Public opinion about guns in the home

Arthur L Kellermann, Dawna S Fuqua-Whitley, Tomoko R Sampson, Walter Lindenmann

Abstract

**Objectives**—(1) Determine the frequency of gun ownership, acquisition, and transfer; (2) assess gun storage practices; and (3) compare the views of firearm owning and non-owning adults regarding the protective value of keeping a gun in the home.

**Setting and methods**—Over three different time periods (1995, 1996, and 1999) stratified, random digit telephone surveys were conducted in a five county area of metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia. Five hundred adults (aged 21+ years) responded to each survey.

**Results**—The proportion of Atlanta area households reporting firearm ownership was generally stable over this interval (38%, 40%, and 35% respectively). The percentage of gun owning households containing a handgun (approximately 75%) was stable as well. In 1995, more than half of gun owning households kept one or more guns unlocked; since that time, the trend has been gradually downward. In 1995, 44% of gun owning respondents kept one or more guns loaded, compared with 38% in 1996 and 40% in 1999. A majority of respondents to all three surveys (55%) agreed with the statement “A home with a gun is less secure than a home without a gun, because a gun can be involved in an accidental shooting, suicide or family homicide”. Among five home security measures, respondents rated a burglar alarm most effective, and keeping a gun in the home least effective.

**Conclusions**—In Atlanta, many households keep a firearm for protection, but they are ambivalent about the associated risks. These findings suggest that education about gun safety should include a discussion of the risks of unsafe storage, and non-lethal alternatives for home security.

**Keywords:** firearms; education; counseling; survey

In 1994, five metropolitan Atlanta counties joined Project PACT (“Pulling America’s Communities Together”) an ongoing federal violence prevention initiative intended to encourage local governments and federal agencies to work together to identify local problems and create local solutions. These counties are Fulton, DeKalb, Cobb, Clayton, and Gwinnett. Through Metro Atlanta Project PACT, local leaders and community stakeholders were brought together and asked to identify the most pressing violence problems in the project area. Firearm violence (particularly firearm violence involving young people) was identified as a top priority for the city.

To assist Metro Atlanta Project PACT’s efforts to reduce gun violence, we obtained a grant from the National Institute of Justice to collect a wide range of baseline and interval data in the project area. This information was provided to the officials and groups responsible for reducing gun violence so they could monitor the impact of their strategies and make any changes that are necessary. Since the primary goal of this program was to reduce gun violence by juveniles and adult criminal offenders, interventions have been focused on blocking illegal sources of supply, illegal gun carrying, and illegal use of firearms. No effort has been made to discourage the lawful purchase and legal ownership of firearms.

Part of the evaluation of this initiative involved conducting a series of household surveys of gun ownership in the five county area. Survey objectives included the following: (1) assess and monitor the proportion of households that own, acquire, and/or transfer firearms over time; (2) determine the proportion that keep one or more firearms loaded or unlocked; and (3) determine if gun owning and non-gun owning households differ with respect to their perceptions of the benefits and risks of keeping a gun for protection.

**Methods**

**TIMELINE**

The first of three surveys was conducted from 2–18 May 1995. The second was conducted 18 months later, from 7–20 November 1996. The third was conducted two years later, from 18–22 January 1999.

**SURVEY**

All three surveys utilized random digit dialing to contact a stratified sample of 500 adults in the survey area. One hundred citizens in each of the five study counties were interviewed. Screening questions were asked to determine that the respondent was aged 21 years or older, and a member of the contacted household. Once these facts were established, our inter-
visitors asked questions about household ownership, acquisition, storage, and disposition of firearms, as well as the respondent’s rating of the effectiveness of a variety of home security measures. Participants were advised they could refuse to answer any question, and that they were free to terminate the interview at any time. The survey was approved by the Human Investigations Committee of Emory University.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

Responses were weighted on the basis of the population of each county to generate accurate aggregate estimates for the five county metro Atlanta area. Frequencies and cross tabulations were performed for each question based on demographic variables (age, race, sex, and level of education). Group comparisons were calculated using the χ² test, Yates’ corrected χ² and Fisher’s exact (for small cell size) for categorical variables, and the Mann-Whitney U test for ordinal values. For most responses, the statistical margin of error at the 95% confidence level was plus or minus four percentage points. The threshold for statistical significance was set at p<0.05.

