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## Gun Ownership Trends In The United States, 1973-2000

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**GUN OWNERSHIP TRENDS IN THE UNITED STATES, 1973-2000**

by

JASON MICHAEL RUCKERT  
B.A University of Central Florida, 2001

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of Sociology  
in the college of Arts and Sciences  
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## **ABSTRACT**

In the last half century, gun ownership has been one of the most hotly debated topics in the United States. The right to bear arms was written into the U. S. Constitution and into the hearts and minds of its citizens. During the last half century, however, numerous gun control laws have been enacted at Federal, state and local levels, and it can be argued (plausibly or not) that part of the "legislative intent" has been to decrease the number of gun owning households in the United States. For many decades, this number hovered at one half of all households (Wright, 1995). The possible success of these gun control efforts is suggested by an apparent and rather sharp decline in the ownership percentage beginning in the 1990s. In 2000, the household gun ownership rate had decreased to 32.5% (according to the General Social Survey). The question raised in this thesis is how to account for declining gun ownership. More specifically, I ask if there has in fact been a decline in ownership, or whether the apparent decline is an illusion resulting from changing demographics. A third possibility, that social norms have changed such that admitting gun ownership in surveys is now more problematic for

many people, is also considered and seems, indeed, to be the most telling line of explanation.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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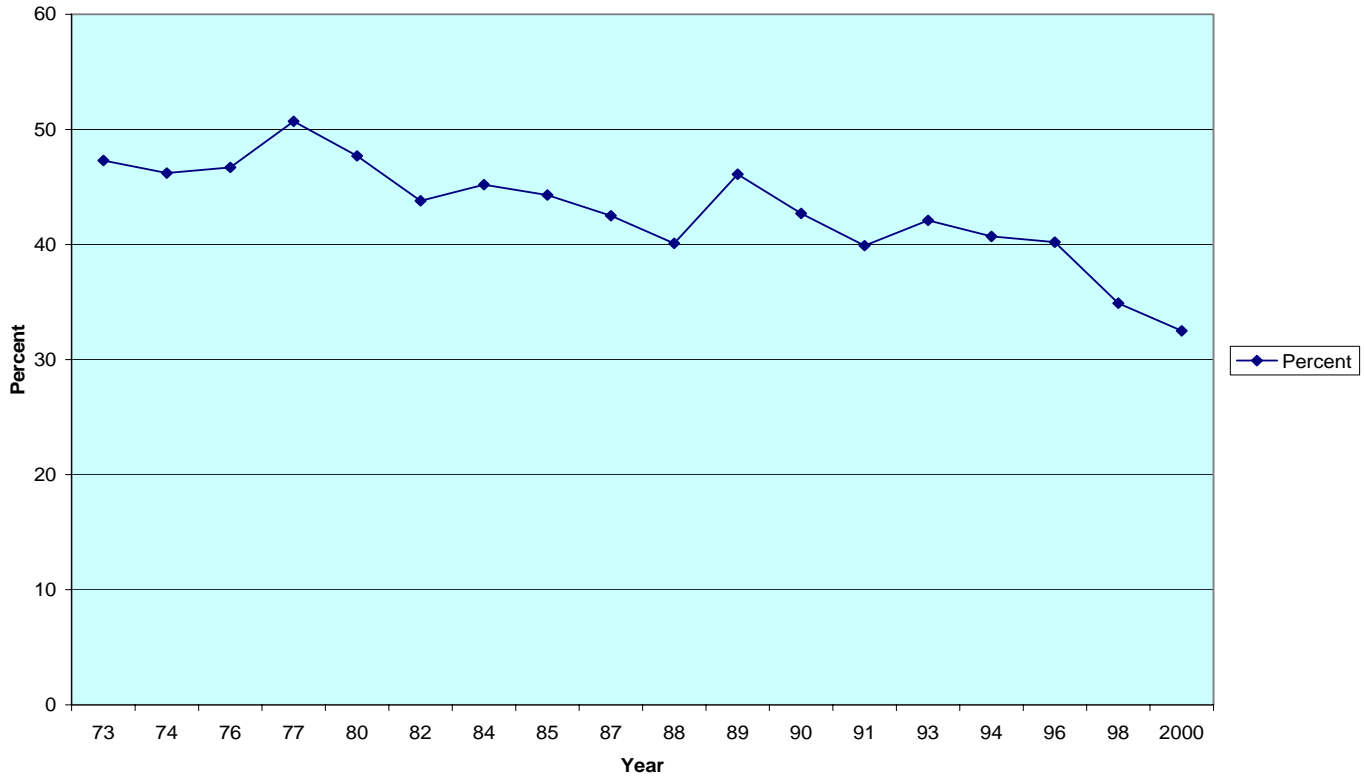
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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In the General Social Survey from which these data are taken, reported household gun ownership has declined from a high of 50.7% in 1977 to a low of 32.5% in 2000, a drop of 18.2 percentage points. Figure One and Table One, below, provide the central "problematic" with which this thesis is concerned: the apparent decline in the percentage of survey respondents who say there is a gun in their household. This thesis explores three potential lines of explanation for this trend:

- The trend reflects an actual decrease in the number of households owning guns, perhaps as a reaction to recent anti-gun legislation and activism.
- The trend reflects the changing demographic composition of the American population.
- The trend reflects the increasing social disapproval of gun ownership and a consequent increase in the hesitancy of survey respondents to admit gun ownership in national surveys.

