



**Guns in America:  
Results of a Comprehensive National Survey  
on Firearms Ownership and Use**

by Philip J. Cook and Jens Ludwig

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This report presents new evidence from a comprehensive national survey on guns in America, the National Survey of Private Ownership of Firearms (NSPOF). The NSPOF focuses on *four central issues*:

- < The size, composition, and ownership of America's gun stock;
- < How and why firearms are acquired;
- < Gun storage and carrying; and
- < The defensive use of firearms against criminal attackers.

The NSPOF is a nationally-representative telephone survey conducted by Chilton Research Services during November and December, 1994, for the Police Foundation under the sponsorship of the National Institute of Justice. The NSPOF employs a list-assisted random-digit-dial sampling method, in which each telephone household has essentially equal likelihood of being selected. A total of 2,568 adults were interviewed. While the response rate to the survey is somewhat low (44 or 59%, depending on how it is defined), the rate is comparable to those of other academic telephone surveys on firearms ownership and uses. Nevertheless, since those who refuse to participate in the survey may be different from participants, we urge caution in the interpretation of results based on NSPOF data.

On the basis of the NSPOF results, we estimate that 192 million working firearms are in private possession, about one-third of which are handguns. At least 40 percent of all handguns are semi-automatics. Only about one in six handguns have barrel lengths shorter than three inches.

About one-quarter of American adults personally own a firearm (42 percent for men, and 9 percent for women). Our survey evidence suggests that gun ownership may be less popular among younger cohorts of adults than among those aged 51 or older. Gun ownership is most prevalent among middle-aged, middle-class whites from rural areas. We also find that adults who have been arrested for a non-traffic offense are more likely to own a firearm than other adults.

Gun ownership is fairly concentrated, but not more so than other durable goods. Gun owners with four or more guns, about 10 percent of the nation's adults, own about 77 percent of the total stock of firearms. Most handgun owners have a handgun primarily for self-defense. Nevertheless, two-thirds of all handgun owners also own at least one rifle or shotgun, suggesting some experience and interest in the sporting uses of guns. Overall, 46 percent of gun owners own some kind of gun primarily for protection against crime.

Almost all owners say they have received some sort of instruction in the use of their firearms, and over half of all gun owners have received formal training in the use of firearms from the military, National Rifle Association, or other sources. At the same time, about one in five of all gun-owning households violate a widely accepted standard of safe storage by keeping a loaded and unlocked gun in the home at the time of the survey. This percentage was significantly higher among households that had a handgun than among households with long guns only (30 versus 7 percent). Over half of all guns are usually kept unlocked, and about one-quarter of all guns (55 percent of all handguns) are usually kept loaded. We find some evidence to suggest that owners who have participated in particular kinds of training programs, such as those offered by the National Safety Council, are less likely to store firearms unsafely.

About one out of every six handguns in the U.S. is usually kept either on the owner's person or in a motor vehicle. About 14 million adults carry a firearm during the course of a year, about 4 million of whom carry "in connection with work." Two thirds of those who carry keep the gun in their vehicle, while the others sometimes carry it on their persons. On any given day, about 1 million adults carry a gun on their person and another 2 million have a firearm in their car or truck.

The NSPOF includes a number of items on when and how owners obtained their guns. Twenty-two percent of all guns, and 27 percent of handguns, were acquired by their current owners within the past two years. Most of

these guns were acquired through cash purchases from a federally licensed firearms dealer (FFL). About 60 to 70 percent of all gun transactions involved an FFL. Over half a million firearms are stolen from private sources each year.

The NSPOF also provides the first opportunity to replicate Kleck and Gertz' (1995) widely publicized survey finding that 2.5 million adults use guns defensively each year against criminal attackers. The sequence of questions in the NSPOF is quite similar to that used by Kleck and Gertz, and when similar estimation methods are applied, suggests 1.5 million defensive gun users, and 4.7 million defensive gun uses, each year. These results are not inconsistent with the 2.5 million figure.

However, our discussion suggests that survey-based estimates such as those from the NSPOF and Kleck and Gertz are grossly in error, for several reasons: (1) The number of crimes defended, perpetrators shot, and lives saved implied by the DGU reports are incredibly high in comparison with well-known facts about crime rates, gunshot woundings and homicides; (2) There is evidence of confusion on the part of some of the DGU reporters, in the form of puzzling inconsistencies in their descriptions; (3) Survey methods for estimating rare events are generally subject to a positive bias from "false positives." Furthermore, the information available with the NSPOF, as with other surveys, is not adequate to determine whether these reported defensive gun uses (if true) were appropriate, in the sense of involving innocent victims taking prudent action. For example, alternative courses of action available to the respondent in each incident, and even the victim-perpetrator relationship, cannot be determined from the survey responses.

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The 94-page report, *Guns in America: Results of a Comprehensive National Survey of Firearms Ownership and Use*, by Philip J. Cook and Jens Ludwig, is available from the Police Foundation.

Police Foundation  
1201 Connecticut Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20036-2636  
(202) 833-1460 Fax: (202) 659-9149  
E-Mail: [pinfo@policefoundation.org](mailto:pinfo@policefoundation.org)  
[www.policefoundation.org](http://www.policefoundation.org)