**Results**

**DESCRIPTION OF THE POPULATION**

Slightly less than two thirds of respondents to the 1995 survey were female. Sixty one per cent were white, and 34% were African-American. The mean age of respondents was 41 years, and 32% were college graduates. Two thirds of respondents owned their own home; the remaining one third rented. Thirty six per cent had one or more children aged 12 years or younger living in their home. The demographic breakdown of respondents in 1996 and 1999 resembled that of the 1995 group. With the exception of gender (60% of our respondents were female), the three groups closely resemble the demographic breakdown of adults in the study area (table 1). Among those who reported that guns are kept in their home, 29% (three year average) stated they had one or more children aged 12 years of age or younger living in the home; 15% (three year average) reported they had one or more teenagers aged 13–18 years living in the home, and 50% (three year average) had at least one child 18 years or younger living in the home.

**FIREARM OWNERSHIP**

Thirty eight per cent of respondents to the 1995 survey reported that one or more firearms are kept in their home. Seventy six per cent of firearm owning households had one or more handguns. In the 1996 survey, 41% of respondents reported a gun was kept in their household, and 72% of gun owning households had one or more hand guns. In the 1999 survey, 35% of respondents reported that a gun was kept in their household and 69% of these gun owning households reported a handgun was kept in the home. None of these year-to-year differences are statistically significant. In all three surveys, white respondents were more likely than black respondents to keep a gun in their home (44% v 28%, three year average, p=0.000), but black gun owners were more likely to keep a handgun than whites (85% v 67%, three year average, p=0.0002).

**FIREARM ACQUISITION, TRANSFER, AND DISPOSAL**

In each year, gun owning respondents were much more likely to report acquiring a firearm than disposing of one. An average of 22% (24% in 1995, 19% in 1996, 22% in 1999) of gun owning households in each survey year reported buying a firearm within the past year. Not more than 7% of respondents reported selling, loaning, or giving away one or more firearms in the previous year in any of the three surveys. Less than 1% of gun owning respondents in any survey reported disposing of a firearm in the previous year through a gun “buy-back” program.

**FIREARM STORAGE PRACTICES**

Respondents in half of the gun owning households in the 1995 survey reported that they kept one or more guns in their home unlocked (table 2), and 44% kept at least one gun in their house loaded. Forty one per cent reported that they carried a gun in their car. In 1996, 47% of gun owning respondents kept one or more guns unlocked, 38% reported that a gun was kept loaded, and 40% reported that they carried a gun in their car. By 1999, the fraction of gun owning respondents who reported that they keep at least one gun unlocked had declined to 41% but the percentage of those who keep a gun loaded remained stable at 40%; 34% reported carrying a gun in their car. The decrease in persons leaving a gun unlocked between 1995 and 1998, and 1996 and 1998 is statistically significant (p = 0.05).

### Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the study population (n=500 respondents in each year); values are %

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Racial/ethnic group</th>
<th>African-American</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Other minority group</th>
<th>Refused/missing</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Home ownership</th>
<th>Children in residence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>37</td>
<td>63</td>
<td></td>
<td>34</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>21–29</td>
<td>Grade 8 or less</td>
<td>Own 66.1 Rent 32.6</td>
<td>% With children &lt;12 years 35.9 % With children 13–18 years 18.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>1995</td>
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<td>1996</td>
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<tr>
<td>1999</td>
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Public opinion about guns in the home

None of these responses varied by more than two percentage points in one survey compared with another.

African-Americans were more likely than whites to cite protection as their primary reason for gun ownership (three survey average 71% v 48%, p=0.0000). White respondents, on the other hand, were more likely to cite hunting (three survey average 27% v 11%, p=0.0002).

PERCEIVED BALANCE OF BENEFITS AND RISKS OF KEEPING A GUN IN THE HOME

To ascertain respondents’ views of the balance of benefits and risks of keeping a gun in the home, they were read three statements about the balance of benefits and risks of keeping a gun in the house and asked to rate their level of agreement with each statement on an 11 point scale (0 = strongly disagree to 10 = strongly agree).

