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## CHANGES IN FIREARMS OWNERSHIP AMONG WOMEN, 1980-1994

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Since the mid-1980s, pro-gun groups, especially the National Rifle Association and Smith & Wesson, have promoted gun ownership among women. They claim that the purchase and ownership of firearms by women has greatly increased. This claim has been accepted by most journalists and repeated in dozens of stories about the feminization of gunnery. The main themes of these stories are that: (1) the ownership of guns by women has been and is continuing to increase notably; (2) the number of women owning guns is now quite high; (3) the traditional gender gap regarding firearms is closing; (4) the acquisition of handguns is heavily stressed as a reaction to a rise in crime in general and the violent victimization of women in particular; and (5) the women arming themselves tend to be unmarried women living in metropolitan areas.

This Article examines: (1) what pro-gun groups and the mass media report about the ownership of firearms by women; (2) the reliability of the figures used by pro-gun groups and the mass media; and (3) the best available information on how the ownership of firearms by women has changed since 1980. The Article concludes that pro-gun groups and the media have exaggerated the rate of gun ownership among women.

### II. THE OWNERSHIP OF FIREARMS BY WOMEN ACCORDING TO PRO-GUN GROUPS AND THE MASS MEDIA

Pro-gun groups have touted twin themes: (1) that women should arm themselves for self-protection; and (2) that many women have

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already armed themselves and many more are planning to do so. The mass media have debated the wisdom of the first theme but, with few exceptions, have accepted the truth of the second. The typical news story describes women who buy handguns and take firearms training courses because they have been the victims of crime or are afraid of becoming victims.<sup>1</sup> Most of these women are unmarried and live in large cities.<sup>2</sup> The typical article asserts that the level of ownership among women is already high, that their ownership is rapidly increasing, and that women account for a large number of trainees, gun sales, and new permit holders.

To help fulfill this supposed surge in demand, the stories also frequently mention that guns especially designed for women are being marketed and advertised in women's magazines and that a wide range of gun accessories for women are available. This standard story has been repeated dozens of times in virtually every women's magazine, the major newsmagazines, most leading newspapers, and in many other prominent news sources.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Among the dozens of articles examined, only one mentions a woman obtaining a long gun for protection. See Robert Draper, *Why 15 Million Women Own Guns*, GLAMOUR, May 1993, at 260. Two articles mentioned that hunting has become more popular for women. See Karen M. Thomas, *Seasons of Their Lives*, DALLAS MORNING NEWS, Jan. 23, 1994, at 12F; *Consumer Products: Arms and the Woman*, MARKETING TO WOMEN, March 1, 1993, available in WESTLAW, 1993 WL 2462004.

<sup>2</sup> Several articles mention the fear of crime and the need for protection for unmarried women. See, e.g., Carrie Goerne, *Gun Companies Target Women: Foes Call It Marketing to Fear*, MARKETING NEWS, Aug. 31, 1992, at 1; Lisa B. Pulitzer, *Women Bearing Arms Increasing*, N.Y. TIMES, June 14, 1992, at L114. In addition, of the women described in the stories, thirty-three are unmarried and only seventeen are married; for another twenty-eight women marital status is unknown. Prior to 1990, almost all women in the stories were identified as unmarried or depicted as living alone. Since 1990, unmarried women are still over-represented in the stories, but marital status is unstated for a larger share of women and there are more examples of husbands and wives or families acquiring guns.

<sup>3</sup> See *A-Hunting They Will Go—For New Members*, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REP., Mar. 29, 1993, at 8; Associated Press, *NRA Campaign Under Attack: Female Lawmakers Call on NRA to End 'Refuse to Be a Victim' Ad*, L.A. TIMES, Oct. 16, 1993, at A18; William Barnhill, *Sisters in Arms: More and More Women Are Buying Guns for Self-Defense*, WASH. POST, Jan. 7, 1992, at B5; Brian Baron, *Female Lawmakers Cry Foul over NRA Ad Campaign*, STATES NEWS SERVICE, Oct. 15, 1993; Joan Barthel, *Women & Guns*, WOMEN'S DAY, Sep. 1, 1983, at 84; Lorraine Calvacca, *Sticking It to Women & Guns*, FOLIO: THE MAGAZINE FOR MAGAZINE MANAGEMENT, Feb. 1, 1994, at 25; George J. Church, *The Other Arms Race*, TIME, Feb. 2, 1989, at 20; Pamela Cytrynbaum, *What's New in Gun Manufacturing: A Drive to Woo Women—And Invigorate Sales*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 2, 1989, § 3, at 17; Carol Davison, *That's a Gun in Lobbyists' Pocket, and Yes, They're Glad to Scare Us*, GAZETTE (Montreal), May 16, 1994, at C4; Rebecca Deaton, *Getting a Grip on Crime Fears: More and More Women Learning to Use Handguns*, HOUS. POST, Aug. 9, 1991, at A17; *Dehere Foundation Report Reveals that Crime and Violence Top List of American Concerns; 56% of Americans Willing to Make Constitutional Change to Stop Senseless Killings*, BUS. WIRE, Nov. 4, 1993 available in LEXIS, News Library, BWIRE File; Lisa De Paulo, *Would I Shoot to Kill? In a Heartbeat*, WASHINGTONIAN, Sept. 1992; Draper, *supra* note 1, at 2; *Fighting Back*, MARKETING TO WOMEN, Dec. 1, 1993 available in WESTLAW, 1993 WL 2461822; Steve

