

GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEY  
FINAL REPORT

Trends in Gun Ownership  
in the United States, 1972-2014

MARCH 2015

PRESENTED BY:  
NORC at the  
University of Chicago  
55 East Monroe Street  
30th Floor  
Chicago, IL 60603  
(312) 759-4000  
(312) 759-4004

Tom W. Smith  
Jaesok Son



*at the* UNIVERSITY of CHICAGO

## List of Tables

<b>Table 1.</b>	Trends in Household Gun Ownership .....	3
<b>Table 2.</b>	Trends in Personal Ownership of Guns .....	4
<b>Table 3.</b>	Trends in Hunting, 1977-2014 .....	5
<b>Table 4.</b>	Adults Living in a Household with Firearms by Socio-Demographics, 2010-2014 .....	6
<b>Table 5.</b>	Gender Gap in Personal Firearms Ownership .....	7
<b>Table 6.</b>	Trends in Support for Requiring a Police Permit before Purchasing a Firearms.....	8

## Trends in Gun Ownership in the United States, 1972-2014

Tom W. Smith  
Jaesok Son

The household ownership of firearms has declined in recent decades. Table 1 (left side) shows that the 31.0% of households reported having a firearm in 2014, essentially tying with 2010 for the lowest level of gun ownership in the last 40-some years. This is a decline of about 17 percentage points from the peak ownership years in 1977-1980. Similarly, Table 1 (right side) indicates that in 2010 and 2014 about 32% of adults lived households having firearms. This was a decline almost 19 percentage points from an average of 51.2% in 1976-1982. Based on an earlier analysis of those who refused to say whether or not there was a firearm in their household,<sup>1</sup> the refusers were reallocated as probably living in a household with a firearm or not living in such a household. This allocation indicates that just under 35% of adults lived in a household with a firearm in both 2014 and 2010. This represents a decline of over 16 percentage point from the peak average of 51.1% in 1976-1982.

Table 2 shows that in 2014 22.4% of adults personally owned a firearm. This is up slightly from a record low of 20.6% in 2010. There has been little change from 2006 to 2014. Personal ownership in 2014 is down 8.1 percentage points from a high of 30.5% in 1985.

One of the main reasons for the decline in household firearm ownership is the decrease in the popularity of hunting (Table 3). In 2014, only 15.4% of adults lived in households in which they, their spouse, or both were hunters. This is the lowest level of hunters since the highest level of 31.6% adults being hunters or married to a hunter in 1977.<sup>2</sup>

In 2010-14, household firearms ownership was higher among households with white respondents (39.0%) than among those with black respondents (18.1%) (Table 4). Similarly, it was greater among non-Hispanics (36.0%) than among Hispanics (15.2%). Household gun ownership was greater for among respondents in household with higher incomes. As Table 4 indicates, it rose from 18.2% for households with income below \$25,000 to 44.0% for those with (\$90,000+). It was also low for households that

---

<sup>1</sup> Tom W. Smith, Jaesok Son, and Faith Laken, "Gun Ownership in the United States: Measurement Issues and Trends," GSS Methodological Report No. 123. Chicago: NORC, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Additional information on hunting is included in Smith, Son, and Laken, 2014.

refused to report income (243.5). This was because households that refused to supply income information were more likely to also refuse to report on firearm ownership. Adults living on households with firearms are concentrated in rural areas and in regions with more residents living in rural areas. As Table 4 shows, household firearms ownership was greatest in the East South Central region and smallest in the Pacific region and Northeast regions. Likewise, it was highest in counties with no town over 10,000 (55.9%) and lowest in the central cities of the largest 12 metropolitan areas (14.8%).

Personal ownership of firearms has not appreciably change for women from 1980 through 2014. Between 9% and 14% of women personally owned a firearm during those years and there is no meaningful trend in the level of personal ownership. In 1980, 10.1% personally owned a firearm and in 2014 11.7% did. Men are much more likely to personally own a firearm than women are, but the gender gap has narrowed due to a decline in personal firearm ownership among men. In 1980, 50.3% of men and 10.1% of women reported personal firearm ownership for a gender gap to +40.2 percentage points (Table 5). In 2014, it was 35.1% for men and 11.7% for women for a gender gap of +23.4 points. This is the second smallest gender gap just above the 23.1 point difference in 2010.

Personal firearms ownership used to vary very little across age cohorts. In 1980, 23.5% of those under 35 owned a firearm as did 27.4% of those 65+ for an age gap of + 3.9 points. Age differences increased over time, averaging about + 20 points in recent years. In 2014, personal firearms ownership was 14.0% for those under 35 and 30.4 % for those 65+ for an age gap of 16.4 points.

