	728	34.2 (31.9, 36.5)
≥100,000	862	41.7 (39.4, 44.2)
Educational attainment		
Less than high school	69	6.6 (5.1, 8.3)
High school	514	28.3 (26.1, 30.6)
Some college	713	33.3 (31.1, 35.6)
Bachelor's degree or higher	790	31.9 (29.7, 34.1)
Home ownership status		
Own home	1,804	83.4 (81.3, 85.3)
Rent	282	16.6 (14.7, 18.7)
Urban status		
Metropolitan area	1,628	79.4 (77.5, 81.2)
Nonmetropolitan area	458	20.6 (18.8, 22.5)
Political party		
Republican	1,107	51.3 (48.9, 53.8)
Independent	453	22.8 (20.8, 25.0)
Democrat	522	25.8 (23.7, 28.0)
Political ideology		
Conservative	1,073	49.1 (46.7, 51.6)
Moderate	630	33.7 (31.4, 36.1)
Liberal	371	17.2 (15.4, 19.1)

(Table 2). Only 13.9% reported going to a shooting range more than rarely, only 3.5% reported participating in an online gun forum more than rarely, just 1.6% reported going to a gun show more than rarely, and only 2.4% and 2.6% of gun owners supported gun rights more than

rarely by taking part in political activity or donating money, respectively. In all, less than one quarter of gun owners (22.9%) reported taking part in any gun-related activity more than rarely.

Only a small percentage (15.4%) of gun owners displayed strong agreement with any of the gun owner identity items (Table 3). Only 8.3% of gun owners agreed that they act like a typical gun owner, and just 12.8% agreed that they act like gun owners to a great extent.

Guns were viewed as a symbol of freedom by the majority of the respondents (63%) and were also viewed by the majority of the gun owners as making them feel safe (58.9%) (Table 3). However, only a small proportion linked gun ownership to a feeling of patriotism (23.9%), value to their family (18.5%), or empowerment (15.8%).

The majority of the gun owners viewed gun control advocates as wanting to eliminate aspects of gun culture (61.9%), eliminate the Second Amendment (59.1%), or take away all guns (58.5%) (Table 3). Close to half (45.1%) of gun owners reported that gun control advocates threatened their culture, and the same proportion reported that they feel disrespected by gun control advocates.

A large majority of gun owners supported a range of gun violence prevention policies, whereas there were a number of policies that were not supported by a majority of gun owners (Table 4). Of the gun owners who supported universal background checks, only 7.3% had ever publicly expressed support for such policies. Of those who failed to publicly support background checks, the majority reported that a reason for this failure was feeling alienated because they feel that they are being blamed by gun control advocates (60.2%), because gun control advocates do not understand much about guns (60.0%), or because gun control advocates do not know anything about what gun ownership is all about (59.7%).

Finally, there were profound differences in the opinions about gun control policies on the basis of gun owner's identity, the symbolic meaning of guns to the owners, and gun owners' attitudes toward the intentions of gun control advocates (Appendix Table 3, available online). Respondents who had a strong sense of gun owner identity, who found symbolic meaning in firearms, and who believed that gun control advocates disrespect them or are trying to eliminate aspects of gun culture or take away their guns were all significantly more likely to oppose assault weapons bans than those who did not have these attitudes or beliefs. The most striking differences in the support for assault weapons bans were between gun owners who believed and those who did not believe that gun control advocates aim to take away their guns (24.3% vs 65.1%) and between gun owners who identified and those who did not identify

Table 2. Reasons for Owning a Gun, Type of Guns Owned, and Gun-Related Activities Among Adult Gun Owners in the U.S., 2019 (n=2,086)