**Do you have a gun in your home?**



**Figure 1:** Trend in Household Gun Ownership: 1973-2000

GSS Question: Have Gun In Home

Source: General Social Survey

**Table 1**

Percentage of respondents who say they have a gun in their home from GSS data

Year	Percentage	Number with guns in survey
1973	47.3	1495
1974	46.2	1479
1976	46.7	1493
1977	50.7	1521
1980	47.7	1457
1982	43.8	1851
1984	45.2	1466
1985	44.3	1530
1987	42.5	1812
1988	40.1	970
1989	46.1	1030
1990	42.7	907
1991	39.9	986
1993	42.1	1073
1994	40.7	1989
1996	40.2	1921
1998	34.9	1875
2000	32.5	1857

Source: General Social Survey

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

According to the best available national survey data, the rate of gun ownership among U.S. households has declined from about half to about a third over the past three decades. It is generally agreed by contestants on both sides of the gun debate that there are around 200 million guns in circulation in the United States, which is almost one gun for every man, woman, and child in the country (Wright, 1995). The first gun ownership question was asked by Gallup in a 1959 poll and, until the 1990s, the percentage of households reporting gun ownership hovered around 50%. In the 1990's, the percentages started to drop. This decline is evident in every available statistical series, not just the GSS. The 1959 Gallup poll mentioned above found that 49 percent of households stated that they owned a gun; in a 2000 Gallup poll, this number had dropped to 39 percent (Gallup.com, 2000). The General Social Survey has shown some fluctuations in the levels of gun ownership, usually ranging from 40 to 50% during the 30 years that gun ownership questions have been included on the survey, but it dropped to the low 30's the last two survey years.

Likewise, in 1996, Cook and Ludwig reported a gun ownership rate close to 35%, consistent with what other surveys of the 1990s were starting to show (Cook & Ludwig, 1996). In like fashion, the ownership percentage in the 1994 and 1996 General Social Surveys as shown in Table One, was around 41%(Vail, 1999). Vail states that "after reviewing all of the credible research and the literature in this area, therefore, it seems reasonable that the most current estimate of the percentage of households owning guns is roughly between 38 and 42%" (Vail, 1999), substantially lower than the rule of thumb 50% ownership figure that had prevailed for decades.

The decrease in gun ownership has been credited by some to anti-gun laws such as the Brady Bill which was enacted in the last decade but this decrease could also be caused by demographic factors, or by changing social norms about the propriety of gun ownership.

The argument that the decline is real and reflects the passage of various anti-gun measures in the last decade proceeds roughly as follows: Until the 1990's, the National Rifle Association was very powerful and well organized to prevent passage of most anti-gun legislation. The first chink in the NRA armor opened in 1994 with the passage of

the Brady Bill, which established a national five-day waiting period for handgun purchases, legislation that was bitterly opposed by the NRA. Brady and many of the post-Brady measures are intended to make the general ownership of guns more difficult. Perhaps the downward trend in ownership is the evidence that these laws have been successful, one question that drives this thesis.

Alternatively, the downturn in household gun ownership might be explained by more ordinary demographic factors. Social patterns in gun ownership were first explored by Wright and Marston in 1975. There is, for example, a sharp city size gradient in gun ownership, which is highest in the small town and rural areas and falls off sharply as city size increases. Increasing urbanization and suburbanization would presumably result in fewer households owning guns, all else equal, since these trends imply fewer households living in community contexts where gun ownership is traditionally widespread.

Similar arguments can be made for several other demographic factors that have shown dramatic changes in the past few decades, among them shifting patterns of regionalism, rising levels of education, the loss of prime hunting grounds and a declining population of hunters, and,

potentially most consequential of all, an increase in the percentage of households headed by women. This study documents each of these trends through a variety of data sources and explores their empirical contributions to the decline in household gun ownership.

Vail (1999) argues in behalf of the "demographic transformation" hypothesis: "There is, in fact, at least some evidence to suggest that the percentage of households owning guns has declined, from close to 50% to closer to 40%. This declining rate can be interpreted as either primarily a function of misleading and deceptive responses or, more likely, as a real trend. The decrease in households reporting gun ownership could also be the result of changes within several demographic factors. These included increasing urbanization, an increase in female headed households, and a decrease in hunting activity- all of which could clearly affect the percentage of households owning guns. To illustrate, as males own guns at a higher rate than females, an increase in female-headed households would negatively affect the percentage of households which claim gun ownership in surveys" (Vail, 1999).