Support for a law requiring a police permit before purchasing a firearm was between 69-75% in 1972-1988 with no clear trend before moving up from 73.5% in 1988 to a peak of 81.9% in 1998 (Table 6). Support remained at 78-81% during 1989-2008 before slipping to a low of 71.7% in 2014, the lowest level since 1987. Thus, the gains in support in the late 1980s and 1990s have disappeared in recent years.

**Table 1.** Trends in Household Gun Ownership

	% of Households with Guns					% of Adults in Households with Guns					
	Gun	No Gun	Refused	DK	Missing	Gun	No Gun	Refused	DK	Missing	N
1973	47.0	51.4	1.0	0.0	0.6	48.7	49.5	1.0	0.0	0.7	1504
1974	46.1	52.9	0.7	0.1	0.3	47.6	51.3	0.6	0.1	0.4	1484
1976	46.5	52.0	1.1	0.0	0.4	49.5	48.9	1.2	0.0	0.4	1499
1977	50.4	48.9	0.1	0.1	0.5	53.7	45.6	0.1	0.2	0.4	1530
1980	47.3	51.8	0.1	0.1	0.7	50.3	48.5	0.2	0.1	0.8	1468
1982	45.3	52.9	1.3	0.2	0.3	48.6	49.5	1.3	0.2	0.4	1506
1984	44.9	54.0	0.6	0.1	0.4	48.1	50.5	0.7	0.1	0.5	1473
1985	44.2	54.9	0.7	0.0	0.3	47.9	51.3	0.5	0.0	0.3	1534
1987	46.0	53.3	0.5	0.0	0.1	48.5	50.8	0.5	0.0	0.2	1466
1988	39.8	58.4	1.0	0.0	0.7	43.1	55.3	0.9	0.0	0.7	977
1989	46.0	53.7	0.0	0.0	0.3	48.7	50.9	0.0	0.0	0.4	1033
1990	42.2	56.7	0.0	0.1	1.0	45.4	53.7	0.0	0.1	0.8	917
1991	39.6	58.7	1.0	0.0	0.7	43.4	54.7	1.2	0.0	0.7	993
1993	42.0	57.1	0.7	0.0	0.2	45.4	53.7	0.7	0.0	0.2	1075
1994	40.6	58.1	1.0	0.2	0.2	43.8	54.9	0.9	0.1	0.2	1996
1996	40.1	59.4	0.4	0.1	0.0	43.3	56.2	0.4	0.1	0.0	1923
1998	34.8	64.6	0.3	0.1	0.3	36.5	62.7	0.4	0.1	0.3	1882
2000	32.4	66.1	1.2	0.1	0.2	34.2	64.2	1.3	0.1	0.2	1861
2002	33.5	65.5	1.0	0.0	0.0	36.4	62.7	0.9	0.0	0.0	924
2004	34.7	62.9	1.6	0.2	0.6	37.0	60.8	1.4	0.2	0.6	898
2006	33.1	65.2	1.6	0.1	0.0	34.4	63.8	1.7	0.1	0.0	1984
2008	34.0	64.6	1.1	0.3	0.0	35.9	62.7	1.0	0.4	0.0	1356
2010	31.1	65.0	3.5	0.5	0.0	32.1	63.7	3.6	0.6	0.0	1291
2012	33.1	64.7	2.0	0.2	0.0	34.4	63.4	2.0	0.2	0.0	1314
2014	31.0	65.7	3.2	0.2	0.0	32.4	64.3	3.1	0.2	0.0	1711

Source: GSS

**Table 2.** Trends in Personal Ownership of Guns

	<b>Owns</b>	<b>Gun in Household Unknown Owner</b>	<b>Gun in Household Owned by Other</b>	<b>No Gun in Household</b>	<b>Missing</b>	<b>N</b>
1980	28.1%	2.5	19.7	48.5	1.1	1469
1982	28.2%	2.6	17.8	49.5	1.9	1507
1984	25.3%	0.2	22.7	50.5	1.4	1473
1985	30.5%	0.3	17.2	51.3	0.8	1535
1987	28.0%	0.7	19.8	50.8	0.8	1466
1988	24.9%	0.5	17.7	55.3	1.6	980
1989	27.1%	0.6	21.0	50.9	0.4	1037
1990	28.5%	0.2	16.7	53.8	0.8	909
1991	27.0%	0.5	15.9	54.7	1.9	997
1993	29.3%	0.4	15.9	53.7	0.8	1066
1994	28.2%	0.1	15.4	54.9	1.3	2027
1996	27.1%	0.3	16.0	56.2	0.5	1917
1998	22.4%	0.3	13.9	62.7	0.8	1891
2000	22.3%	0.1	11.9	64.2	1.6	1865
2002	26.3%	0.0	10.1	62.7	0.9	936
2004	25.2%	0.2	11.5	60.8	2.2	876
2006	21.6%	0.0	12.8	63.8	1.8	1996
2008	23.5%	0.0	12.4	62.7	1.4	1358
2010	20.6%	0.1	11.3	63.7	4.2	1279
2012	21.8%	0.2	12.4	63.4	2.2	1307
2014	22.4%	0.1	9.9	64.3	3.2	1724

