

## Gun inequality: US study charts rise of hardcore super owners

Americans own an estimated 265m guns, more than one gun for every American adult, according to the most definitive portrait of US gun ownership in two decades. But the new survey estimates that 133m of these guns are concentrated in the hands of just 3% of American adults – a group of super-owners who have amassed an average of 17 guns each.

The unpublished Harvard/Northeastern survey result summary, obtained exclusively by the Guardian and [the Trace](#), estimates that America's gun stock has increased by 70m guns since 1994. At the same time, the percentage of Americans who own guns decreased slightly from 25% to 22%.

Large increase in handgun stock

The new survey, conducted in 2015 by public health researchers from Harvard and Northeastern universities, also found that the proportion of female gun owners is increasing as fewer men own guns. These women were more likely to own a gun for self-defense than men, and more likely to own a handgun only.

Women's focus on self-defense is part of a broader trend. Even as the US has grown dramatically safer and gun violence rates have plummeted, handguns have become a greater proportion of the country's civilian [gun stock](#), suggesting that self-defense is an increasingly important factor in gun ownership.

"The desire to own a gun for protection – there's a disconnect between that and the decreasing rates of lethal violence in this country. It isn't a response to actuarial reality," said Matthew Miller, a Northeastern University and Harvard School of Public Health professor and one of the authors of the study.

The data suggests that American gun ownership is driven by an "increasing fearfulness", said Dr Deborah Azrael, a Harvard School of Public Health firearms researcher and the lead author of the study.

"If we hope to reduce firearm suicide, if we hope to reduce the other potential dangers of guns, my gut is, we have to speak to that fear," she said.

The new survey also found a much higher estimate of annual gun thefts: 400,000 guns stolen per year, compared with 230,000 a year in a recent estimate from the National Crime Victimization Survey.

Phil Cook, a Duke University firearms researcher and one of the authors of a prominent 1994 study of American gun ownership, praised the new research as "a very high-

quality survey”.

Unlike the more frequent gun ownership polls from Pew or the General Social Survey, “it goes beyond asking whether there’s a firearm in their household and asks how many firearms are in the household”, he said. “Without knowing the answer to the second question, it’s not possible to get a estimate of the total stock of firearms in the US.”

He noted, however, that “their estimate of the national total is lower than some would expect. It’s been commonplace to say there are 300m guns in circulation.”

- f** Gun Nation: A 30-minute revealing and unsettling journey to the heart of America’s deadly love affair with the gun
- 🐦** The new survey’s results do line up with the broader trends of some previous surveys: even as gun sales hit records highs under Barack Obama’s
- 📌** administration, the total proportion of Americans who say they own guns has fallen slightly, leaving more guns in relatively fewer hands.

While there are an estimated 55 million American gun owners, most own an average of just three firearms, and nearly half own just one or two, according to the survey results.

Then there are America’s gun super-owners – an estimated 7.7 million Americans who own between eight and 140 guns.

This kind of concentrated ownership isn’t unique to guns, firearms researchers noted. Marketing experts suggest that the most devoted 20% consumers will typically account for 80% of a product’s sales.

Half of guns are concentrated in just three percent of Americans’ hands

Azrael, the lead author of the study, said there was no research on “whether owning a large number of guns is a greater risk factor than owning a few guns”.

“We know almost nothing about that,” she said.

Some gun owners responded to the study’s findings with trepidation. Bryce Towsley, a Vermont-based gun writer and the author of Prepper Guns, a firearms guide for survivalists, said he worried about how the survey would be used politically.

“They’re going to say, ‘Okay, there’s a small minority of people who have all the guns – we’re going to go after them.’”

But Azrael’s immediate reaction to the survey results, she said, was not to focus on the

gun owners with dozens of weapons, but on the nearly 50% of gun owners who had just one or two. “To change their behavior with respect to guns, and the ways in which they store them, or their decision-making – we could have a really big impact on suicide,” she said.

Roughly 20,000 of America’s more than 30,000 annual gun deaths are suicides.