For purposes of analysis, responses to each statement were aggregated into three groups: 0–3 = strongly disagree, 4–6 = somewhat agree/disagree, and 7–10 = strongly agree. In each survey year, a plurality of respondents (44.1%) strongly disagreed with the statement “A home with a gun is more secure than a home without a gun, because a gun can be used for protection”. Clear majorities in each year (55%) strongly agreed with the second statement “A home with a gun is less secure than a home without a gun, because a gun can be involved in an accidental shooting, suicide, or family homicide” compared with 20% (three year average) that strongly disagreed. A larger plurality disagreed (three year average 43.8%) than agreed (three year average 30.7%) with the final statement “On balance, a home with a gun is safer than the same home without a gun”. Responses were generally consistent across all three surveys, reflecting little shift in public opinion (table 3).

Not surprisingly, gun owners rated the protective value of keeping a gun in the home more favorably than non-gun owners. Owners also expressed less concern about the associated risks of keeping a gun in the home. An average of 45% (47% of gun owners in 1995, 46% in 1996 and 43% in 1999) “strongly agreed” with the statement “A home with a gun is less secure than a home without a gun, because a gun can be used for protection”. Clear majorities in each year (55%) strongly agreed with the second statement “A home with a gun is more secure than a home without a gun, because a gun can be used for protection”. Responses were generally consistent across all three surveys, reflecting little shift in public opinion (table 3).

Two subgroups within the population of gun owners may have altered their firearm storage practices over the course of the three surveys. The percentage of male gun owners who stated they keep a firearm loaded in their home decreased from 55% in 1995 to 37% in 1996 ($\chi^2$ 5.70, p=0.0170). In 1999, 43% of male gun owners kept a loaded firearm, this difference was not statistically significant from 1995 or 1996. The percentage who reported keeping a gun in their home unlocked also decreased, from 63% in 1995 to 45% in 1996 ($\chi^2$ 5.86, p=0.015). This proportion remained stable in 1999 ($\chi^2$ for 1995 v 1999, p = 0.015).

The percentage of African-American gun owners who reported that they keep a loaded firearm in their home declined from 55% in 1995 to 32% in 1996, to 49% in 1999. This trend was significant for 1995–96 ($\chi^2$ = 4.47, p=0.0344) but not for 1996–99. African-American male gun owners in our group of respondents were also less likely to report keeping a gun unlocked (Yates’ corrected $\chi^2$ = 8.63, p=.0033; Fisher’s exact p=0.0015) or loaded (Yates’ corrected $\chi^2$ = 4.58, p=0.0324; Fisher’s exact p=0.0157) in 1996 than in 1995. No further decline was noted between the 1996 and the 1999 surveys.

REASONS FOR GUN OWNERSHIP

All three surveys asked gun owning respondents to identify the single most important reason that one or more guns were kept in their home. A majority of respondents to all three surveys (56% in 1995, 55% in 1996, and 53% in 1999) cited protection. Other important reasons for gun ownership included hunting or target practice (three survey average 23%); inherited the gun (three survey average 8%); collector’s item (three survey average 6%); and occupational use (three survey average 4%).
Table 3 Perceptions of the benefits and risks of keeping a gun for protection*

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;A home with a gun is more secure than a home without a gun because a gun can be used for protection&quot;</td>
<td>4.59</td>
<td>4.48</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>6.18</td>
<td>3.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Who &quot;strongly agree&quot;</td>
<td>33.3%</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
<td>27.2%</td>
<td>54.8%</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
<td>54.6%</td>
<td>18.6%</td>
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</table>

"A home with a gun is less secure than a home without a gun, because a gun can be involved in an accidental shooting, suicide, or family homicide"‡

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Who &quot;strongly agree&quot;</td>
<td>55.7%</td>
<td>56.5%</td>
<td>52.6%</td>
<td>35.6%</td>
<td>70.1%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>70.5%</td>
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</table>

"On balance, a home with a gun is safer than a home without a gun because a gun can be used for protection"

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>% Who &quot;strongly agree&quot;</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>4.37</td>
<td>4.31</td>
<td>5.94</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>5.93</td>
<td>3.19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

"Installing bright exterior lights", “having a dog in the home", and “installing metal security doors" received mean scores of between 6.28 and 7.50 in either year (7.41, 6.69, and 6.28 respectively in 1995, and mean scores of 7.50, 6.77, and 6.28 in 1996) (table 4).

