
50% of American guns owned by 3% of population – study

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Half of America's guns are owned by just 3 percent of the population – and those people own an average of 17 firearms each, a new survey says. It also found that the number of male gun owners is decreasing, while female ownership is on the rise.

The unpublished Harvard/Northeastern survey – which was obtained by the Guardian and the Trace – estimates that America's gun stock has increased by 70 million guns since 1994, with the current number totaling 265 million.

However, the rise in guns hasn't come with a rise in owners. In fact, the number of people owning guns has actually decreased from 25 percent to 22 percent.

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Females v males

The 3 percent drop in gun owners was heavily influenced by a dramatic decrease among men. In 1994, 42 percent of American men described themselves as gun owners, compared to 32% of in the new study.

Meanwhile, female gun ownership is on the rise, with 12 percent saying they own guns in the new survey, versus 9 percent in 1994. Females were also most likely to be in the category of those who only owned handguns.

However, the researchers were quick to stress that the jump is not significant, as female gun ownership has fluctuated between 9 percent and 14 percent in various surveys since the 1980s.

But the numbers do align with the National Rifle Association (NRA) figures which claim that the number of women enrolling in its pistol course almost doubled from 2011 to 2014, from about 25,000 a year to nearly 46,000 a year.

Political & racial trends

Despite any increase in female gun owners, the majority of owners tend to be white, male, conservative and live in rural areas.

Thirty percent of conservatives said they were gun owners, compared to just 19 percent of moderates and 14 percent of liberals. The strongest predictor of ownership was military service, with 44 percent of veterans saying they owned a gun.

Twenty-five percent of white and multi-racial Americans said they owned a gun, compared with just 16 percent of Hispanics and 14 percent of African-Americans.

Those most likely to only own handguns were African-American (44 percent) and Hispanic (33 percent). People in the “*handgun only*” category were also more likely to live in an urban area, and were less likely to have grown up in a house with a gun. Only 21 percent of whites fell into the “*handgun only*” category.

What fuels gun ownership?

Lead author Dr. Deborah Azrael, a Harvard School of Public Health firearms researcher, said the data points to gun ownership being driven by “*increasing fearfulness*” which must be addressed.

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"If we hope to reduce firearm suicide, if we hope to reduce the other potential dangers of guns, my gut is, we have to speak to that fear," Azrael said.

She went on to state that the answer is not to focus on the gun owners with dozens of weapons, but on the nearly 50 percent of gun owners who have just one or two firearms.

"To change their behavior with respect to guns, and the ways in which they store them, or their decision-making – we could have a really big impact on suicide," she said.

Azrael also noted that she doesn't *"know anybody who thinks or talks seriously about confiscating guns,"* but went on to compare the situation to that of cigarettes.

"From a public health perspective – you don't seize cigarettes." But, she said, "You do try to make good science available. You do try to help people think about the risks and benefits of the behavior they choose to undertake."

Approximately 20,000 of America's more than 30,000 annual gun deaths are suicides.

The study is based on a survey of nearly 4,000 Americans who were questioned only in 2015 by market research company GfK, with a panel of opt-in participants who are paid to complete surveys on various topics.

It is currently undergoing peer review, and is scheduled to be published in the autumn of 2017 by the Russell Sage Foundation. The survey has, however, gone through an initial round of comments and revisions from a group of leading firearms researchers, according to Azrael.