

GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEY
FINAL REPORT

Trends in Gun Ownership
in the United States, 1972-2018

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Trends in Gun Ownership in the United States, 1972-2018

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The household ownership of firearms has declined in recent decades. Table 1 (left side) shows that the 31.0% of households reported having a firearm in 2016, essentially tying with 2010 and 2014 for the lowest level of gun ownership in the last 40-some years. This is a decline of about 17 percentage points from the peak ownership years in 1977-1980. Similarly, Table 1 (right side) indicates that in 2010, 2014, and 2016 about 32% of adults lived households having firearms. This was a decline almost 19 percentage points from an average of 51.2% in 1976-1982. But, in 2018, ownership moved upwards to 34.3% of households and 35.2% of adults living in households that reported a firearm. Based on an earlier analysis of those who refused to say whether or not there was a firearm in their household,¹ the refusers were reallocated as probably living in a household with a firearm or not living in such a household. This allocation indicates that 37.4% of adults lived in a household with a firearm in 2018. This represents a decline of over 13.7 percentage points from the peak average of 51.1% in 1976-1982.

Table 2 shows that in 2018 21.9% of adults personally owned a firearm. This is up slightly from a record low of 20.5% in 2016. There has been little change from 2006 to 2018. Personal ownership in 2018 is down 8.6 percentage points from a high of 30.5% in 1985.

One of the main reasons for the decline in household firearm ownership is the decrease in the popularity of hunting (Table 3). In 2018, only 17.0% of adults lived in households in which they, their spouse, or both were hunters. This compares to the highest level of 31.6% adults being hunters or married to a hunter in 1977.²

In 2010-18, household firearms ownership was higher among households with white respondents (39.3%) than among those with black respondents (18.8%) (Table 4). Similarly, it was greater among non-Hispanics (36.4%) than among Hispanics (16.2%). Household gun ownership was greater among respondents in household with higher incomes. As Table 4 indicates, it rose from 18.4% for households

¹ Tom W. Smith, Jaesok Son, and Faith Laken, "Gun Ownership in the United States: Measurement Issues and Trends," GSS Methodological Report No. 123. Chicago: NORC, 2014.

² Additional information on hunting is included in Smith, Son, and Laken, 2014.

with income below \$25,000 to 45.8% for those with (\$90,000+). It was also low for households that refused to report income (23.3%). This was because households that refused to supply income information were more likely to also refuse to report on firearm ownership. Adults living in households with firearms are concentrated in rural areas and in regions with more residents living in rural areas. As Table 4 shows, household firearms ownership was greatest in the East South Central region and smallest in the Pacific region and Northeast regions. Likewise, it was highest in counties with no town over 10,000 (54.2%) and lowest in the central cities of the largest 12 metropolitan areas (12.7%).

Personal ownership of firearms has not appreciably changed for women from 1980 through 2018. Between 9% and 14% of women personally owned a firearm during those years and there is no meaningful trend in the level of personal ownership. In 1980, 10.1% personally owned a firearm and in 2018 11.7% did. Men are much more likely to personally own a firearm than women are, but the gender gap has narrowed due to a decline in personal firearm ownership among men. In 1980, 50.3% of men and 10.1% of women reported personal firearm ownership for a gender gap to +40.2 percentage points (Table 5). In 2016, it was 32.7% for men and 10.8% for women for a gender gap of +21.9 points, the lowest recorded. In 2018, it moved back up to +25.3 points.

Personal firearms ownership used to vary very little across age cohorts. In 1980, 23.5% of those under 35 owned a firearm as did 27.4% of those 65+ for an age gap of + 3.9 points. Age differences increased over time. In 2018, personal firearms ownership was 15.0% for those under 35 and 33.2 % for those 65+ for an age gap of 18.2 points.

Support for a law requiring a police permit before purchasing a firearm was between 69-75% in 1972-1988 with no clear trend before moving up from 73.5% in 1988 to a peak of 81.9% in 1998 (Table 6). Support remained at 78-81% during 1989-2008 before slipping to a low of 69.7% in 2016, the lowest level since 1987. It moved back up to 71.1% in 2018. Thus, the gains in support in the late 1980s and 1990s have disappeared in recent years.