As expected, gun owners consistently rated the effectiveness of “having a gun in the home” more favorably than non-gun owners (mean scores 6.52 v 3.11, Mann-Whitney U p<0.001 in 1995; mean score 6.27 v 2.98, Mann-Whitney U p<0.001 in 1996). Despite this fact, gun owning respondents rated having a gun in the home less effective than installing a burglar alarm system, bright exterior lights or having a dog in the home. Non-gun owners rated having a gun in the home last among the five options in both the 1995 and 1996 surveys (table 4).

Discussion

The rate of gun ownership reported by respondents to our surveys is lower than the national average, but fairly typical of urban residents.89 Although it is possible that some residents failed to answer whether or not there was a gun in the household on date of survey, 1995: 29 cases missing data regarding whether or not there was a gun in the household on date of survey. 1996: 20 cases missing data regarding whether or not there was a gun in the household on date of survey.

Our findings suggest that gun ownership is generally valid.12-20

A majority of gun owning respondents cited protection as their most important reason for keeping a gun. Not surprisingly, they also viewed the protective benefits of gun ownership more favorably than non-gun owners. However, a growing body of research suggests that keeping a loaded and readily available gun in the home does more harm than good.12-20

Table 4 Perceptions of the value of five home security measures*

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Having a gun in the home†</td>
<td>4.46</td>
<td>4.41</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>6.52</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>6.27</td>
<td>2.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Installing bright exterior lights</td>
<td>7.41</td>
<td>7.50</td>
<td>7.10</td>
<td>7.33</td>
<td>7.41</td>
<td>7.60</td>
<td>7.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Installing metal security doors</td>
<td>6.28</td>
<td>6.28</td>
<td>6.28</td>
<td>6.09</td>
<td>6.37</td>
<td>5.98</td>
<td>6.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Having a dog in the home</td>
<td>6.69</td>
<td>6.77</td>
<td>6.77</td>
<td>6.83</td>
<td>6.59</td>
<td>6.92</td>
<td>6.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Installing a burglar alarm system</td>
<td>7.76</td>
<td>7.90</td>
<td>7.52</td>
<td>7.69</td>
<td>7.79</td>
<td>7.68</td>
<td>8.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Mean, or "average", scores are calculated based on responses to a 0–10 scale, where a score of "0" indicates the most negative possible reaction (“strongly disagreed”), and a score of “10” indicates the most positive possible reaction (“very effective”). The higher the score, the more favorably the rating.

†Differences between group means (gun owners vs. non-gun owners) significant at p<0.001, calculated using Mann-Whitney U test. Differences were significant between groups for each question, during every time. Previous research has demonstrated that respondent answers to survey questions about gun ownership are generally valid.12-20

‡Did not repeat these questions in the 1999 administration of the survey.

1995: 29 cases missing data regarding whether or not there was a gun in the household on date of survey. 1996: 20 cases missing data regarding whether or not there was a gun in the household on date of survey.

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Table 5  Perceptions of the benefits and risks of keeping a gun for protection* men versus women, stratified by gun ownership (between group significance)

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;A home with a gun is more secure than a home without a gun because a gun can be used for protection&quot;</td>
<td>(0.000) (0.000) (0.000)</td>
<td>(0.078) (0.659) (0.143)</td>
<td>(0.060) (0.001) (0.000)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>5.18</td>
<td>5.16</td>
<td>5.34</td>
<td>7.05</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>6.63</td>
<td>3.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Who &quot;strongly agree&quot;</td>
<td>n=184</td>
<td>n=197</td>
<td>n=200</td>
<td>n=83</td>
<td>n=90</td>
<td>n=90</td>
<td>n=101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>40.2%</td>
<td>41.1%</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
<td>63.4%</td>
<td>17.7%</td>
<td>61.1%</td>
<td>23.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>4.23</td>
<td>4.04</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>5.89</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>5.79</td>
<td>2.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Who &quot;strongly agree&quot;</td>
<td>n=310</td>
<td>n=300</td>
<td>n=303</td>
<td>n=93</td>
<td>n=198</td>
<td>n=103</td>
<td>n=184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>47.3%</td>
<td>19.7%</td>
<td>51.0%</td>
<td>17.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Mean, or "average", scores are calculated based on responses to a 0–10 scale, where a score of 0 indicates the most negative possible reaction ("strongly disagreed"), and a score of 10 indicates the most positive possible reaction ("strongly agreed"). The higher the score, the more strongly the respondent agreed with the statement.

