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Differences in Public Support for Gun Policies Between Women and Men

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Abstract

Introduction: This study examines whether differences exist by sex in support for specific gun policies aimed at reducing gun violence.

Methods: Investigators combined 2 waves of the National Survey of Gun Policy administered in January 2017 and January 2019. Data were analyzed in 2020. Opinions on 21 gun policies were examined. Respondents rated their support on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly favor* to *strongly oppose*. *Somewhat favor* and *strongly favor* were combined to create a dichotomous measure to indicate the proportion in favor of each policy. Respondents were categorized by their answer on the demographic profile as male or female and whether they personally owned a gun.

Results: Women had higher levels of support than men for 20 of 21 policies, with 7 policies having a 10 percentage point difference in support. Differences in support between women and men who own guns were less pronounced. Only 3 of 21 policies had a 10 percentage point difference in support. Among women and men who do not personally own guns, 4 of 21 policies had a 10 percentage point difference in support.

Conclusions: This survey is the first to explore differences in public support for specific gun policies between women and men. Policy support was substantially higher among women than men and higher among gun owners who are women compared with men. These findings provide important context for understanding differences in public opinion and suggest the need to tailor messages that will resonate within demographic groups.

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SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

Supplemental materials associated with this article can be found in the online version at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2020.06.028>.

INTRODUCTION

According to data from the General Social Survey, during the past 4 decades, the percentage of households with guns in the U.S. has decreased from 47% to 31%.¹ In 2018, this survey found that 22% of adults personally owned guns—37% of men and 12% of women—and that the decline in overall gun ownership over time was largely driven by reductions in ownership by men (50% in 1980 vs 37% in 2018).¹ Consistent with the General Social Survey, the 2015 National Firearms Survey found that 12% of women and 33% of men personally owned guns; although women generally owned fewer guns than men, about three quarters of men and women gun owners reported owning guns for protection.²

Prior research has explored reasons for gun ownership and trends in ownership by women over time; similarities exist between men and women in reasons for gun ownership, numbers of guns owned, and storage practices.^{3–5} However, research indicates that women fear crime more than men,⁶ which has been used by gun manufacturers to promote increased ownership among women.⁷ This may influence women who own guns' perceptions of gun policy. To the authors' knowledge, no prior study has explored whether differences exist by sex in support for specific gun policies aimed at reducing gun violence. Understanding whether support for specific policies differs among women who do and do not own guns relative to men could suggest opportunities for promoting meaningful dialogue around policy solutions to reduce gun violence.

METHODS

Study Sample

This study combined 2 waves of the National Survey of Gun Policy administered in January 2017⁸ and January 2019.⁹ The surveys were fielded using NORC's AmeriSpeak Panel. The AmeriSpeak Panel is from NORC's area probability sample (the NORC National Frame), an address-based sample that covers 97% of U.S. households. The panel provides sample coverage for households with listed and unlisted phone numbers, as well as those with cell phones only. Interviews were administered online and by phone. Panel participants receive a small number of surveys each month and are encouraged to participate via cash awards and other incentives. Both surveys had high completion rates (75% in 2017 and 80% in 2019). Sample sizes were 2,124 in 2017 and 1,680 in 2019, for a total sample size of 3,804. All respondents were aged ≥ 18 years. To generate estimates for each survey wave that were representative of the U.S. population, survey weights were used to adjust for known selection deviations and survey nonresponse (Appendix Tables 1 and 2, available online). Data were analyzed in 2020.

Measures

Respondents' opinions—rated using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly favor* to *strongly oppose*—on 21 different gun policies were examined. The authors combined *somewhat favor* and *strongly favor* to create a dichotomous variable compared with the other response options to indicate the proportion in favor of each policy (Appendix Tables 3–5, available online, include *neither favor nor oppose* and *oppose/strongly oppose*). Respondents

were categorized by their answer on the demographic profile as male or female and whether they personally owned a gun.

Statistical Analysis

Chi-square tests were used to examine differences in public support between women and men and by gun ownership (standardized mean differences are available as Appendix Tables 6 and 7, available online). All analyses were conducted using the *svy* command in Stata, version 14.2. This study was reviewed and approved by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health IRB.