Characteristics	n	% (95% CI)
Primary reason for owning a gun		
Defense ^a	1,177	59.4 (57.0, 61.7)
Recreation ^a	612	26.8 (24.8, 28.9)
Rights/power ^a	161	7.9 (6.7, 9.3)
Other ^a	127	5.9 (4.8, 7.2)
Feel that local community is unsafe		
Yes	186	10.1 (8.6, 11.8)
No	1,895	89.9 (88.2, 91.4)
Type of guns owned		
Pistol(s) only	339	17.7 (15.9, 19.7)
Revolver(s) only	96	4.7 (3.8, 5.8)
Rifle(s) only	110	5.0 (4.1, 6.1)
Shotgun(s) only	96	4.5 (3.6, 5.6)
Own both pistol and rifle	945	45.5 (43.1, 47.9)
Any other	500	22.6 (20.6, 24.6)
Gun-related activities (monthly or more)		
Shooting range	261	13.9 (12.2, 15.8)
Shooting competition	39	2.5 (1.7, 3.5)
Hunting	129	7.1 (5.8, 8.6)
Buy a gun for collection	20	1.6 (1.0, 2.6)
Assemble own firearm	106	5.4 (4.4, 6.8)
Buy tactical gear	24	1.8 (1.2, 2.8)
Lead a firearm-related training	24	1.9 (1.2, 2.9)
Bring friend to a shooting range	20	1.4 (0.9, 2.3)
Participate in online gun-related forum	56	3.5 (2.6, 4.6)
Attend gun show	18	1.6 (0.9, 2.6)
Political activity to support gun rights	34	2.4 (1.6, 3.5)
Donate money to support gun rights	35	2.6 (1.8, 3.8)
Any monthly gun-related activity ^b	446	22.9 (20.8, 25.0)
NRA membership ^c		
Yes	267	12.4 (10.9, 14.1)
No	1,819	87.6 (85.9, 89.1)
Magazine subscriptions		
Any of the 6 gun-related magazines ^d	327	16.3 (14.5, 18.3)
Frequency of concealed carry		
Sometimes or more	497	26.6 (24.4, 28.9)
Rarely or never	1,574	73.4 (71.1, 75.6)
Use of favorite firearm		
Carried at least once in past 30 days	611	32.1 (29.8, 34.5)
Shot at least monthly in past 6 months	309	16.5 (14.7, 18.5)

^aDefense: to protect my family, to protect my community, for my own protection; Recreation: I enjoy hunting, I enjoy shooting for sport or competition, I like collecting them, it is a tradition in my family; Rights/Power: to exercise my constitutional rights, they give me a feeling of power; Other: to manage pests on my property, I use them for my job.

^bParticipates in any 1 or more of the above activities at least monthly.

^cEstimated by magazine subscriptions: anyone reporting a subscription to an NRA magazine (American Hunter, American Rifleman, America’s 1st Freedom, Shooting Illustrated) was considered an NRA member.

^dAmerican Hunter, American Rifleman, America’s 1st Freedom, Shooting Illustrated, Guns and Ammo, or Shooting Times.

NRA, National Rifle Association.

Table 3. Gun Owner Identity, Symbolic Meaning of Guns, and Attitudes About Gun Control Advocates Among Adult Gun Owners in the U.S., 2019 (n=2,086)

Characteristics	n	% (95% CI)
Gun identity		
Gun-identity agreement ^a		
When someone criticizes gun owners, it feels like a personal insult	569	28.3 (26.1, 30.5)
I'm very interested in what others think about gun owners	356	16.8 (15.1, 18.7)
When I talk about gun owners, I usually say "we" rather than "they"	741	35.5 (33.2, 37.9)
Gun owners' successes are my successes	382	18.9 (17.1, 20.9)
When someone praises gun owners, it feels like personal compliment	305	21.5 (19.2, 24.0)
I act like gun owners to a great extent	266	12.8 (11.3, 14.6)
If a story in the media criticizes gun owners, I feel embarrassed	147	7.3 (6.2, 8.7)
I act like a typical gun owner	170	8.3 (7.0, 9.7)
I have a number of qualities typical of gun owners	627	29.6 (27.5, 31.9)
The flaws associated with gun owners apply to me also	248	12.1 (10.6, 13.8)
Strong agreement with any gun-identity statement		
Yes	307	15.4 (13.7, 17.2)
No	1,779	84.6 (82.8, 86.3)
Gun-identity score		
<2.8	315	15.4 (13.7, 17.2)
≥2.8	1,771	84.6 (82.8, 86.3)
Mean gun-identity score	3.28	-- (3.25, 3.31)
Symbolic meaning of guns ^a		
Essential to my sense of freedom	1,308	63.0 (60.6, 65.3)
Make me feel safe	1,166	58.9 (56.6, 61.3)
Make me feel responsible	991	49.6 (47.1, 52.0)
Make me feel in control of my fate	646	33.7 (31.4, 36.1)
Make me feel confident	553	29.6 (27.3, 31.9)
Make me feel patriotic	444	23.9 (21.8, 26.1)
Make me feel valuable to my family	348	18.5 (16.6, 20.5)
Make me feel empowered	285	15.8 (14.0, 17.8)
Important to my overall identity	183	10.0 (8.6, 11.7)
Agreement ^a with perceived threats to gun rights and culture		
Gun control advocates want to		
Eliminate aspects of gun culture	1,306	61.9 (59.5, 64.3)
Eliminate Second Amendment	1,235	59.1 (56.7, 61.5)
Take away all guns	1,237	58.5 (56.1, 60.9)
Threaten my culture	951	45.1 (42.7, 47.5)
I feel disrespected by gun control advocates	941	45.1 (42.7, 47.5)

^aResponded Strongly Agree or Agree.

guns as a symbol of freedom (27.9% vs 63.8%). Similarly, striking differences were also found in support for assault weapons bans on the basis of believing or not believing that gun control advocates were trying to eliminate the Second Amendment (25.1% vs 64.5%) or aspects of gun culture (27.1% vs 63.9%).