For purposes of analysis, a score of 0–3 was interpreted as "strongly disagreed", a score of 4, 5, or 6 was interpreted as "neither agreed nor disagreed".

For 1999: 20 cases refused question, two cases replied "don't know" regarding whether or not there was a gun in the household on the date of the survey.

For 1995: 29 cases missing data regarding whether or not there was a gun in the household on date of survey.

They are based on three small (n=500) surveys that supports or refutes this belief.

We are unaware of any empirical data that supports or refutes this belief.

A Parent’s Guide to Gun Safety

A HOME WITH A GUN IS MORE SECURE THAN A HOME WITHOUT A GUN BECAUSE A GUN CAN BE USED FOR PROTECTION

A HOME WITH A GUN IS LESS SECURE THAN A HOME WITHOUT A GUN, BECAUSE A GUN CAN BE INVOLVED IN AN ACCIDENTAL SHOOTING, SUICIDE, OR FAMILY HOMICIDE

For purposes of analysis, a score of 0–3 was interpreted as “strongly disagreed”, a score of 7–10 was interpreted as “strongly agreed” and a score of “10” indicates the most positive possible reaction (“strongly agreed”). The higher the score, the more strongly the respondent agreed with the statement.

Sixty per cent of our respondents were women; most gun owners are men. Ludwig and colleagues have noted that wives tend to report household ownership of firearms less often than husbands. In all three of our surveys, women tended to view the merits of keeping a gun in the home less favorably than men (table 5). Others have made the same observation. If this is true, the preponderance of women respondents may bias our surveys in a direction that is less favorable to gun ownership.

Health providers interested in reducing the risk of firearms injuries in the home may find it easier to promote “safe storage” of guns than to counsel gun owning patients to remove firearms from their home. The National Rifle Association’s A Parent’s Guide to Gun Safety advises owners to “Always keep the gun unloaded until ready to use” and “store guns so that they are inaccessible to children and other unauthorized users.” The Sporting Arms and Ammunition Manufacturers Institute supports the notion that the safe handling of firearms in the US, however, a larger telephone survey of a nationally representative sample of 4138 registered voters in urban areas of the US yielded results that are similar to our own. In that survey, 29% of respondents reported that they believed keeping a gun in the home makes the home more safe, 40% believed it made the home less safe, 23% said it depends, and 9% were not sure.21

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requires that guns be stored unloaded in a locked area separate from the ammunition. The Clinician’s Handbook of Preventive Services includes the following recommendations: (1) never keep a loaded gun in the home; (2) keep guns and ammunition locked in separate locations; (3) always treat a gun as if it were loaded; and (4) never allow children access to guns. The American Medical Association has produced a guidebook for physicians that emphasizes the importance of safe storage.

Although no study has conclusively demonstrated that storing guns in a secure manner reduces the subsequent risk of injury, there is indirect evidence that safe storage of firearms is beneficial. Safe storage could reduce the risk that firearms will be lost due to burglary or theft, an event that occurs more than 350,000 times each year in the US. Safe storage may also decrease the likelihood that a loaded gun will be reached by a child or used to commit suicide.

Implications for prevention
Firearm injuries are a major cause of premature death and disability nationwide. In metropolitan Atlanta, most gun owning households contain a handgun. Many households keep at least one gun unlocked or loaded. Our findings suggest that a majority of these gun owning households are ambivalent about the balance of benefits and risks associated with keeping a gun in the home. Perhaps in response to these concerns, the number of gun owning households that report unsafe storage practices has declined somewhat in recent years. Health educators and health care providers should view this development as an encouraging trend and redouble their efforts to educate patients about the importance of safe storage and the availability of non-lethal alternatives for home security.

This project was supported by a grant (994-MU-CX-Ko03) from the National Institute of Justice. We gratefully acknowledge the support of Ms Lois Mock, NIJ project officer for the grant and Mr Graham Hueber, Ketchum Public Relations, who helped prepare preliminary statistics. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of Emory University, the National Institute of Justice, or Ketchum Public Relations.

24 Sporting Arms and Ammunition Manufacturer’s Association, Inc. Firearms safety depends on you. Riverside, CT: Sporting Arms and Ammunition Manufacturer’s Association, 1987.
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Inj Prev 2000 6: 189-194
doi: 10.1136/ip.6.3.189

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