

Public Support for Gun Violence Prevention Policies Among Gun Owners and Non-Gun Owners in 2017

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Objectives. To compare public support for 24 different gun policies between gun owners and non-gun owners in 2017.

Methods. We fielded a national public opinion survey in January 2017 using an online panel to measure US adults' support for 24 gun policies. We compared support among gun owners and non-gun owners.

Results. For 23 of the 24 policies examined, most respondents supported restricting or regulating gun ownership. Only 8 of 24 policies had greater than a 10-point support gap between gun owners and non-gun owners.

Conclusions. Policies with high public support and minimal support gaps by gun ownership status included universal background checks, greater accountability for licensed gun dealers unable to account for their inventory, higher safety training standards for concealed carry permit holders, improved reporting of records related to mental illness for background checks, gun prohibitions for persons subject to temporary domestic violence restraining orders, and gun violence restraining orders.

Public Health Implications. Although there are important areas where Americans disagree on guns, large majorities of both gun owners and non-gun owners strongly support measures to strengthen US gun laws. (*Am J Public Health.* 2018;108:878–881. doi:10.2105/AJPH.2018.304432)

 See also Galea and Vaughan, p. 856; and the Gun Violence Prevention Section, pp. 858–888.

The 2012 mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School catalyzed a national dialogue about firearm policy. In the intervening years, thousands of lives have been lost to mass shootings in the United States; firearms were responsible for 38 658 deaths in 2016 alone.¹ Following the 2017 and 2018 mass shootings in Las Vegas, Nevada; Sutherland Springs, Texas; and Parkland, Florida, one prominent message in the US news headlines has been the deep divide among Americans on gun policy.² Media reports such as this described a chasm separating gun owners from non-gun owners: 1 headline described a staggering gap that made abortion look like an issue with a minor divide. The perception that the public is deeply divided by gun ownership status has been characterized as a stumbling block to the passage of policies to reduce gun violence.

To understand the nature of the partisan divide, we fielded a national survey assessing Americans' attitudes about 24 different policies to reduce gun violence in 2017 and measured the size of the gaps in support between gun owners and non-gun owners. In this study, we have updated what was known about public opinion, by gun ownership status, directly following the mass shooting at

Sandy Hook Elementary³ and 2 years later in 2015,⁴ and examined a broader set of policy options than has been studied elsewhere.⁵ In the context of renewed interest in policy action following the Parkland tragedy, our intent was to identify policies with the highest overall public support levels and the smallest partisan gaps for consideration.

METHODS

We fielded the national survey with NORC's AmeriSpeaks online panel from January 2 to 16, 2017 (n = 2124). The probability-based panel was designed to be representative of the US population; we used random-digit dialing and address-based sampling covering 95% of US households. Panelists include households with listed and unlisted telephone numbers or with only cell phones and were aged 18 years and older. The survey completion rate was 75%.

We conducted analyses using survey weights to adjust for known sampling deviations and survey nonresponse (Appendix A, available as a supplement to the online version of this article at <http://www.ajph.org>). We oversampled gun owners and compared policy support by gun ownership status with the Pearson χ^2 test.

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Requiring a background check system for all gun sales to make sure a purchaser is not legally prohibited from having a gun

Allowing the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms to temporarily take away a gun dealer's license if an audit reveals record-keeping violations and the dealer cannot account for 20 or more of his guns

A person who can legally carry a concealed gun should be required to pass a test demonstrating they can safely and lawfully handle a gun in common situations they might encounter

Requiring states to report a person to the background check system who is prohibited from buying a gun due either to involuntary commitment to a hospital for psychiatric treatment or to being declared mentally incompetent by a court of law

Prohibiting a person subject to a temporary domestic violence restraining order from having a gun for the duration of the order

Allowing family members to ask the court to temporarily remove guns from a relative who they believe is at risk of harming himself or others

Requiring a person to obtain a license from a local law enforcement agency before buying a gun to verify their identity and ensure that they are not legally prohibited from having a gun

Prohibiting a person convicted of a serious crime as a juvenile from having a gun for 10 years

Allowing cities to sue licensed gun dealers when there is strong evidence that the gun dealer's careless sales practices allowed many criminals to obtain guns

Authorizing law enforcement officers to temporarily remove guns from individuals who the officer determines pose an immediate threat of harm to self or others

Requiring a mandatory minimum sentence of two years in prison for a person convicted of knowingly selling a gun to someone who cannot legally have a gun

Prohibiting a person convicted of public display of a gun in a threatening manner, excluding self-defense, from having a gun for 10 years

Requiring by law that a person lock up the guns in their home when not in use to prevent handling by children or teenagers without adult supervision