Fishman, *What You Know About Guns Can Kill You*, VOGUE, Oct. 1993, at 142-48; *For the Ladies, a .38 Caliber*, NEWSWEEK, Feb. 27, 1989, at 48 [hereinafter *For the Ladies*]; Nancy R. Gibbs, *When Women Take Up Arms*, TIME, Apr. 11, 1989, at 63; Ellen Goodman, *Arming Women Won't Protect Them*, CHI. TRIB., Jan. 17, 1993, at 6; Marty Graham, *Females Increasingly Seek Gun Training*, HOUS. POST, Oct. 17, 1993, at A29; Barbara G. Grizzuti, *Guns a la Mode*, MADEMOISELLE, May 1989, at 140; *Guess Who Is the New Marketing Target for Guns? You Are!*, GLAMOUR, Sept. 1986, at 94; *Gun Owners Don't Fit Stereotypes*, USA TODAY, Dec. 30, 1993, at 5A; Janice Harayda, *Puffed Up Poll Nailed After Publication*, CLEV. PLAIN DEALER, Feb. 8, 1994, at 3E; Maureen Harrington, *Women Gaining Access to Guns Amid Rising Sense of Frustration*, DENVER POST, Aug. 30, 1993, at F1; Greg Hassell, *A Range of Reasons for Shooting, Whether It's for Fear or Safety, People are Lining Up*, HOUS. CHRON., May 31, 1994, at 1; Linda M. Hasselstrom, *A Peaceful Woman Explains Why She Carries a Gun*, UTNE READER, May-June 1991, at 88-92; Melinda Henneberger, *The Small-Arms Industry Comes On to Women*, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 24, 1993, § 4, at 4; Rhonda Hillbery, *City Is the NRA Capital for a Spell, Gun Group Has a New Agenda*, STAR TRIB., May 19, 1994, at 1A; Kim S. Hirsh, *Violent Times Provide Ammunition for Interest in Guns*, CHI. TRIB., Mar. 14, 1993, at 1; Michael Hodges, *Up in Arms*, DETROIT NEWS, Dec. 6, 1993, at C1; Joe Holleman, *More Women Are Fired Up About Guns*, ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH, Mar. 22, 1993, at 1A; Ellen Hopkins, *Feminine Protection*, MIRABELLA, Jan. 1993, at 74-77; Joy Horowitz, *Arms and the Woman; Women as Gun Owners*, HARPER'S BAZAAR, Feb. 1994, at 166; Susan Houriet, *Learning to Fight Back*, HARTFORD COURANT, Jun. 12, 1994, at H1; Robert W. Hunnicutt, *Smith & Wesson's LadySmith Revolvers*, AM. RIFLEMAN, Mar. 1989, at 40-3; John Husar, *On the Outdoors—Women Beginning to Take Aim*, CHI. TRIB., May 2, 1993, § 3, at 4; Mark Ippolito, *NRA Unveils Women's Program*, GANNETT NEWS SERV., Apr. 24, 1993; Ann Japenga, *Would I Be Safer with a Gun?*, HEALTH, Mar.-Apr. 1994, at 52; Ann Jones, *Living with Guns; Playing with Fire*, MS., May-Jun. 1994, at 38-44; Maggie Jones, *Gunmakers Target Women*, WORKING WOMAN, Jul. 1993, at 10; Cheryl Laird, *Women with Guns; Desire for Protection Spurs Arms Purchases*, HOUS. CHRON., Jan. 21, 1994, at 1; Mitchell Landsberg, *More Women Turning to Firearms Out of Fear*, L.A. TIMES, Feb. 21, 1993, at A18; Erik Larson, *Armed Force: Paxton Quigley Shows Her Women Students How to Shoot a Man*, WALL ST. J., Feb. 4, 1993, at A1; Bryanna Latoof, *For Safety's Sake?*, ST. PETERSBURG TIMES, Apr. 20, 1994, at 1D; Kevin Leary, *Fighting Fear with Firearms, Many U.S. Women Buying Guns*, S.F. CHRON., Sept. 30, 1992, at A1; Karen Lehrman, *Boy Toys*, NEW REPUBLIC, Mar. 30, 1992, at 45; Carol A. Leonetti, *When Women Decide Not to Be Easy Targets*, N.Y. TIMES, Aug. 22, 1993, § 13CN, at 1; Joanne Lipman, *To Get Annie Her Gun*, WALL ST. J., Feb. 13, 1989, available in WESTLAW, 1989 WL 485361; Ken Marshall, *Increasing Numbers of American Women Now Own Guns*, Copley News Service, Jan. 1990; Kathryn Means, *Women and Handguns . . . A Hot-Button Issue*, CONROE COURIER, Sept. 5, 1993, at 1-2B; *Milady Packs Heat*, ATLANTA J. CONST., Feb. 26, 1989, at D6; Bryan Miller, *Guns & Women*, READER (Chicago), Feb. 4, 1994, at 1 [hereinafter Miller, *Guns & Women*]; Bryan Miller, *Why Women Should Buy Guns*, USA TODAY, July 6, 1994, at 11A [hereinafter Miller, *Why Women Should Buy Guns*]; Kate Muir, *Pistol Packin' Mommas*, TIMES, Nov. 18, 1993; Ellen Neuborne, *Cashing In on Fear*, MS., May-June 1994, at 46-50; *On Eve of Brady Vote 47 Percent of Americans Are Willing to Vote Out Representatives and Senators Over Gun Control, Poll Finds*, PR NEWswire, Nov. 9, 1993, available in NEXIS News Library; Wires File; Colleen O'Connor, *Women's Self-Defense: Big Business; Sales of Everything from Firearms to Garter-Belt Holsters Are Up*, DALLAS MORNING NEWS, Oct. 24, 1993, at 1F; Molly O'Neill, *Sure as Shootin'*, CHI. TRIB., Feb. 19, 1993, § 5 at 1, 3; Letty C. Pogrebin, *Neither Pink nor Cute: Pistols for the Women of America*, NATION, May 15, 1989, at 666, 668, 689; PAXTON QUIGLEY, ARMED & FEMALE (1989); Paxton Quigley, *Women and Crime: Is This the Answer?*, GLAMOUR, Apr. 1989, at 344; Melissa Rossi, *Annie Got Her Gun*, MADEMOISELLE, June 1992, at 66-70; Sharon Rowell, *Ladies' Handguns Raise Controversy*, TRENTONIAN, Aug. 8, 1989, at 5; Dale Russakoff, *Pistol-Packing Mama, Dressed to Kill; A Clothing Line for the Woman with a Weapon*, WASH. POST, Dec. 9, 1992, at C1; Katherine Seligman, *Women Taking Up Firearms*, S.F. EXAMINER, Jan. 16, 1994, at A1; Shari M. Sims, *Violent Reactions*, SELF, Mar. 1989, at 159-65; Mary Z. Stange, *Disarmed by Fear*, AM. RIFLEMAN, Mar. 1992, at 34-37, 92; Peter H. Stone, *Annie, Get Your Gun*, NAT'L L.J., Oct. 25, 1993, at 2563; Josh Sugarmann & Kristen Rand,