“I don’t know anybody who thinks or talks seriously about confiscating guns,” she said. “From a public health perspective – you don’t seize cigarettes.” But, she said, “you do try to make good science available. You do try to help people think about the risks and benefits of the behavior they choose to undertake.”

## **More female gun owners**

Since 1994, America’s estimated total number of gun owners has grown by 10 million.

But growth in gun ownership does not seem to be keeping up with overall growth in the US population, according to the new survey. Since a previous in-depth national phone survey in 1994, the percentage of Americans who say they own guns has fallen slightly, from 25% to 22%. The drop was driven by a dramatic decrease among men. The 1994 survey found that 42% of American men described themselves as gun owners, compared with only 32% of American men in the new study.

Decrease in gun ownership driven by males

The percentage of women who say they own guns has increased slightly from 9% in a 1994 survey to 12% today, but researchers said the increase was not meaningful. Since the 1980s, female gun ownership has fluctuated between 9% and 14% in annual surveys.

Women tend to be more supportive of gun control laws than men, and gun control advocates have focused on women, particularly [mothers](#), as a key voting bloc to push forward what they call a “gun sense” agenda. Earlier this year, Everytown for Gun Safety, the country’s largest gun control group, launched a new campaign focused on [educating single women](#) about the need for new gun laws.

But the new survey provides support for the National Rifle Association’s assertion that the total number of female gun owners has grown in recent years, even if the percentage of women owning guns has not increased substantially. The findings also show that the gender gap in gun ownership is closing, with American women making up a larger proportion of gun owners as male gun ownership declines.

The number of women who enroll each year in the NRA’s basic pistol course almost doubled from 2011 to 2014, from about 25,000 a year to nearly 46,000 a year,

according to [NRA](#) spokeswoman Catherine Mortensen.

## Demographics

Overall, the survey found, gun owners tended to be white, male, conservative, and live in rural areas. Thirty per cent of conservatives said they were gun owners, compared with 19% of [moderates](#) and only 14% of liberals. The strongest predictor of gun ownership was military service. 44% of veterans said they owned a firearm.

Clear racial disparities in overall gun ownership remained, with 25% of white and multi-racial Americans saying they personally owned a gun, compared with 16% of Hispanics and 14% of African Americans.

But there was essentially no disparity in gun ownership based on income level for Americans who make between \$25,000 and more than \$100,000 a year. Americans who made less than \$25,000 a year were less likely to own guns.

The survey found that Americans who only owned handguns were much more diverse than gun owners who owned a mix of handguns and long guns, or those who only owned rifles and shotguns. Those in the “handguns only” group were more likely to be female, non-white, and live in a urban area, and less likely to have grown up in a house with a gun.

Demographic characteristics of gun owners

Roughly 44% of black gun owners and 37% of Hispanic gun owners said they only owned handguns, compared with 21% of non-Hispanic whites.

Cook, the Duke firearms researcher, said the demographic data on handgun-only owners was one of the most interesting findings of the study. But he said it was “kind of worrying” that women who had no previous experience with guns were buying handguns for self-defense, and that he was concerned “that puts them at greater risk” for gun accidents or thefts.

The demographics of America’s 7.7 million gun super-owners were less diverse than gun owners overall, with super-owners more likely to be male, less likely to be black or Hispanic, and more likely to own a gun for protection, researchers said. This subset of gun enthusiasts – only 14% of all gun owners – has amassed a collective 133m firearms.

Interviews with Americans who own at least 17 firearms revealed a wide range of reasons for accumulating so many guns.

Some super-owners are dedicated collectors with special rooms to display their

assortment of historic firearms. Others are firearms instructors, gunsmiths, or competitive shooters, who need a variety of firearms in the course of work or competition. Some gun owners have a survivalist streak, and believe in storing up weapons, as well as food and water, in case of a disaster scenario. Others simply picked up a handgun here, a shotgun or hunting rifle there, and somehow ended up with dozens.

“Why do you need more than one pair of shoes?” said Philip van Cleave, the president of the Virginia Citizens Defense League, a gun rights group that views itself as being to the political right of the NRA. “The truth is, you don’t, but do you want more than one pair of shoes? If you going hiking, you don’t want to use that one pair of high heels.”