RESULTS

Table 1 presents public support for 21 different gun policies overall and by sex. Women had higher levels of support than men for 20 of the 21 policies. Seven policies had a 10 percentage point difference in support between women and men: banning the sale of assault weapons (71% vs 54%), banning the sale of large-capacity magazines (69% vs 52%), requiring a minimum age of 21 years for handgun possession (70% vs 58%), requiring gun purchasers to get a license from local law enforcement before buying a gun (82% vs 71%), safe storage requirements (80% vs 67%), prohibiting gun ownership temporarily for multiple driving under the influence/driving while intoxicated convictions (61% vs 51%), and authorizing law enforcement to temporarily remove firearms from people at risk of harming themselves or others (81% vs 69%).

Table 2 presents public support by sex and gun ownership. The differences in support between women and men who own guns were less pronounced than the differences between men and women overall. Only 3 of the 21 policies had a 10 percentage point difference in support: requiring a minimum age of 21 years for handgun possession (80% vs 70%), prohibiting gun ownership temporarily for multiple driving under the influence/driving while intoxicated convictions (62% vs 45%), and prohibiting gun ownership temporarily for a drunk and disorderly conduct conviction (49% vs 34%). Among women and men who do not personally own guns, 4 of 21 policies had a 10 percentage point difference in support: banning the sale of assault weapons (75% vs 62%), banning the sale of large-capacity magazines (73% vs 61%), requiring a minimum age of 21 years for handgun possession (73% vs 62%), and authorizing law enforcement to temporarily remove firearms from people at risk of harming themselves or others (83% vs 72%).

DISCUSSION

This study found that overall women have higher levels of support for gun policies than men, including gun-owning women. The gap in gun ownership between men and women has been declining over time, largely because of declines in male gun ownership. This means that the relative share of all gun owners who are women has been increasing. Given these shifts, and different drivers of gun ownership between women and men, it is essential to understand what women think about gun policy. Although the differences in support were 10 percentage points, relative to men who own guns, women who own guns were more supportive of banning assault-style weapons, time-delimited prohibitions for serious juvenile

offenses, and requiring gun purchasers to get a license from law enforcement. These policies tend to have large support gaps between gun owners and nonowners.^{8–11} However, differences within subgroups, in particular the higher levels of support among women gun owners, highlights the need to tailor messages that may better resonate with more targeted subgroups (e.g., gun-owning women).¹²

Limitations

These findings should be considered in the context of some limitations. Sampling biases could impact the results; however, in both survey waves, this threat is minimized by probability-based sampling that covers 95% of U.S. households. Sociodemographic characteristics of respondents at each survey were compared with national rates to ensure the sample was representative of the U.S. population. The authors combined neutral and opposition positions, which could overestimate the proportion of respondents who were opposed to a given policy and mask policies with larger proportions of neutral respondents that may be primed for targeted messaging. This study did not assess to what degree a state's implementation of a policy impacted support among respondents. Future research should explore whether support for policies varies among respondents in states with and without a given policy. Finally, although much of the discourse about policies to reduce gun violence is occurring at the state level, the authors were not able to test for differences in support across states owing to sampling and sample size constraints.

CONCLUSIONS

This survey is the first to explore differences in public support for specific gun policies between women and men. Policy support was substantially higher among women than men and higher among gun owners who are women versus men. These findings provide important context for understanding differences in public opinion and suggest the need to tailor gun policy messages to specific demographic groups.

Supplementary Material

Refer to Web version on PubMed Central for supplementary material.

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Table 1.

Differences in Public Support for Gun Policies by Sex (n=3,804)

Question – do you favor or oppose...	Overall support, %	Women (n=1,962), %	Men (n=1,842), %
License and background check policies			
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?	77	82 ***	71
Requiring a background check system for all gun sales to ensure a purchaser is not legally prohibited from having a gun?	88	90 ***	85
Prohibited person policies			
Prohibiting a person convicted of a serious crime as a juvenile from having a gun for 10 years?	75	78 **	72
Prohibiting a person under the age of 21 from having a handgun?	64	70 ***	58
Prohibiting a person subject to a temporary domestic violence restraining order from having a gun for the duration of the order?	81	85 ***	77
Prohibiting a person convicted of 2 or more DWIs or DUIs in a 5-year period from having a gun for 5 years?	56	61 ***	51
Prohibiting a person convicted of 2 or more misdemeanor crimes involving illegal drugs in a 5-year period from having a gun for 5 years?	66	69 **	63
Do you favor or oppose prohibiting a person convicted of each of these crimes from having a gun for 10 years?			
Public display of a gun in a threatening manner, excluding self-defense	73	75	72
Assault and battery that does not result in serious injury or involve a lethal weapon	55	58 **	51
Drunk and disorderly conduct	46	50 ***	42
Carrying a concealed gun without a permit	55	57 *	52
Assault weapon and ammunition policies			
Banning the sale of military-style, semiautomatic assault weapons that are capable of shooting more than 10 rounds of ammunition without reloading?	63	71 ***	54
Banning the sale of large-capacity ammunition clips or magazines that allow some guns to shoot more than 10 bullets before reloading?	61	69 ***	52
Policies affecting gun dealers			
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?	74	78 ***	71
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?	84	86 *	82
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?	72	75 ***	68
Temporary firearm removal policies			