The NRA and virtually every article in the media assert that gun ownership in general and handgun ownership in particular is rapidly increasing. *Time* magazine called the change a "gender revolution"; others describe these developments as "a boom," "soaring," and a "surge."<sup>4</sup>

In support of media claims that the number of women owning guns is increasing is a frequently cited Smith & Wesson survey which found that gun ownership among women increased by 53% from 1983 to 1986.<sup>5</sup> Media claims that many more women are planning to buy guns and that this group of potential gun owners has greatly expanded is also supported by the Smith & Wesson/Gallup surveys. In particular, the Smith & Wesson/Gallup surveys found that there were 15.6 million potential female gun purchasers in 1989 and that this figure was 100% higher than in 1983.

These central claims are bolstered by supporting assertions that: (1) more NRA members are women; (2) more women are taking training courses; (3) the success of the magazine *Women and Guns* indicates greater female interest in guns; (4) retail sales to women are up; and (5) gun permits issued to women have increased.<sup>6</sup>

Pro-gun groups are, as expected, doing all that they can to further this supposed development. For example, Smith & Wesson and other manufacturers have developed guns especially designed for women and have widely advertised these products in women's magazines. The NRA targeted women in their membership drives in the 1980s, set up an Office on Women's Issues and Information in

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*Cease Fire*, ROLLING STONE, Mar. 10, 1994, at 30-42; Pat Swift, *Even the Strongest Women Can't Fight Brutal Statistics*, BUFF. NEWS, Jan. 8, 1994, at C7; *Targeting Women*, USA TODAY, May 24, 1994, at 12A; Thomas, *supra* note 1, at 12F; Pierre Thomas, *Fear Impels More Women to Buy Guns*, WASH. POST, Jan. 29, 1994, at A1; Simon Tisdall, *Dressed to Kill Designer Outfits for U.S. Women Who Pack a Pistol*, GUARDIAN (London), Dec. 12, 1992, at 15; Cynthia Tucker, *Gun Lobby Aims Its Myths at Women*, ATLANTA J. CONST., Oct. 17, 1993, at G7; David Osborne, *Annie Get Your Gun*, INDEPENDENT (London), Nov. 28, 1993, at 16; Diane White, *Gun-Toting Women*, BOSTON GLOBE, Mar. 30, 1992, at 30; *Women Buying More Handguns*, CHI. DAILY L. BULL., July 13, 1992, at 1; *Women and Firearms: Responsibilities of Choice*, AM. RIFLEMAN, Mar. 1992, at 36-37, 95; *Women and Gun Ownership*, N.Y. TIMES, Feb. 24, 1986, § B, at 9; *Women Learning to Protect Selves, Firearms Instructor Says*, L.A. TIMES, Dec. 28, 1993, at B5; *Women Want Products to Enhance Their Safety But Many Don't Know Where to Shop for Security Devices, Poll Finds*, U.S. NEWswire, June 1, 1994, available in WESTLAW, 1994 WL 3822990; *Women Who Love Guns*, OBSERVER, Jan. 2, 1994, at 14.

<sup>4</sup> *For the Ladies*, *supra* note 3, at 48; Gibbs, *supra* note 3, at 63; Leary, *supra* note 3, at A1; Leonetti, *supra* note 3, § 13CN, at 1; Rossi, *supra* note 3, at 66, 68, 70.

<sup>5</sup> Smith & Wesson commissioned Gallup to conduct annual surveys on gun ownership from 1983 to 1988 and, based on these surveys, claimed that the ownership by women increased by 53% from 1983 to 1986. See Tom W. Smith, *Armed and Dangerous Statistics: Media Coverage of Trends in Gun Ownership by Women*, PUB. PERSPECTIVE, May-June 1990, at 5-8.

<sup>6</sup> See *supra* note 3.

1990, and launched a massive public relations and recruitment campaign in October 1993 called "Refuse to Be a Victim." It urged women to take self-protection and anti-crime measures and equated owning a gun to female empowerment. Female gun ownership has been characterized as the "last frontier of feminism."<sup>7</sup>

### III. THE RELIABILITY AND ACCURACY OF FIGURES ON THE OWNERSHIP OF FIREARMS BY WOMEN ACCORDING TO PRO-GUN GROUPS AND THE MASS MEDIA

Statistics on gun ownership, gun sales, potential sales, and other matters related to women and firearms presented by pro-gun groups and widely cited in the mass media are often based on unreliable data, miscalculations, and otherwise misused figures. This Article reviews the claims as to the level of gun ownership by women and the trends in same, and then considers problems with specific statistics and claims.