“Walking around the beach with shirt off and shorts ... I’m probably going to use a different gun than putting on a sport coat and going out to dinner,” he said.

There is no official national count of the total number of American gun owners or how many guns they own. Many gun rights advocates are fiercely private about gun ownership.

After Sandy Hook, when a local newspaper in New York state published an interactive map with the names and addresses of gun permit owners – a matter of public record – gun owners reacted with outrage, reporters and editors received threats, and the paper reportedly hired armed security guards in response. New York state swiftly passed a law protecting the privacy of gun permit holders. Two other local papers in North Carolina and Maine were later inundated with threats after merely requesting public records of gun ownership, though they said they were not planning to publish the names of individual owners. Both papers dropped their requests, and the editor of one of the papers resigned.

The Harvard/Northeastern study is based on a survey of nearly 4,000 Americans conducted online in 2015 by a market research company, GfK, with a nationally representative [panel of opt-in participants](#) who are compensated to complete surveys on a variety of issues.

Van Cleave, the president of the Virginia Citizen’s Defense League, said he was very skeptical of the accuracy of phone surveys of gun ownership, since he believes many gun owners might not feel comfortable telling a stranger on the phone whether they are a gun owner or how many guns they own. He said his “gut feeling” was that gun owners might be a little more comfortable answering questions honestly in an anonymous online survey.



**f** Gun enthusiasts look over Smith & Wesson pistols at the NRA Annual Meetings & Exhibits in May. The number of women who enroll each year in the NRA's basic pistol course almost doubled from 2011 to 2014, said an NRA spokeswoman. Photograph: Scott Olson/Getty Images

**p** Azrael, one of the study's authors, said she was surprised that the detailed questions on gun ownership received no pushback. "People didn't write back to GfK and say, 'You have no right to ask these questions.'"

"It was encouraging," she said. "It didn't feel fraught. It felt that we were talking about a regular consumer product."

The new survey results mirror the trends of the annual General Social Survey, which found that household gun ownership has fallen from 50% to close to 31% since the late 1970s, and that individual gun ownership fell from 28% in 1980 to 22% in 2014.

But as with most aspects of American gun politics, the basic data on American gun ownership is hotly debated, with some gun rights supporters arguing that American gun ownership is not on the decline, and that Americans may be under-reporting their gun ownership in some surveys.

A [Gallup poll](#) last year estimated personal gun ownership at 28%, while a [Pew Research Center](#) survey put it at 31%, which would make the estimated total of American gun owners more than 75 million, compared with 55 million in the Harvard/Northeastern study.

The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms tracks the numbers of firearms manufactured in or imported into the United States, as well as how many background checks on gun sales licensed firearm dealers process.

Manufacturing and import records suggest that more than 360m firearms entered the US market between 1899 and 2013, the new study's authors noted. With gun sales spiking since 2013, some estimates would put the total number of American firearms today around 400m.

However, it's not clear how many American guns have been broken, confiscated and destroyed by the police, smuggled out of the country, or otherwise left the gun stock over the decades.

The full results of the Harvard/Northeastern gun ownership study are undergoing peer review and are slated to be published in the autumn of 2017 by the Russell Sage Foundation. While the full peer review is not complete, Azrael said, the current results have gone through an initial round of comments and revisions from a group of leading firearms researchers.

The National Rifle Association did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the initial findings of the survey.

Mike Bazinet, a spokesman for the National Shooting Sports Foundation, the firearm industry's trade association, said he would have to defer full comment until he could read the entire survey and its methodology.

But he questioned why some results of the survey were being released before the full paper was published, and said some of the results sounded implausible.

"Really? Three per cent of American gun owners own half the guns? That seems wildly off the mark. On the surface, this survey sounds like part of the ongoing effort to minimize gun ownership to make more gun control seem politically achievable," he wrote in an e-mail.

But Gary Kleck, a Florida State University criminologist and firearms researcher, said the concentration of most guns in the hands of a relatively small proportion of gun owners was "old news".

"It's probably true for just about any consumer good," he said.

Support the Guardian's independent journalism by [making a contribution](#) or [becoming a member](#)