DISCUSSION

Three major findings emerged from this study. First, a large majority of gun owners do not engage regularly in

any gun-related activities, including concealed carry, recreation, NRA membership, gun-related magazine subscriptions, or political activity in support of gun rights. Instead, the survey suggests that for the majority of gun owners in the U.S., their practical involvement with guns is simply in trying to protect themselves in the home. Second, despite their lack of participation in gun-related activities and the limited use of guns in their daily lives, the majority of the gun owners have a symbolic connection to guns, viewing them as important to their sense of freedom and believing that gun control

Table 4. Opinion on Firearm Policies and Engagement in Gun Violence Prevention Among Adult Gun Owners in the U.S., 2019 (n=2,086)

Characteristic	n	% (95% CI)
Support for gun violence prevention policies		
Majority support		
Background checks for concealed carry permits	1,806	86.5 (84.6, 88.1)
Prohibitor for mental illness	1,818	86.3 (84.5, 88.0)
Extreme risk protection orders	1,702	81.4 (79.4, 83.3)
Prohibitor for domestic violence restraining orders	1,639	79.1 (77.1, 81.1)
Require a permit to buy a handgun	1,608	76.6 (74.4, 78.6)
Universal background checks	1,541	75.0 (72.8, 77.1)
Prohibitor for no-fly list	1,504	72.3 (70.0, 74.4)
Require safety course before a gun purchase	1,377	67.0 (64.7, 69.3)
Restore gun manufacturer liability	1,304	62.9 (60.4, 65.2)
Require permit to buy gun	1,076	53.0 (50.6, 55.4)
Majority does not support		
Create a federal database to track gun sales	989	49.2 (46.8, 51.7)
Ban assault weapons	880	41.2 (38.9, 43.6)
No concealed gun carrying in elementary schools	883	40.7 (38.3, 43.1)
Prohibitor for ages <21 years	751	39.4 (37.0, 41.9)
Gun laws should be made stricter	832	39.2 (36.9, 41.6)
Ban high-capacity ammunition magazines	831	37.8 (35.5, 40.1)
Require that all guns in home be locked when not in use	747	37.8 (35.4, 40.2)
Restrict gun possession on college campuses	773	35.6 (33.3, 37.9)
May-issue laws (discretion to deny concealed carry permits)	677	31.7 (29.4, 33.9)
Engagement in gun violence prevention		
Ever publicly supported universal background checks (among those who support universal background checks)	124	7.3 (6.0, 8.9)
Reason for not publicly supporting universal background checks (among those who support the policy but have never publicly supported it)		
Feel alienated because gun control advocates blame gun owners	853	60.2 (57.2, 63.0)
Feel alienated because gun control advocates do not understand very much about guns	843	60.0 (57.1, 62.9)
Feel alienated because gun control advocates do not understand what gun ownership is all about	848	59.7 (56.8, 62.6)
Feel alienated for at least 1 of the above reasons	982	69.2 (66.4, 71.9)
Willingness to engage in gun violence prevention		
Would be willing to engage in gun violence prevention activity? ^a	1,127	52.9 (50.4, 55.3)

^aResponded 6 or higher (on scale of 1–10) on any of the 9 activities to support gun violence prevention: contact a public official, make donation, talk to family members or friends, attend a meeting, testify at a public hearing, write a letter to editor, write a comment on Internet discussion, talk to other gun owners, talk to nongun owners.

advocates threaten that freedom by aiming to take away their guns. Third, variation among gun owners in this symbolic connection with guns and the belief that their freedom is being threatened lead to a sharp divide in the opinion about gun policies within the gun-owning community that in some cases, is even wider than the overall gap between gun owners and nongun owners generally.

This national survey paints a picture of gun owners that is quite different from previous nonrepresentative, ethnographic, or sociologic studies that have described gun owners as being citizen–protectors who take on the defense of others as a personal responsibility,¹¹ shooters

who thrive on competitive recreation,¹² good guys with guns who feel empowered by gun ownership,¹³ gun show fanatics,¹⁴ or gun aficionados.¹⁵ Instead, the picture that emerges here is one of a large population of typical people who are primarily trying to protect themselves and their families. These results appear to support Yamane's⁶ argument that guns represent for people part of their solution for safely negotiating the contemporary world.

Ironically, very few respondents identified themselves as being like the typical gun owner, meaning that they are like the typical gun owner without realizing it. One

possibility for this finding is that the NRA and the media have successfully created stereotypes of gun owners that the gun-owning community itself has largely accepted. Few gun owners, for example, are likely aware of one of the major findings of this study: the majority of gun owners do not participate regularly in gun-related activities, including concealed carry, but simply own guns for self-defense at home. Therefore, it is likely that gun owners who do not engage in such activities assume that they are in the minority and thus respond that they are not like the typical gun owner.