#### A. HOW MANY WOMEN OWN GUNS?

Table 1 summarizes estimates from thirty-three sources, mostly newspapers and magazines, of the level of female gun ownership. Most, at least twenty-eight, cite the NRA and/or Smith & Wesson as their source. Two aspects of the estimates of the proportion of women owning guns are particularly interesting. First, there is a large range in the estimates. For example, in 1994, the estimates went from a low of 15% to a high of 34%, and in 1993, they covered an even greater span of 12% to 43%. Second, from 1986 on, even the *low* estimates have exceeded the best available estimates on female ownership levels.<sup>8</sup> Before examining the basis for the standard NRA estimate that currently 17 to 20% of women own guns, this Article looks at estimates that exceed the most reliable figure that 11 to 12% of women own guns.

##### 1. *The 25% Estimate*

Ellen Hopkins, a *Mirabella* journalist, in her headline lead asserts "one in four American women . . . have chosen to pack a pistol."<sup>9</sup> In the body of the article the claim is scaled down from handguns to guns in general, and the contradictory statement is made that "at least twenty million of these women—that's one in four adult women—

<sup>7</sup> Larson, *supra* note 3, at A1.

<sup>8</sup> See *infra* part III.A.3.

<sup>9</sup> Hopkins, *supra* note 3, at 74-77.

own a gun."<sup>10</sup> At the time the article was written, the twenty million figure would convert into 20.3% of women—one in five, not one in four—owning a gun.<sup>11</sup> Hopkins cites as her source "a Smith & Wesson-sponsored Gallup Poll."<sup>12</sup> This apparently refers to the oft-cited 1986 survey which is usually used to support claims that twelve, not twenty, million women own guns. The twenty million figure is actually the typical upper estimate cited in recent years by the NRA.

Hopkins then immediately adds, "in other words there's a decent chance that the woman across the aisle in the movie theater, the woman next door, your friend the woman doctor/lawyer/actress/journalist could be armed and at the ready."<sup>13</sup> This passage (along with the headline lead that about one in four women are packing a pistol) implies that the twenty million women are typically armed and carry their weapons with them. However, few gun owners regularly carry weapons on their person away from home.<sup>14</sup>

In an article apparently based on the Hopkins article, Maureen Harrington, a *Denver Post* reporter, makes the same contradictory assertion that "at least 20 million—one in four females—own a gun."<sup>15</sup>

This figure is also cited by Cheryl Laird, a reporter for the *Houston Chronicle*, without any source or elaboration.<sup>16</sup> Laird is unclear on whether the figure refers to guns owned by women or guns in the household.

## 2. The 34% Estimate

While we find this estimate to be incorrect, it is the most credible of all the high-side estimates, since it seems to be based on representative data and a question that, on its face, appears to measure personal gun ownership. EDK Associates, a survey research firm specializing in women, conducted 1,000 telephone interviews with men and women

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<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

<sup>11</sup> There were approximately 98,326,000 women 18 and older in the United States in 1992. UNITED STATES BUREAU OF THE CENSUS, STATISTICAL ABSTRACT OF THE UNITED STATES: 1994 (1994).

<sup>12</sup> Hopkins, *supra* note 3, at 74-77.

<sup>13</sup> *Id.*

<sup>14</sup> National surveys by Gallup, the Los Angeles Times, Yankelovich, L.H. Research, CBS/New York Times, and Roper indicate that only 8 to 12% of people *ever* carry a gun in their car or truck and about 5 to 11% *ever* carry a gun on their person. About 1.5 to 2% are "always" armed and about another 1.5 to 2% carry a weapon on their person "frequently" or "fairly often." No breakdown by gender is available for these national surveys, but a survey of southern whites found that women carried guns less often than men. See William B. Bankston et al., *The Influence of Fear of Crime, Gender, and Southern Culture on Carrying Firearms for Protection*, 31 SOC. QUARTERLY 287, 293 (1990). Data available from authors.

<sup>15</sup> Harrington, *supra* note 3, at F1

<sup>16</sup> See Laird, *supra* note 3, at 1.

in October 1993.<sup>17</sup> They asked:

Which of the following describes your views on owning a gun:

	All	Men	Women
I own one	45%	56%	34%
I am thinking about owning	13	—	—
I would never own a gun	33	23	42
Don't Know	10	—	—

Although more credible than other surveys, this survey is problematic because it blurs both attitudes and behaviors and personal and household ownership. First, it asks about "views on owning a gun," but the responses actually cover (1) current behavior ("I own one"), (2) possible future behavior ("I am thinking about owning one"), and (3) intentions ("I would never own a gun"). Second, the question confuses personal and household ownership. It is phrased in terms of the personal "I," but fails to address the common situation of guns in the household. Most declarations of ownership are probably references to a gun present in the house.<sup>18</sup>

### 3. *The 43 to 43.5% Estimate*

Branscombe and Owen cite estimates of up to forty-two million women gun owners. They ground their estimate on "combined NORC data [from 1973, '74, '76, '77]," as reported by Wright, Rossi, and Daly, "which are based on a household ownership question [finding that] . . . 44% of the females report a weapon in the home."<sup>19</sup> Branscombe and Owen apparently multiplied this percent by the number of women eighteen and older in 1990 to get the forty-two million figure.<sup>20</sup> Not only do Branscombe and Owen take a figure from 1973 to 1977 and apply it to 1990, but they use it to represent the number of women owning guns, despite the fact that Wright, Rossi, and Daly warn that their figure does not represent individual or personal weapons ownership by women.<sup>21</sup>

Another study which concludes that 43% of women own firearms

<sup>17</sup> EDK Associates, *Many More Women than Men Support Ban on Handguns, Polls Show*, NEWS RELEASE, Dec. 13, 1993.

<sup>18</sup> SEYMOUR SUDMAN & NORMAN M. BRADBURN, *ASKING QUESTIONS: A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO QUESTIONNAIRE DESIGN* (1982) (arguing differences in question wording can produce substantially different estimates of household gun ownership).

