

Most Americans support smart guns, survey finds

January 21 2016

Nearly 60 percent of Americans, if they buy a new handgun, are willing to purchase a smart or childproof gun—a weapon that is only operable in the hands of an authorized user—new Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health-led research suggests.

In addition to high overall support, the survey found that four in 10 gun owners and 56 percent of political conservatives surveyed are willing to purchase a smart gun, debunking the widely used argument by gun manufacturers and gun groups that there is no market for smart guns.

On Jan. 4, 2016 President Obama issued a memorandum directing the Departments of Justice, Homeland Security and Defense to develop a strategy to expedite the real-world deployment of gun safety technology to reduce the unauthorized use of firearms, and to consider the purchase of smart guns.

The findings, to be published Jan. 21, 2016 in the *American Journal of Public Health*, are consistent with the growing national interest in using technology to reduce the toll of gun deaths in the U.S.

The survey findings contrast sharply from earlier estimates. Research from 2013, funded by the gun manufacturers' trade association, suggested just 14 percent of people would be willing to make their next handgun purchase a smart gun.

Proponents of smart guns say their widespread use would cut down on

suicides, stolen or borrowed guns that go on to be used in crimes and accidental shootings of children by other children. The technology uses fingerprint or radio frequency identification (RFID) that only allows authorized people to fire a given handgun. Objections from gun manufacturers and the gun lobby—including opposition to any requirements mandating the sale of smart over traditional guns—have kept them from being produced on a large scale. Smart guns are not currently sold in the United States.

"The results of this study show that there is potentially a large commercial market for smart gun technology," says Julia A. Wolfson, MPP, a Lerner Fellow with the Bloomberg School's Center for a Livable Future and a PhD candidate in the Department of Health Policy and Management. "This has been one of the biggest arguments against smart guns, that people just don't want them. This research shows otherwise."

To examine public interest in purchasing smart guns, also known as childproof or personalized guns, the study team conducted a nationally representative, web-based survey in January 2015, getting responses from 3,949 people. The respondents were nearly evenly split among gun owners and those who do not own guns. Among the findings: Fifty-nine percent of all respondents said they would be willing to consider a childproof gun if they were to purchase a new weapon. More than twice as many current gun owners said they would be willing to purchase a childproof gun than would be unwilling. The guns were most supported by political liberals (71 percent), but support was also high among political moderates (56 percent) and conservatives (56 percent).

The technology to make guns smart is already being used in other products. Some iPhones can be unlocked by the user's unique thumbprint. Many cars use RFID to allow for keyless entry and keyless ignitions. For a smart gun, a chip could be embedded in a watch or a ring worn by the authorized user; the gun would then verify the identity of

the person holding it as an authorized user and could fire.

In 2014, the most recent year for which final data are available, 33,599 people died in the United States from [gun violence](#). The majority were suicides (more than 21,000 deaths) and firearm homicides accounted for more than 11,000 deaths. Unintentional shootings, in which children are often the shooter and/or the victim, comprised more than 500 deaths that year. In addition to fatalities, in 2013 more than 84,000 people in the United States suffered non-fatal gunshot wounds, requiring hospital or emergency room treatment.

"By simply using technology that already exists and bringing it to the marketplace, the public health benefits could be enormous, allowing us to take a standard injury prevention approach to preventing gun violence," says study co-author Stephen P. Teret, JD, MPH, a professor in the Bloomberg School's Department of Health Policy and Management and founding director of the School's Center for Gun Policy and Research. "Countless lives that would otherwise have been lost to suicide, accidental shootings and guns getting into the wrong hands could be saved. Policymakers and manufacturers should re-examine the potential for smart guns to not only produce a profit, but also to lessen the toll of [gun](#) deaths in the United States."

Provided by Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health

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