Table 1. Trends in Household Gun Ownership

	% of Households with Guns					% of Adults in Households with Guns					
	Gun	No Gun	Refused	DK	Missing	Gun	No Gun	Refused	DK	Missing	N*
1973	47.0	51.4	1.0	0.0	0.6	48.7	49.5	1.0	0.0	0.7	1,504
1974	46.1	52.9	0.7	0.1	0.3	47.6	51.3	0.6	0.1	0.4	1,484
1976	46.5	52.0	1.1	0.0	0.4	49.5	48.9	1.2	0.0	0.4	1,499
1977	50.4	48.9	0.1	0.1	0.5	53.7	45.6	0.1	0.2	0.4	1,530
1980	47.3	51.8	0.1	0.1	0.7	50.3	48.5	0.2	0.1	0.8	1,468
1982	45.3	52.9	1.3	0.2	0.3	48.6	49.5	1.3	0.2	0.4	1,506
1984	44.9	54.0	0.6	0.1	0.4	48.1	50.5	0.7	0.1	0.5	1,473
1985	44.2	54.9	0.7	0.0	0.3	47.9	51.3	0.5	0.0	0.3	1,534
1987	46.0	53.3	0.5	0.0	0.1	48.5	50.8	0.5	0.0	0.2	1,466
1988	39.8	58.4	1.0	0.0	0.7	43.1	55.3	0.9	0.0	0.7	977
1989	46.0	53.7	0.0	0.0	0.3	48.7	50.9	0.0	0.0	0.4	1,033
1990	42.2	56.7	0.0	0.1	1.0	45.4	53.7	0.0	0.1	0.8	917
1991	39.6	58.7	1.0	0.0	0.7	43.4	54.7	1.2	0.0	0.7	993
1993	42.0	57.1	0.7	0.0	0.2	45.4	53.7	0.7	0.0	0.2	1,075
1994	40.6	58.1	1.0	0.2	0.2	43.8	54.9	0.9	0.1	0.2	1,996
1996	40.1	59.4	0.4	0.1	0.0	43.3	56.2	0.4	0.1	0.0	1,923
1998	34.8	64.6	0.3	0.1	0.3	36.5	62.7	0.4	0.1	0.3	1,882
2000	32.4	66.1	1.2	0.1	0.2	34.2	64.2	1.3	0.1	0.2	1,861
2002	33.5	65.5	1.0	0.0	0.0	36.4	62.7	0.9	0.0	0.0	924
2004	34.7	62.9	1.6	0.2	0.6	37.0	60.8	1.4	0.2	0.6	898
2006	33.1	65.2	1.6	0.1	0.0	34.4	63.8	1.7	0.1	0.0	1,984
2008	34.0	64.6	1.1	0.3	0.0	35.9	62.7	1.0	0.4	0.0	1,356
2010	31.1	65.0	3.5	0.5	0.0	32.1	63.7	3.6	0.6	0.0	1,291
2012	33.1	64.7	2.0	0.2	0.0	34.4	63.4	2.0	0.2	0.0	1,314
2014	31.0	65.7	3.2	0.2	0.0	32.4	64.3	3.1	0.2	0.0	1,711
2016	31.0	66.2	2.7	0.1	0.0	32.4	64.6	3.0	0.1	0.0	1,898
2018	34.3	62.9	2.5	0.3	0.0	35.2	61.6	2.8	0.4	0.0	1,576

Source: GSS

Note: N is a total number weighted by household, which matches more closely with percentages on the left side (“% of Households with Guns”) of the table.

Table 2. Trends in Personal Ownership of Guns

	Owns	Gun in Household Unknown Owner	Gun in Household Owned by Other	No Gun in Household	Missing	N
1980	28.1%	2.5	19.7	48.5	1.1	1,469
1982	28.2%	2.6	17.8	49.5	1.9	1,507
1984	25.3%	0.2	22.7	50.5	1.4	1,473
1985	30.5%	0.3	17.2	51.3	0.8	1,535
1987	28.0%	0.7	19.8	50.8	0.8	1,466
1988	24.9%	0.5	17.7	55.3	1.6	980
1989	27.1%	0.6	21.0	50.9	0.4	1,037
1990	28.5%	0.2	16.7	53.8	0.8	909
1991	27.0%	0.5	15.9	54.7	1.9	997
1993	29.3%	0.4	15.9	53.7	0.8	1,066
1994	28.2%	0.1	15.4	54.9	1.3	2,027
1996	27.1%	0.3	16.0	56.2	0.5	1,917
1998	22.4%	0.3	13.9	62.7	0.8	1,891
2000	22.3%	0.1	11.9	64.2	1.6	1,865
2002	26.3%	0.0	10.1	62.7	0.9	936
2004	25.2%	0.2	11.5	60.8	2.2	876
2006	21.6%	0.0	12.8	63.8	1.8	1,996
2008	23.5%	0.0	12.4	62.7	1.4	1,358
2010	20.6%	0.1	11.3	63.7	4.2	1,279
2012	21.8%	0.2	12.4	63.4	2.2	1,307
2014	22.4%	0.1	9.9	64.3	3.2	1,724
2016	20.5%	0.1	11.7	64.6	3.0	1,903
2018	21.9%	0.1	13.2	61.7	3.1	1,578