<sup>19</sup> Nyla R. Branscombe & Susan Owen, *Influence of Gun Ownership on Social Inferences about Women and Men*, 21 J. OF APPLIED SOC. PSYCH. 1567, 1568 (1991) (quoting JAMES D. WRIGHT ET AL., *UNDER THE GUN: WEAPONS, CRIME, AND VIOLENCE IN AMERICA* 109 n.6 (1983)).

<sup>20</sup> They round the 42.4 million estimate down to 42 million. When this figure is then converted to the percentage of women owning guns, one gets an estimate of 43.5%—a loss of half a percentage point from the original 44% due to rounding.

<sup>21</sup> See *supra*, note 19, at 1568.



is the Dehere Foundation Poll on Gun Violence in America. The poll was conducted by the Roper Organization in October 1993; 504 men and 503 women eighteen and older were interviewed by telephone.<sup>22</sup> Despite the claim that "men are more likely than women to own a gun, 54% vs. 43%," their data actually shows, like the General Social Surveys (GSS) data cited by Wright, Rossi, and Daly from almost two decades earlier, that 43% of women live in a household in which *someone* owns a gun ("Do you or does anyone in your household own any of the following types of weapons [shotgun, rifle or other 'long gun' / pistol or handgun]?").<sup>23</sup> This study does not determine who owns the guns and thus does not measure personal ownership by gender.

#### 4. Future Estimates

Finally, Colleen O'Connor, a reporter for the *Dallas Morning News*, asserts that "a new handgun is produced every twenty seconds. And if crime continues to rise, by the end of the century nearly seven of every ten American women will own one of these guns."<sup>24</sup> This forecast is not only predicting about a ten-fold increase in handgun ownership by women, but it would also mean that during each of the next seven years more women would buy handguns than currently own these weapons and that the annual level of purchases would be about four times greater than the total number of handguns produced and imported per annum, which has been typically 1.5 to 2.5 million in recent years. No source or basis for this projection is given.

#### B. HOW HAS GUN OWNERSHIP CHANGED AMONG WOMEN?

Estimates of changes in gun ownership among women rest primarily on the ownership estimates of the NRA and Smith & Wesson cited above. Of the thirty-three articles citing ownership levels, fourteen also include figures on trends in ownership, as do an additional eight articles which do not present statistics on absolute levels. Of the twenty-two articles discussing ownership trends, nineteen report large increases and three report no change. The standard claim cites the Smith & Wesson figure of a 53% increase from 1983 and 1986 and then adds more recent estimates from the NRA indicating large additional gains. Two typical examples are Laird's *Houston Chronicle* re-

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<sup>22</sup> It appears that the actual polling was done by the Opinion Research Corporation rather than by the Roper Organization.

<sup>23</sup> This estimate is close to a 1988 to 1993 figure from the National Opinion Research Center's General Social Surveys that 53.5% of men and 39.0% of women live in households with guns.

<sup>24</sup> O'Connor, *supra* note 3, at 1F.

port<sup>25</sup> that women owned eight million guns in 1983, twelve million in 1986, and seventeen million in 1994 and Kevin Leary's account in the *San Francisco Chronicle*<sup>26</sup> that women owned 6 million guns in 1983, 12.1 million in 1986, and at least 17 million in 1992.

To assess the accuracy and reliability of the figures of ownership, potential buyers, and related matters, we consider how statistics on these issues are generated and used by pro-gun groups and the mass media.

First, on what does the NRA base its estimates? Elizabeth Swasey, director of the Office of Women's Issues and Information at the NRA and main NRA spokesperson on this issue, cites (1) the Smith & Wesson/Gallup polls, (2) industry sources, (3) information from the NRA's 33,000 certified instructors, and (4) magazine surveys such as a 1992 readership survey by *Self* magazine which indicated that 16% of gun owners purchased a gun to protect themselves.<sup>27</sup>

How these various bits of information are put together to yield estimates on how many women own guns is not explained. Of the sources cited, only the Gallup polls are possibly a credible and scientifically reliable source; yet Smith & Wesson has never presented any detailed analysis of their Gallup polls, has refused to allow scholars to examine the data, and has been corrected by Gallup for misusing data on potential gun purchases from these same surveys.<sup>28</sup>

Second, even when working with the Smith & Wesson data, the NRA has problems. Swasey asserts, "From 1983 to 1986 there was a 53% increase in the number of women who owned guns: It jumped from six million to just over twelve million."<sup>29</sup> However, the claims of a 53% increase and an increase from six to over twelve million are inconsistent.

Robert Hunnicutt, a NRA employee writing in the NRA publication *American Rifleman*, claimed that an "estimated 12 million women bought sidearms during 1986"—a number that exceeded the *total* number of handguns manufactured or imported in 1986 by a factor of eight.<sup>30</sup> He apparently transformed the Smith & Wesson estimate that twelve million women *owned* guns in 1986 into a claim that twelve million women *bought* handguns in 1986. In 1986 approximately 1.5 mil-

<sup>25</sup> See Laird, *supra* note 3, at 1.

<sup>26</sup> See Leary, *supra* note 3, at A1.

<sup>27</sup> See Hirsh, *supra* note 3, at 1; Horowitz, *supra* note 3, at 166; Miller, *Guns & Women*, *supra* note 3, at 1; Miller, *Why Women Should Buy Guns*, *supra* note 3, at A11.

<sup>28</sup> Smith, *supra* note 5, at 5-7; Joseph F. Sheley et al., *Women and Handguns: Evidence from National Surveys, 1973-1991*, 23 Soc. Sci. Res. 219 (1994).

<sup>29</sup> Fishman, *supra* note 3, at 142.