Source: GSS

**Table 3.** Trends in Hunting, 1977-2014

	<b>Respondent, Spouse, or Both Hunt (%)</b>
1977	31.6
1980	28.3
1982	26.8
1984	26.7
1985	26.2
1987	25.5
1988	22.2
1989	23.4
1990	24.3
1991	23.0
1993	21.0
1994	22.1
1996	23.1
1998	19.3
2000	18.7
2002	20.2
2004	19.4
2006	17.2
2008	17.6
2010	18.2
2012	19.7
2014	15.4

Source: GSS

**Table 4.** Adults Living in a Household with Firearms by Socio-Demographics, 2010-2014

	<b>% with a Firearm in Their Household</b>
Whites	39.0
Blacks	18.1
Others	11.8
Hispanics	15.2
Not-Hispanic	36.0
New England	29.9
Mid-Atlantic	19.3
East North Central	36.2
West North Central	43.3
South Atlantic	32.5
East South Central	46.2
West South Central	43.0
Mountain	34.9
Pacific	24.5
Central City of Largest 12 Metros	14.8
Central Citi of 13-100 Largest Metros	19.4
Suburbs of 12 Largest Metros	19.2
Suburbs of 13-100 Largest Metros	29.0
Other Urban Areas	43.7
Rural Counties (no town < 10,000)	55.9
Household Income < \$25,000	18.2
Household Income \$25,000-49,999	32.1
Household Income \$50,000-89,999	41.8
Household Income \$90,000+	44.0
Refused to Report Income	24.3

Source: GSS



**Table 5.** Gender Gap in Personal Firearms Ownership

	<b>% of Men with Firearms Minus % of Women with Firearms</b>
1980	+40.2
1982	+31.2
1984	+34.3
1985	+39.7
1987	+32.3
1988	+32.8
1989	+39.7
1990	+42.8
1991	+37.3
1993	+34.8
1994	+33.6
1996	+31.5
1998	+27.0
2000	+28.2
2002	+25.7
2004	+29.3
2006	+24.2
2008	+27.6
2010	+23.1
2012	+25.3
2014	+23.4

Source: GSS

**Table 6.** Trends in Support for Requiring a Police Permit before Purchasing a Firearms

	<b>Favor</b>	<b>Oppose</b>	<b>Don't know</b>
1972	70.2%	26.7	3.0
1973	73.6%	24.7	1.7
1974	75.4%	23.5	1.1
1975	72.5%	24.9	2.6
1976	71.6%	27.0	1.4
1977	70.8%	27.5	1.6
1980	69.2%	29.0	1.8
1982	72.1%	26.3	1.6
1984	70.6%	26.9	2.5
1985	72.4%	26.6	1.0
1987	69.4%	28.6	2.0
1988	73.5%	24.1	2.5
1989	78.4%	20.3	1.4
1990	79.1%	19.4	1.4
1991	80.4%	18.3	1.2
1993	80.8%	17.7	1.5
1994	77.9%	20.7	1.4
1996	80.3%	17.9	1.6
1998	81.9%	16.0	2.1
2000	79.0%	18.5	2.5
2002	80.7%	18.5	0.7
2004	80.1%	19.2	0.7
2006	79.4%	19.2	1.4
2008	78.1%	20.6	1.3
2010	73.7%	25.9	1.5
2012	72.6%	25.9	1.5
2014	71.7%	27.2	1.1

Source: GSS

## Question Wordings

### Household and Personal Firearm Ownership:

- Do you happen to have in your home (IF HOUSE: or garage) any guns or revolvers?
- IF YES: Is it a pistol, shotgun, rifle, or what? CODE ALL THAT APPLY.
- Do any of these guns personally belong to you?

### Hunting:

- Do you (or does your [husband/wife]) go hunting?

### Police Permit:

- Would you favor or oppose a law which would require a person to obtain a police permit before he or she could buy a gun?