Question – do you favor or oppose...	Overall support, %	Women (n=1,962), %	Men (n=1,842), %
Authorizing law enforcement officers to temporarily remove guns from individuals who the officer determines pose an immediate threat of harm to self or others?	75	81 ***	69
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?	79	84 ***	72
Other policies			
Requiring a mandatory minimum sentence of 2 years in prison for a person convicted of knowingly selling a gun to someone who cannot legally have a gun?	76	79 **	73
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?	74	80 ***	67
Allowing a person who can legally carry a concealed gun to bring that gun onto school grounds for kindergarten through 12th grade?	28	24 ***	31

Note: Boldface indicates statistical differences when comparing support among women to men (* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$).
 DUI, driving under the influence; DWI, driving while intoxicated.

Table 2.
Differences in Support for Public Policies by Gun Ownership and Sex ($n=3,804$)

Question – do you favor or oppose...	Female gun owners (n=298), %	Male gun owners (n=678), %	Female nonowners (n=1,664), %	Male nonowners (n=1,164), %
License and background check policies				
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?	69*	60	85**	77
Requiring a background check system for all gun sales to ensure a purchaser is not legally prohibited from having a gun?	87	85	91**	85
Prohibited person policies				
Prohibiting a person convicted of a serious crime as a juvenile from having a gun for 10 years?	80*	70	78*	73
Prohibiting a person under the age of 21 from having a handgun?	55	51	73***	62
Prohibiting a person subject to a temporary domestic violence restraining order from having a gun for the duration of the order?	80	74	86**	79
Prohibiting a person convicted of 2 or more DWIs or DUIs in a 5-year period from having a gun for 5 years?	62***	45	61*	55
Prohibiting a person convicted of 2 or more misdemeanor crimes involving illegal drugs in a 5-year period from having a gun for 5 years?	69	60	69	64
Do you favor or oppose prohibiting a person convicted of each of these crimes from having a gun for 10 years?				
Public display of a gun in a threatening manner, excluding self-defense	75	71	75	72
Assault and battery that does not result in serious injury or involve a lethal weapon	49	42	60	56
Drunk and disorderly conduct	49**	34	50	46
Carrying a concealed gun without a permit	44	46	60	56
Assault weapon and ammunition policies				
Banning the sale of military-style, semiautomatic assault weapons that are capable of shooting more than 10 rounds of ammunition without reloading?	49*	40	75***	62
Banning the sale of large-capacity ammunition clips or magazines that allow some guns to shoot more than 10 bullets before reloading?	45	37	73***	61
Policies affecting gun dealers				
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?	70	64	79*	74
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?	84	80	86	83
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?	67	59	77	73

Question – do you favor or oppose...	Female gun owners (n=298), %	Male gun owners (n=678), %	Female nonowners (n=1,664), %	Male nonowners (n=1,164), %
Temporary firearm removal policies				
Authorizing law enforcement officers to temporarily remove guns from individuals who the officer determines pose an immediate threat of harm to self or others?	71	65	83 ***	72
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?	74	67	85 ***	75
Other policies				
Requiring a mandatory minimum sentence of 2 years in prison for a person convicted of knowingly selling a gun to someone who cannot legally have a gun?	73	71	80 **	74
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?	63	57	82 ***	73
Allowing a person who can legally carry a concealed gun to bring that gun onto school grounds for kindergarten through 12th grade?	41	46	21	23

Note: Boldface indicates statistical significance among differences by gun ownership across sex (* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$).

DUI, driving under the influence; DWI, driving while intoxicated.