<sup>30</sup> Hunnicutt, *supra* note 3, at 40-43.

lion handguns were manufactured or imported.<sup>31</sup>

Third, projections of current gun ownership by women are even more problematic than published estimates. The Smith & Wesson claim, based on its Gallup surveys that "15.6 million women are potential buyers in 1989," was refuted by Gallup itself. To correct the misuse of their findings, Gallup announced: "The 15.6 [million] figure corresponds to survey findings that women say there is at least some chance they will ever buy a gun. In truth, only 900,000 women could be considered potential purchasers and even this would be in terms of the next three years."<sup>32</sup> And as time has gone, by the exact exaggeration has changed, but it remains inconsistent with Gallup's understanding of the data it collected. In 1992, a Smith & Wesson spokesman indicated that the Gallup survey had estimated that women would purchase twenty million guns from 1988 to 1991.<sup>33</sup>

Fourth, as evidence of the expanding interest of women in firearms, the NRA claims large gains in women members. But the NRA has no consistent or reliable figure on how many of its members are women (Table 2). In 1994, various NRA estimates of women members ranged from 5% to 16.7%. Yet, at another point, the NRA said that it did not know how many of its members were women.<sup>34</sup> The NRA also admitted that it does not even collect information on the gender of members and uses first names to estimate gender, a procedure that is complicated by the fact that one-third of its members use only their initials.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, the existence and growth of the magazine *Women and Guns* is frequently cited to bolster the assertion that gun ownership among women is widespread and growing. Since its start in 1989 as a simple newsletter, *Women and Guns* has grown into a glossy, high-production value magazine. However, as of 1993, it had a circulation of only 18,000. This is about two-hundredths of a percent of all adult women or less than two-tenths of a percent of all adult, female gun owners. Thus the apparent success of *Women and Guns* provides little support for the idea of a huge or expanding mass market for women.

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<sup>31</sup> BUREAU OF ALCOHOL, TOBACCO, AND FIREARMS, *Firearms Under 18 U.S.C. Chapter 44*, OFFICE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS (1994).

<sup>32</sup> Smith, *supra* note 5, at 5-7.

<sup>33</sup> John Maines, *Can Females be Friends with Firearms?*, AM. DEMOGRAPHICS, June 1992, at 22, 24. In 1994, Smith & Wesson's current marketing manager admitted that the original projection "was an error. I wasn't here when they released the survey results. It's quite surprising a survey more than four years old keeps resurfacing." Horowitz, *supra* note 3, at 166. However, Smith & Wesson has been repeating the claim (in modified form) at least well into 1992 and the media is still repeating the figures to the present.

<sup>34</sup> Ippolito, *supra* note 3.

<sup>35</sup> Horowitz, *supra* note 3, at 166.

In brief, the standard claims of pro-gun groups and the mass media rest on questionable data and even manage to misinterpret and exaggerate what relatively hard data they have.

#### IV. THE OWNERSHIP OF FIREARMS BY WOMEN ACCORDING TO THE GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEYS (GSS)

The best available data on the ownership of firearms by gender are the GSS conducted by the National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago.<sup>36</sup> Table 3 presents figures on the ownership of firearms in general and of handguns in particular for men and women from 1980 to 1994. First, for both men and women and for both handguns and all guns, there has been no statistically significant trend in the ownership of firearms. Neither women nor men are more likely to own either a gun or handgun now than they were in 1980. The notion that women are rapidly purchasing guns and notably increasing their ownership of firearms receives no support from these data. And the gender gap in weapons has not changed. From 1980 to 1994 male ownership of firearms exceeded female ownership by a constant 31.1 percentage points, better than four-to-one, and male ownership of handguns surpassed ownership by women by 19.7 percentage points, or almost four-to-one (Table 3).

Second, the level of gun ownership is substantially below that cited by the NRA and the mass media. As detailed above, the typical claims are that 17 to 20% of women own guns, and these soar to as high as 43.5%. However, the GSS indicates that from 1980 to 1994 about 11.6% of women owned a gun and 7.4% of women had a handgun.

Third, contrary to the heavy media emphasis on handguns, many of the weapons owned by women are long guns. From 1988 to 1993 (Table 4), 88.7% of women did not personally own a gun and only 11.3% had a weapon in their households (3.2% owned only handguns, 3.1% owned only long guns, 4.7% owned both types, and 0.3% some other or unknown type). This means that from 3.2% to 7.9% of women personally owned a handgun. If we assume that women living without another adult personally owned the handgun(s) reported, then the female ownership range would be from 4.5% to 7.9%. Looking at only women who owned a gun, we see that in their households, 27.9% owned only a handgun, 27.5% only a long gun, 41.9% both,

<sup>36</sup> The GSS are full-probability samples of adults living in households in the United States. Interviewing is done in person and the response rate averages about 77 to 78%. For full details see JAMES A. DAVIS & TOM W. SMITH, *GENERAL SOCIAL SURVEYS, 1972-1993: CUMULATIVE CODEBOOK* (1993).

and 2.6% some other type.

Fourth, the media profile of women gun owners emphasizes unmarried women living in crime-ridden cities who are either the past victims of crimes or are fearful of becoming future victims. While some female gun owners fall in one or more of these categories, on balance, women who own guns differ markedly from these stereotypes. According to the GSS (Table 5):

1. Women gun owners are more likely to be married than unmarried. And among the unmarried, widows are much more likely to own a gun than divorced, separated, or women who never married.<sup>37</sup> Presumably, many widows inherited the weapons from their deceased husbands. Women gun owners tend to be older rather than younger.

2. Women gun owners are more likely to live outside the one hundred largest metropolitan areas and least likely to live in the twelve largest central cities. Ownership is highest in rural regions, the South and West, and lowest in the most urbanized area, the Northeast.

3. Women gun owners are not more likely to have been crime victims either in terms of being hit or shot at as an adult or having been robbed or burglarized in the last year. Also, those afraid of their neighborhood are marginally less likely to own a gun than those living in safer areas. However, those living in a fearful neighborhood are slightly more likely to have a handgun in the household than those in less fearful places (8.2% to 7.6%).