Nevertheless, despite low levels of gun-related activity in their daily lives, the majority of the gun owners have accepted the NRA's rhetoric that the ultimate aim of firearm violence prevention advocates is to take away their guns and eliminate the Second Amendment. Gun owners overwhelmingly feel that public health advocates are trying to eliminate important aspects of gun culture. The majority of the gun owners support policies that aim to keep firearms out of the hands of people at high risk for violence—such as universal background checks, permit requirements, and extreme risk protection orders—but extremely few are willing to publicly express their support for these policies. Nearly 70% of these gun owners reported that a reason for this reluctance to engage in gun violence prevention is that they feel alienated because they perceive gun control advocates as blaming them for the gun violence problem, not understanding gun ownership, and not understanding much about guns.

The finding that the primary concern of the majority of gun owners is their ability to protect themselves explains the wide range of support for various gun policies. The majority of gun owners supported every policy for which the primary aim was to keep firearms out of the hands of people at high risk for violence (e.g., people deemed to be a danger to themselves or others, people with mental illness, domestic violence offenders) and opposed every policy that could be perceived as threatening the ability of law-abiding gun owners to protect themselves (e.g., banning assault weapons or high-capacity magazines, restricting concealed carry, making it more difficult to obtain a concealed carry permit, requiring that guns be locked when not in use). This is perhaps best illustrated by the astounding discrepancy between the level of gun owners' support for requiring a permit to purchase a handgun (77%) and the level of their support for may-issue laws that give law enforcement officials the discretion in approving concealed carry permits (32%). This nearly 2-fold difference in public opinion is striking because although permit systems affect the general ease of purchasing a gun, may-issue laws specifically affect the ability to carry a gun in public for self-defense.

Thus, the latter laws are more threatening to gun owners, most of whom own guns for self-defense.

These findings have 2 important implications for how public health practitioners can better communicate with gun owners to engage them in gun violence prevention. First, the major reason why most gun owners do not publicly support gun violence prevention policies that they favor is a feeling of alienation because of their perception that gun control advocates do not respect gun culture generally and their decision to own a gun for self-defense specifically. Though, on a population basis, a higher prevalence of household gun ownership is associated with higher rates of firearm-related death,^{16–18} public health advocates must still respect the decision that gun owners have made to protect themselves and their families. Educating gun owners on the risks associated with gun ownership is important but needs to be done without criticizing gun owners or attacking gun culture.

Second, public health practitioners must counter the NRA's rhetoric that their ultimate goal is to take people's guns away. This perception is clearly leading to a feeling of threatened freedom and is associated with strong opposition to gun violence prevention policies. Whereas this perception is largely due to statements by the NRA, gun violence prevention advocates have sometimes fed into this rhetoric. For example, former Democratic presidential candidate Beto O'Rourke advocated for a mandatory buy-back program for military-style semiautomatic rifles, proclaiming: "Hell yes, we're going to take away your AR-15, your AK-47."¹⁹ A New York State legislator introduced a bill to ban school shooting programs, arguing that schools should not be supporting the spread of gun culture in society.²⁰ These statements may be interpreted as showing disrespect for gun owners and gun culture and may make it much more difficult for gun violence prevention advocates to convince gun owners that they are not coming for people's guns.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this paper is the possibility of selection bias, both in terms of the representativeness of the initial panel and potential nonresponse bias. Previous research has demonstrated that the KnowledgePanel produces estimates that are nationally representative²¹ and the demographics of this sample are similar to those of gun owners nationally in the General Social Survey.¹⁰ A comparison of survey respondents and nonrespondents revealed that there were no differences in terms of political party or ideology. The survey completion rate of 57% is excellent for an Internet panel survey and is far higher than the range typically seen with nonprobability, opt-in panels (2%–16%).²²

CONCLUSIONS

The major finding of this research is that the prevailing stereotypes about U.S. gun owners are largely inaccurate. A population-based examination of lawful gun ownership reveals that for the majority of gun owners, gun ownership is primarily a method of self-protection. However, this practical use of guns is often tied to a symbolic association with freedom and a perception that gun control advocates represent a threat to that freedom because they aim to take guns away. This research suggests that to succeed in engaging gun owners in gun violence prevention, public health advocates must effectively counter this perception.

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All authors contributed to the conception and design, acquisition of data, analysis and interpretation of data, and revising the article critically for important intellectual content and approved the final version. MS created the codebook and drafted the manuscript.

A publicly available data set and codebook have been deposited with the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan.

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SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

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