Allowing the information about which gun dealers sell the most guns used in crimes to be available to the police and the public so that those gun dealers can be prioritized for greater oversight

Prohibiting a person convicted of two or more misdemeanor crimes involving illegal drugs in a five-year period from having a gun for five years

Prohibiting a person under the age of 21 from having a handgun

Banning the sale of military-style, semi-automatic assault weapons that are capable of shooting more than 10 rounds of ammunition without reloading

Banning the sale of large-capacity ammunition clips or magazines that allow some guns to shoot more than 10 bullets before reloading

Prohibiting a person convicted of assault and battery that does not result in serious injury or involve a lethal weapon from having a gun for 10 years

Prohibiting a person convicted of carrying a concealed gun without a permit from having a gun for 10 years

Prohibiting a person convicted of two or more DWIs or DUIs in a five-year period from having a gun for five years

Allowing people who have lost the right to have a gun due to involuntary commitment for mental illness to have that right restored if they are determined not to be dangerous

Prohibiting a person convicted of drunk and disorderly conduct from having a gun for 10 years

Allowing a person who can legally carry a concealed gun to bring that gun onto school grounds for kindergarten through 12th grade

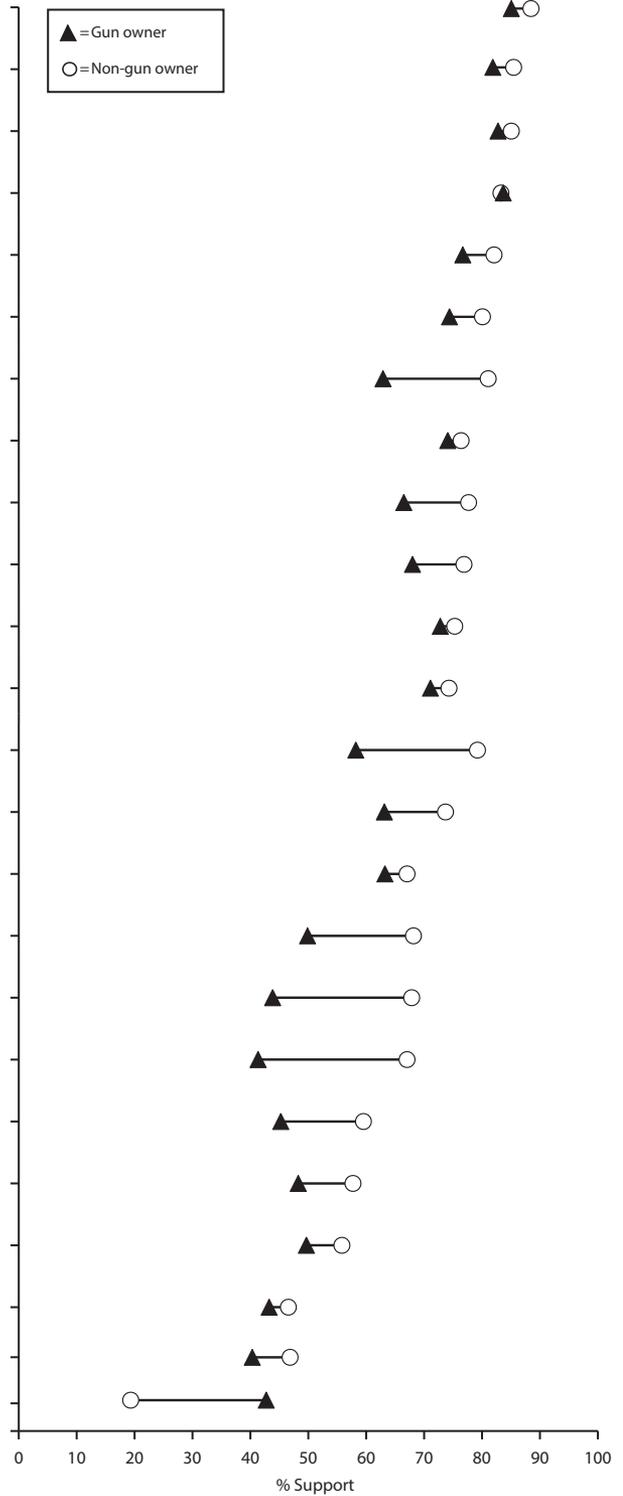


FIGURE 1—Gaps in Public Support Between Gun Owners and Non-Gun Owners for US Gun Policies in 2017

RESULTS

For 23 of the 24 policies, most respondents supported restrictions or regulations on gun ownership (Appendix B, available as a supplement to the online version of this article at <http://www.ajph.org>). Gun policies with the highest support were universal background checks (87.8%); stronger measures requiring accountability by gun dealers unable to account for missing (e.g., lost or stolen) guns (84.8%); requiring a person who can legally carry a concealed gun to pass a test demonstrating safe and lawful handling (84.7%); improved reporting of people disqualified from owning a gun on the basis of mental health criteria to the firearm background check system (83.6%); gun prohibitions on persons subject to temporary domestic violence restraining orders (81%); and laws creating a civil process for families to petition the court for temporary removal of a firearm from an individual deemed to be at serious risk for harming himself or herself or others (78.9%).