4. Instead of past victimization or fear of crime being associated with being armed, gun ownership varies by whether people hunt. In households in which neither the wife nor the husband hunts, 9.3% of women own a gun. When one or both hunt, 21.3% of women own a gun.

## V. CONCLUSION

Through the circulation of statistics of dubious reliability and accuracy, pro-gun groups have successfully created the impressions that gun ownership by women has increased appreciably and has reached unprecedented levels. Most of the media have accepted the claims of increasing ownership<sup>38</sup> and have sometimes even mangled and exag-

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<sup>37</sup> Fifty-eight percent of women eighteen and older are married, 65% of female gun owners eighteen and older are married. Among women identified by marital status in articles on women owning guns, only 34% are married.

<sup>38</sup> A small minority of articles question the conclusion that the ownership of firearms among women is increasing. See, e.g., Fishman, *supra* note 3, at 142; Harayda, *supra* note 3, at 3E; Horowitz, *supra* note 3, at 166. They challenge the Smith & Wesson statistics and

gerated these claims.

The facts of gun ownership by women are dramatically different from that described by pro-gun groups and the media.<sup>39</sup> According to the best available data, the ownership of firearms among women is not increasing, the gender gap is not closing, and the level of ownership is much lower than commonly stated, with about 11 to 12% of women owning a gun and 4.5 to 8% owning a handgun. Nor is the typical female gun owner an unmarried woman living in a large city or a past or fearful victim of violent crime. Gun ownership is higher among married women living outside large cities, and it is associated more with hunting than with either fear of crime or past victimization.

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both Fishman and Horowitz cite GSS data finding no gains in ownership among women. A few additional articles describe the issue of gains as unsettled and present some evidence on both sides. See, e.g., Henneberger, *supra* note 3, at 4 (citing GSS data); Hirsh, *supra* note 3, at 1; O'Neill, *supra* note 3, § 5, at 1, 3.

<sup>39</sup> The few scholarly articles dealing with this issue find no evidence of increased firearms ownership among women. See Smith, *supra* note 5, at 5-7; Sheley et al., *supra* note 28. These articles and Mary E. Becker, *The Politics of Women's Wrongs and the Bill of 'Rights': A Bicentennial Perspective*, 59 U. CHI. L. REV. 453, 502 (1992), also report levels of ownership substantially lower than those used by the pro-gun groups and cited in the mass media.

Other scholars have accepted the pro-gun group's figures on increases or ownership levels. See Branscombe & Owen, *supra* note 19, at 9; James B. Jacobs, *The Regulation of Personal Chemical Weapons: Some Anomalies in American Weapons Law*, 15 U. DAYTON L. REV. 141, 155 (1989). In addition, Young found an increase in firearms ownership among non-hunting women from 15.4% in 1980 and 20.4% in 1982. See Robert L. Young, *Gender, Region of Socialization, and Ownership of Protective Firearms*, 5 RURAL SOC. 169, 179 (1986). On the other hand, our own analysis of the same data set (the GSS), shows that ownership is actually well below these reported levels. However, as Table 1 shows, 1980 is below the 1980 to 1994 average, and 1982 is the highest point in the series. Significant trends might exist between those two points.

**Table 1****PUBLISHED ESTIMATES OF THE PROPORTION OF WOMEN OWNING GUNS**

Year	Range of Estimates
1983	6.7- 8.9%
1986	12.9-16.8
1988	12.6-22.4
1990	43.5
1992	12.2-25
1993	12.1-43
1994	14.9-34

**Sources:**

- 1983: Laird, 1994; Hassell, 94; Leary, 1992  
 1986: Seligman, 1994; Laird, 1994; Leary, 1992; "Women Buying,"  
 1992: Miller, 1994; Lehrman, 1992; Holleman, 1993; Gibbs, 1988; "For Ladies," 1989;  
 Quigley, 1989  
 1988: DePaulo, 1992; Pulitzer, 1992  
 1990: Branscombe and Owen, 1991  
 1992: Tisdall, 1992; Leary, 1992; Goerne, 1992; Russakoff, 1992; "Women Buying," 1992;  
 Rossi, 1992; "Women and Firearms," 1992; Hopkins, 1993; "Dehere," 1993; "On Eve,"  
 1993; Pulitzer, 1992  
 1993: Usborne, 1993; Muir, 1993; Leonetti, 1993; Hirsh, 1993; Holleman, 1993; EDK, 1993;  
 Harrington, 1993; Goodman, 1993  
 1994: Seligman, 1994; Laird, 1994; Hillbery, 1994; Hassell, 1994; Miller, 1994; Sugermann  
 and Rand, 1994; Jones, 1994; Davison, 1994; Swift, 1994

**Table 2****% OF NATIONAL RIFLE ASSOCIATION MEMBERS WHO ARE WOMEN**

Date	Estimate	Source
1991	13.5	NRA (Thomas, 1994b)
1993	5-7	Director of NRA's Women's Issues and Information Office (Hirsh, 1993)
	9-12.5	Chair of NRA's women's policies committee (Baron, 1993)
	Don't Know	NRA (Ippolito, 1993)
1994	5	Director of NRA's Women's Issues and Information Office (Miller, 1994)
	5-7	Director of NRA's Women's Issues and Information Office (Horowitz, 1994)
	15	NRA Executive Vice-President (Hillbery, 1994)
	16.7	NRA (Thomas, 1994)

**Table 3**  
OWNERSHIP OF FIREARMS AND HANDGUNS BY GENDER

A. % Owning Firearms by Gender			
Year	Men		Women
1980	52.0 (636)		10.5 (778)
1982	48.1 (645)		14.5 (793)
1984	45.6 (616)		10.9 (834)
1985	52.2 (712)		11.9 (806)
1987	48.0 (646)		12.6 (799)
1988	44.5 (409)		11.3 (551)
1989	49.4 (464)		9.3 (562)
1990	52.2 (404)		9.5 (497)
1991	48.2 (446)		10.2 (528)
1993	48.5 (480)		13.8 (573)
1994	47.0 (925)		12.7 (1061)
Pooled Average	48.7		11.6
	Constant Fit	Model	
	Chi-Sq.	Prop.	
Men	11.3	GT .25	C
Women	13.7	GT .10	C