Source: GSS

Table 3. Trends in Hunting, 1977-2018

	Respondent, Spouse, or Both Hunt (%)
1977	31.6
1980	28.3
1982	26.8
1984	26.7
1985	26.2
1987	25.5
1988	22.2
1989	23.4
1990	24.3
1991	23.0
1993	21.0
1994	22.1
1996	23.1
1998	19.3
2000	18.7
2002	20.2
2004	19.4
2006	17.2
2008	17.6
2010	18.2
2012	19.7
2014	15.4
2016	17.1
2018	17.0

Source: GSS

Table 4. Adults Living in a Household with Firearms by Socio-Demographics, 2010-2018

	% with a Firearm in Their Household
Whites	39.3
Blacks	18.8
Others	12.4
Hispanics	16.2
Not-Hispanic	36.4
New England	28.9
Mid-Atlantic	20.1
East North Central	36.7
West North Central	42.8
South Atlantic	32.4
East South Central	48.3
West South Central	42.3
Mountain	36.7
Pacific	23.8
Central City of Largest 12 Metros	12.7
Central Citi of 13-100 Largest Metros	21.9
Suburbs of 12 Largest Metros	20.1
Suburbs of 13-100 Largest Metros	31.2
Other Urban Areas	44.4
Rural Counties (no town < 10,000)	54.2
Household Income < \$25,000	18.4
Household Income \$25,000-49,999	30.8
Household Income \$50,000-89,999	40.1
Household Income \$90,000+	45.8
Refused to Report Income	23.3
18-34 years old	26.3
35-49 years old	31.9
50-64 years old	38.0
65+ years old	39.8

Source: GSS

Table 5. Gender Gap in Personal Firearms Ownership

	% of Men with Firearms Minus % of Women with Firearms
1980	+40.2
1982	+32.3
1984	+34.3
1985	+39.7
1987	+34.4
1988	+32.8
1989	+39.7
1990	+42.8
1991	+37.3
1993	+34.8
1994	+33.6
1996	+31.5
1998	+27.0
2000	+28.2
2002	+25.7
2004	+29.3
2006	+24.2
2008	+27.6
2010	+23.1
2012	+25.3
2014	+23.4
2016	+21.9
2018	+25.3

Source: GSS

Table 6. Trends in Support for Requiring a Police Permit before Purchasing a Firearms

	Favor	Oppose	Don't know
1972	70.2%	26.7	3.0
1973	73.6%	24.7	1.7
1974	75.4%	23.5	1.1
1975	72.5%	24.9	2.6
1976	71.6%	27.0	1.4
1977	70.8%	27.5	1.6
1980	69.2%	29.0	1.8
1982	72.1%	26.3	1.6
1984	70.6%	26.9	2.5
1985	72.4%	26.6	1.0
1987	69.4%	28.6	2.0
1988	73.5%	24.1	2.5
1989	78.4%	20.3	1.4
1990	79.1%	19.4	1.4
1991	80.4%	18.3	1.2
1993	80.8%	17.7	1.5
1994	77.9%	20.7	1.4
1996	80.3%	17.9	1.6
1998	81.9%	16.0	2.1
2000	79.0%	18.5	2.5
2002	80.7%	18.5	0.7
2004	80.1%	19.2	0.7
2006	79.4%	19.2	1.4
2008	78.1%	20.6	1.3
2010	73.7%	25.9	1.5
2012	72.6%	25.9	1.5
2014	71.7%	27.2	1.1
2016	69.7%	29.0	1.3
2018	71.1%	27.5	1.4

Source: GSS

Question Wordings

Household and Personal Firearm Ownership:

- Do you happen to have in your home (IF HOUSE: or garage) any guns or revolvers?
- IF YES: Is it a pistol, shotgun, rifle, or what? CODE ALL THAT APPLY.
- Do any of these guns personally belong to you?

Hunting:

- Do you (or does your [husband/wife]) go hunting?

Police Permit:

- Would you favor or oppose a law which would require a person to obtain a police permit before he or she could buy a gun?