Figure 1 indicates that 8 of the 24 policies had a greater than 10-point support gap between gun owners and non-gun owners, including banning the sale of large-capacity magazines (41% vs 67%); banning the sale of semiautomatic assault weapons (44% vs 68%); allowing a person to carry a concealed gun onto school grounds for kindergarten through grade 12 (43% vs 19%); requiring that a person lock up guns in their home when not in use to prevent handling by children or adolescents without supervision (58% vs 79%); prohibiting a person younger than 21 from having a handgun (50% vs 68%); requiring a person to obtain a license from local law enforcement before buying a gun to verify identity and ensure no legal prohibition from having a gun (63% vs 81%); prohibiting a person convicted of assault and battery that does not result in serious injury or involve a lethal weapon from having a gun for 10 years (45% vs 59%); and allowing cities to sue licensed gun dealers when strong evidence indicates that the gun dealer's careless sales practices allowed criminals to obtain guns (67% vs 78%).

DISCUSSION

Only 8 of the 24 policies to restrict or regulate firearms had support gaps by gun

ownership status exceeding 10 points. Policies with the highest overall public support and minimal support gaps by gun ownership status included universal background checks, greater accountability for licensed gun dealers unable to account for their inventory, higher safety training standards for concealed carry permit holders, improved reporting of records related to mental illness, gun prohibitions for persons subject to temporary domestic violence restraining orders, and gun violence restraining orders.

Policies with high overall support and minimal support gaps may be the most feasible to enact, and some have strong evidence to support their promise in reducing gun violence. For example, universal background checks are associated with lower levels of guns diverted for criminal use.⁶ Even though changes in these laws have not been linked to changes in homicide or suicide rates,⁷ insufficient enforcement of and compliance with these laws limit their effects.⁸ Universal background checks coupled with handgun purchaser licensing, however, appear to reduce rates of homicides,⁹ suicides,¹⁰ and law enforcement officers being shot in the line of duty.¹¹ Likewise, research indicates that access to firearms by domestic violence abusers increases the risk of intimate partner homicide by 5-fold compared with unarmed abusers, and laws restricting access to guns by perpetrators of domestic violence reduce those risks.¹²

Three states have recently enacted and 16 additional state legislatures are currently considering gun violence restraining order laws authorizing law enforcement officers to remove guns from individuals deemed to be at immediate, serious risk of harming themselves and allowing family members to petition the court to remove guns temporarily from a relative believed to be at risk for harming himself or herself or others. A related firearm removal law in Connecticut suggests that this policy could reduce suicide by firearm.

It is also worth highlighting that support was high (84%; results not shown) for requiring individuals with a concealed carry permit to pass a safe handling test, even among respondents living in states with minimal or no restrictions on concealed gun carrying by civilians (so-called right to carry states).

Our study had some limitations. Online survey panels raise various methodological concerns that we have taken steps to

overcome, including use of probability-based recruitment consistent with well-established standards and comparison of respondent characteristics in our data with national rates. Also, although our study was national in scope, gun policies are often considered in state or local jurisdictions, and it is critical to take into consideration geographic variation in attitudes by gun ownership.

PUBLIC HEALTH IMPLICATIONS

Our research indicates that many policy options have wide public support and that consensus exists between gun owners and those who do not own guns. Given that gun issues are connected tightly to cultural and identity politics in America, it is noteworthy how much agreement we found in support for policies to regulate the ways people acquire and carry guns. **AJPH**

CONTRIBUTORS

C. L. Barry contributed to the conceptualization and design of the study, statistical analyses, interpretation of the data, drafting of the article, and review and revision of the article. D. W. Webster, E. Stone, C. K. Crifasi, and J. S. Vernick contributed to the conceptualization and design of the study and interpretation of the data and critically reviewed and revised the article. E. E. McGinty contributed to the conceptualization and design of the study, conducted the statistical analyses, interpreted the data, and critically reviewed and revised the article. All authors approved the final article as submitted and agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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HUMAN PARTICIPANT PROTECTION

The study was exempted by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health institutional review board.

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