  

B. % Owning a Handgun <sup>a</sup> by Gender			
Year	Men		Women
1980	.270 (644)		.066 (793)
1982	.234 (653)		.081 (810)
1984	.238 (617)		.063 (835)
1985	.281 (715)		.068 (808)
1987	.294 (649)		.084 (801)
1988	.244 (409)		.089 (553)
1989	.315 (465)		.059 (565)
1990	.293 (404)		.074 (497)
1991	.249 (446)		.059 (530)
1993	.270 (479)		.107 (575)
1994	.301 (923)		.083 (1061)
Pooled Average	.271		.074
	Constant Fit	Model	
	Chi-Sq.	Prop.	
Men	16.9	GT .05	C
Women	12.2	GT .25	C

Source: GSS, 1980-1994

C=Constant (for statistical methods see Taylor, 1980)

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

<sup>a</sup> These are maximum estimates of handgun ownership. The follow-up questions do not identify which guns are personally owned by the respondent. If both a long gun and a handgun are present in the household, we know that one or more of the guns personally belongs to the respondent, but can not tell which type of gun is owned. For 1988-1993 at least 3.2% of women personally owned a gun (i.e. they said they owned a gun and only handguns were present) and a maximum of 7.9% owned a handgun (i.e. they said they owned a gun and both handguns and long guns were present). That is, in our procedure if a woman personally owns a gun and a handgun is present, we assume that she owned a handgun (See Table 2).



**Table 4**  
FIREARM OWNERSHIP BY TYPE OF WEAPON BY GENDER

	Men	Women
Only Handgun	5.7%	3.2%
Only Long Gun	20.3	3.1
Both Types	21.8	4.7
Other Type <sup>a</sup>	1.0	0.3
No Gun	51.2	88.7
	(2208)	(2725)

Source: GSS 1988-1993

<sup>a</sup> These are mostly guns that were not coded as pistol, rifle, or shotgun. Most are pellet guns or antique weapons (e.g. muzzleloaders and flintlocks). This also includes a few cases where the type of gun was refused or unknown by respondent.

**Table 5**  
**PROFILE OF FIREARM OWNERSHIP AMONG WOMEN**

	Only Handgun	Only Long Gun	Both Types	Unknown Type	No Gun	
<b>Marital Status:</b>						
Married	2.1%	3.9	7.0	0.4	86.7	(1558)
Not Married	4.6%	2.1	1.8	0.2	91.2	(1167)
Widowed	9.0%	5.6	2.7	0.7	82.0	(310)
Divorced	6.3%	2.0	3.3	0.2	88.2	(291)
Separated	5.3%	0.0	0.0	0.0	94.7	(69)
Never Married	0.9%	0.3	0.5	0.0	98.3	(497)
Prob.=.000						
<b>Age:</b>						
18-29	1.1%	1.5	2.6	0.0	94.8	(624)
30-44	2.9%	2.8	5.0	0.2	89.1	(860)
45+	4.4%	5.6	4.1	0.6	85.3	(1234)
Prob.=.000						
<b>Residence:</b>						
12 Largest Central Cities	2.5%	1.2	0.7	0.3	95.2	(209)
13-100 Largest Central Cities	6.0%	1.7	2.0	0.3	89.8	(308)
Suburbs of 12 Largest	2.9%	0.6	1.5	0.4	94.6	(273)
Suburbs of 13-100 Largest	3.0%	1.5	3.7	0.2	91.5	(415)
Other Urban	2.8%	4.7	7.1	0.3	85.0	(915)
Other Rural	2.9%	5.8	4.6	0.2	86.5	(321)
Prob.=.000						
<b>Region:</b>						
New England	2.4	1.5	0.8	0.8	94.5	(132)
Mid-Atlantic	0.4	2.2	1.4	0.7	95.3	(380)
East No. Cent.	2.0	2.5	2.5	0.0	93.0	(458)
West No. Cent.	2.2	3.3	4.1	0.3	90.2	(193)
South Atlantic	4.9	4.7	4.6	0.6	85.1	(413)
East So. Cent.	8.8	4.4	4.4	0.0	77.3	(179)
West So. Cent.	4.4	3.3	3.3	0.0	81.4	(191)
Mountain	4.7	2.4	2.4	0.0	89.3	(147)
West	2.9	3.4	3.4	0.2	88.0	(348)
Prob.=.000						
<b>Robbed and/or Burglarized in Last Year</b>						
Neither	3.1	3.1	4.7	0.3	88.8	(2529)
One	5.3	2.8	5.9	0.6	85.5	(171)
Both	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0	(15)
Prob.=.681						
<b>Threatened or Shot at with Gun and/or Beaten or Punched as an Adult</b>						
No	3.8	3.1	4.3	0.2	88.6	(1029)
One	3.4	4.3	2.7	0.0	89.6	(173)
Both	6.5	1.4	5.1	0.0	87.0	(73)
Prob.=.825						
<b>Afraid to Walk Alone at Night:</b>						
Yes	4.1	2.7	4.1	0.2	88.9	(1484)
No	2.1	3.7	5.5	0.3	88.4	(1219)
Prob.=.011						
<b>Hunting:</b>						
Hunts	0.8	6.2	8.5	0.0	84.6	(69)
Spouse Hunts	0.0	5.7	13.4	0.0	81.0	(316)
Both Hunt	0.0	12.1	25.6	0.0	62.3	(70)
Neither Hunts	3.8	2.4	2.8	0.4	90.7	(2267)
Prob.=.000						

Source: GSS, 1988-1993