

High rate of mental health problems and political extremism found in those who bought firearms during COVID pandemic

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People who bought firearms during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic have much higher rates of recent suicidal thoughts, self-harm behaviors, and intimate partner violence, a new study suggests, compared with other firearm owners and people who do not own firearms.

Pandemic [firearm](#) buyers were also much more likely than the other groups to hold extreme beliefs, ranging from anti-vaccination views to support for QAnon conspiracy theories, according to the [new findings](#) published by in the journal *PLOS ONE*.

The survey was completed by 1,036 adults living in the United States in October 2021. While not nationally representative, recruitment for the survey was designed to approximate the US adult population in terms of the distribution of age, sex, race, and Hispanic ethnicity with participants drawn from 47 states and Washington, D.C.

The findings suggest that [pandemic](#) firearm buyers have special characteristics that deserve attention to prevent harm to themselves or others, say the researchers, who are from the University of Michigan, the University of South Florida, the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and Michigan State University.

With 53% of all firearm deaths nationwide being suicides, and 6 million firearm sales to first-time buyers in mid-2020, the findings also have implications for local, state, and national firearm policy.

"I have never seen a single question that differentiates people so dramatically on so many things in my career as a psychology researcher," said Brian Hicks, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist at University of Michigan Health and U-M Addiction Treatment Services and professor in the U-M Department of Psychiatry.

"People who bought firearms during COVID, whether or not they had a firearm before, were very different from those who didn't," he continued. "They were far more likely to have major [risk factors](#) for being a danger to themselves or others, including high rates of suicidality, depression, and substance use, as well as extreme social and [political beliefs](#). In other words, there are a lot of firearms now in the

hands of people who were pretty distressed when they bought them."

He added, "On the other hand, those who owned firearms before COVID, but didn't buy any during the first 18 months of the pandemic, aren't much different from those who do not own firearms at all. About the only thing we found pre-pandemic gun owners differed on was having more pro-gun attitudes and being a bit more politically conservative compared to people who don't own firearms."

The analysis of survey data separated the respondents into three groups: 103 pandemic firearm buyers (regardless of whether or not they had owned firearms before their pandemic firearm purchase), 170 firearm owners who did not purchase a firearm during the pandemic, and 763 people who did not own a firearm.

Key areas where pandemic firearm buyers differed strongly from people who didn't own a firearm and firearm owners who did not buy a gun during the pandemic:

- Pandemic firearm buyers were much younger than both groups; over half were in their 30s, and 70% were under age 40. Pandemic firearm buyers were also more likely to be male (70%) and white (91%) than people who did not own a firearm (45% male, 72% white).
- 55% of pandemic firearm buyers had thoughts of suicide in the past two weeks compared to 10% of pre-pandemic firearm owners and 6% of people who did not own a firearm. Also, 64% of pandemic firearm owners reported [self-harm](#) by cutting or burning themselves on purpose in the last two weeks, compared to 4% of the other two groups.
- Over 40% of pandemic firearm buyers reported that they occasionally or frequently push, shove, slap, hit, or punch their romantic partner, compared to less than 2% of people who do not

own a firearm or pre-pandemic firearm owners.

- Pandemic firearm buyers reported much higher levels of mental health symptoms including depression, anxiety, alcohol use problems, nicotine use and antisocial behavior than people who did not own a firearm, and pre-pandemic firearm owners.
- Pandemic firearm buyers were more likely to endorse QAnon conspiracies, Christian nationalistic beliefs, and pro-gun attitudes than people who did not own a firearm and pre-pandemic firearm owners. For instance, 76% of pandemic gun buyers, compared with 15% of both other groups, agreed with the QAnon statement that "the government, media, and financial worlds in the U.S. are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex trafficking operation."
- Pandemic firearm buyers were nearly three times more likely than pre-pandemic firearm owners (74% vs. 26%) to report that they carried a firearm outside their home, and nearly twice as likely to have obtained a state-issued permit to carry a firearm in public (81% vs. 47%).

Hicks and his co-authors note that not all pandemic firearm buyers were this different from the other groups regarding risk factors or beliefs.

This suggests a need to delve further into this population with larger sample sizes, and to develop public health messaging around suicide and violence prevention aimed at those with the highest risks.

Hicks, who has conducted multiple waves of the COVID-19 Adjustment and Behavior Survey, plans to conduct more representative and in-depth studies. One study involves testing gun violence prevention messages designed to reach higher-risk groups in Michigan, whose legislature passed a slate of firearm injury prevention laws following a mass shooting on the Michigan State University campus.

Even though suicide rates nationwide have held relatively steady since the pandemic, the long-term risk of suicide among those who are younger and have more mental health, substance use, and aggression concerns is very real.

Meanwhile, the rise in homicides, which was especially prominent in 2020 and 2021, means it is important to look more deeply at the possible role of pandemic-related firearm purchasing or acquisition in these deaths.

"Firearm owners are a diverse group, but it is especially pertinent that purchasing a gun during the COVID-19 pandemic was so effective at identifying a group of gun owners with such elevated levels of risk factors for violence and self-harm," said Hicks. "The societal effects of COVID, especially the first two years, were tremendously unsettling to many people.

"Combined with the social and political upheaval around the 2020 election, and the ability to self-select news and information sources that funnel people toward more extreme content, this appears to have spurred some high-risk individuals to take steps they felt would improve their security by buying firearms."

In addition to Hicks, the study's authors are Catherine Vitro, Elizabeth Johnson, Carter Sherman, Mary M. Heitzeg, C. Emily Durbin and Edelyn Verona.

More information: Brian M. Hicks et al, Who bought a gun during the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States?: Associations with QAnon beliefs, right-wing political attitudes, intimate partner violence, antisocial behavior, suicidality, and mental health and substance use problems, *PLOS ONE* (2023). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0290770](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0290770)

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