

# As many as 65 million Americans now own firearms for protection, survey suggests

July 25 2024

---



Credit: Karolina Grabowska from Pexels

Some 65 million Americans now own firearms for protection—around 80% of the country's estimated 81 million gun owners—suggest the results of a nationally representative survey carried out in 2023, and

published online in the journal *Injury Prevention*.

This perceived need is changing the profile of gun owners, the findings indicate, with increasing numbers of women and those of minority ethnic backgrounds citing protection as the primary reason for owning a [firearm](#).

In 2021, firearms caused the highest absolute number of deaths on record in the U.S., taking nearly 49,000 lives. This [death toll](#) coincided with a surge in firearm purchases during the COVID-19 pandemic, adding 7.5 million owners to the existing total.

The reasons for gun ownership in the U.S. have steadily evolved from tools of necessity to tools of self-defense, facilitated in part by the liberalization of firearms policies, such as concealed carry and stand your ground (SYG) legislation, note the researchers.

In 2017–2021, between 60% and 70% of firearm owners cited protection as the primary reason for ownership, compared with 48% in 2013 and only 26% in 1999.

The researchers therefore wanted to update information about the motivations for firearm ownership, explore any changes in the profile of gun owners, and assess the impact of SYG laws. They drew on data from the National Firearm Attitudes and Behaviors Study, which aimed to examine the prevalence, contextual factors, beliefs and perceptions surrounding firearm behaviors among a nationally representative sample of 20,284 US adults in May and June 2023.

Of the 8,172 who completed the survey, 2,477 respondents reported owning a firearm. They were asked their primary reason for owning a gun. Motivations other than protection, such as hunting and target shooting, were collapsed into one "other" category due to low numbers

citing this reason.

They were also asked if they had carried a firearm outside the home in the past 12 months, excluding for hunting, target shooting, or for work.

States in which [gun owners](#) lived were categorized by SYG law status. At the time of the survey, 30 states with SYG laws were identified, of which 8 had already applied the legislation.

Among those who said they owned a gun, 79% cited protection as the most important reason for doing so, and 58% reported carrying a firearm outside their home in the past 12 months.

Given that over 81 million Americans are estimated to own firearms, this equates to around 65 million people owning firearms for protection, calculate the researchers.

Ownership for protection was not notably higher among firearm owners living in SYG states, but firearm owners in these states were more likely to carry a gun outside of the home: 50% vs. 35% in states without SYG legislation.

Ownership for protection was characterized by more frequent carriage, despite owning fewer firearms, and more first-time firearm owners.

Gender and race/ethnicity emerged as factors strongly associated with ownership for protection. Women, Black and Hispanic people were more likely to own firearms for protection than for other reasons.

Moreover, Black and Asian women (99% prevalence) almost exclusively owned a gun for protection, and while fewer men cited protection as their primary motivation for owning a gun, owning for protection was more common among Black men (88.5%) than it was among white men

(70%).

Other characteristics, including [political affiliation](#), weren't significantly associated with the desire to own a gun for protection. Neither was knowing someone who had been shot or killed by a firearm. But the feeling that there was no one they could trust or rely on was more common among those who cited protection as the primary reason for gun ownership.

This study didn't set out to address causality or determine the reasons why respondents own firearms for protection, the researchers caution, who also point to certain limitations to their findings.

Among them, the sampling and response biases inherent in surveys and the relatively small number of respondents, which although weighted to generate a representative sample at the regional and national level, may not capture the full spectrum of firearm owners and related characteristics.

Social pressures may also have affected people's willingness to be honest about their behaviors and motivations, suggest the researchers. For example, only 5% of firearm owners reported carrying their firearm for protection, despite most of them (79%) citing protection as the reason for ownership.

"Given that over 81 million Americans are estimated to own firearms, this nationally representative survey finds that around 65 million people own firearms for protection (79% of firearm owners).

"These 2023 estimates are higher than previous years, indicating a continuing trend where firearm ownership is now predominantly motivated by protection, and appealing to demographics beyond the 'traditional' firearm owner, including women and minority races,

regardless of political affiliation," write the researchers.

"SYG laws specifically affect the legal right to use deadly force for self-defense in public places, and therefore, increased firearm carriage might be a mechanism by which states with SYG laws have contributed to higher rates of firearm violence," they suggest. "The simultaneous relaxing of concealed carry laws and strengthening self-defense laws may be reinforcing firearm behaviors for protection, particularly carriage in public places.

"Rising rates of firearm ownership among non-traditional firearm-owning groups, particularly members of historically marginalized populations, may reflect a growing desire to protect against external threats, such as hate crimes," they conclude.

**More information:** Short report: Firearm ownership for protection in the USA, 2023: results from a nationally representative survey, *Injury Prevention* (2024). [DOI: 10.1136/ip-2024-045244](https://doi.org/10.1136/ip-2024-045244)

Provided by British Medical Journal

Citation: As many as 65 million Americans now own firearms for protection, survey suggests (2024, July 25) retrieved 27 July 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2024-07-million-americans-firearms-survey.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--