What we know about gun ownership in America is largely what has been learned through direct surveys that ask



people whether they (or their households) own guns or not. So we need to begin by assessing some of the methodological problems in estimating gun ownership through surveys. Obviously, how people respond to surveys is influenced by social norms and expectations, no less than any other behavior or interaction. It is certainly possible that what anti-gun legislation of the past decade accomplished was not so much to persuade people to get rid of their guns but to persuade them that gun ownership was no longer socially acceptable in polite company and thus to compel them for reasons of "presentation of self" to conceal their gun ownership from survey researchers. This is the third possibility to be explored in this thesis.

Another well-known problem in getting correct estimates of gun ownership rates is that men report much higher rates of household gun ownership than women, although, all else equal, reported rates of households with gun ownership should be the same for both genders of married couples in the same household. Cook and Ludwig found that gun ownership reports are dependent on who they ask: the gun owner or someone else in the house. They state, "the individual who actually owns the gun appears more willing (or able) than other adults in the household

to report that the household includes a gun" (Cook and Ludwig, 1996). Another study done by Ludwig and Cook show that husbands were 4 or 5 times as likely to own a gun compared with their wives. Husbands were also more likely than their wives to report owning a gun (Ludwig & Cook, 1998). The difference is quite substantial: "For households headed by a married couple, 49 percent of the husbands report a gun in the home, compared with just 36 percent of the wives" (Cook and Ludwig 1996). Tom Smith states "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"(Smith, Smith, 1995). The General Social Survey indicates that, in the same fourteen-year period, about 11.6 percent of women owned a gun, and 7.4 percent of women had a handgun (Smith, Smith, 1995). Since most gun owners are men, when men report on household ownership, they are reporting on their own guns, whereas women are reporting on guns owned by men in the household. As ownership of guns becomes more controversial, perhaps "reporting" on guns owned by others comes dangerously close to "informing" on those others, which many women would be understandably

hesitant to do. Granted, this failure to report, or "underreporting" of gun ownership, can happen for several reasons. Many survey respondents may be reluctant to admit ownership of a gun because they feel they can be identified as gun owners through their participation in the survey, especially in face-to-face interviews such as the General Social Survey (Kleck, 1997). People in general do not want to be associated with things that are seen as socially undesirable and might not report owning a gun so the interviewer would not look down on them. Also, some respondents may not understand the question and thus miscommunicate their answer. For example, they might think the question asks about their personal ownership of a gun vs. ownership by any member of the household. Too, some women may have forgotten that their husbands owned a gun, especially if the gun has not been used in a long time or if it is stored in the garage or somewhere else out of sight (and thus out of mind). So it is not logically necessary that the gender difference in reported rates of household ownership results from greater perceived social undesirability of guns among women. This is just one possible explanation to which I return later.

### Urbanization and Sub-Urbanization

Much has changed in American society from 1977 to the present day that might be related to the declining rate of gun ownership. One demographic factor that may be responsible for declining gun ownership is the urbanization and sub-urbanization of the United States. Wright and Marston showed as early as 1975 that household gun ownership was highest in the small town and rural areas of the country and declined significantly as city size increased (Wright & Marston, 1975). In 1972, 16.1% of respondents in the general social survey reported living in a suburb of a large city, but by the 2000 this number had reached 21.1% (see table 2).

**Table 2**

Respondents who live in a suburb of a large city

Year	Percentage	Number
1972	16.1	1613
1973	17.2	1504
1974	17.0	1484
1975	17.5	1490
1976	17.1	1499
1977	14.7	1530
1978	16.4	1532
1980	15.0	1468
1982	12.6	1860
1983	19.9	1599
1984	21.1	1473
1985	23.4	1534
1986	24.3	1470
1987	19.3	1819
1988	24.3	1481
1989	21.5	1537
1990	21.1	1372
1991	20.9	1527
1993	22.8	1606
1994	21.4	2992
1996	20.0	2904
1998	21.1	2832
2000	21.1	2817

Source: General Social Survey

Data from the 2000 General Social Survey show that close to one in three persons surveyed has a gun in their household. In this same survey around one in every four people surveyed owns a gun; one in twenty owns a handgun, and around one in five has actually bought a handgun (Carter, 2002). This same data details that two out of

three respondents who report they have a gun in their household live in rural areas, but these data can be misleading, because rural areas are defined differently by different researchers. (Carter, 2002).

The Parks and Recreation department states: " Only 14 states were more than 50 percent urban in 1910; in 1960 there were 40. By the year 2000 approximately 73 percent of the country's inhabitants, or 250 million people, will live in metropolitan areas" (Parks and Recreation, 2002).

Demographic patterns of gun ownership indicate that a disproportionate number of gun owners will reside in rural areas and small towns (Cook & Moore, 1999). Since the United States is becoming more urban and suburban it is easy to see how this demographic variable might affect the gun ownership rate.

Suburbanization happens when cities expand to nearby towns adjacent to them, and transform the landscape and norms of small towns into that of cities. Suburbanization is occurring all over the United States, and this is shown by Wright stating: "Between 1970 and 1990, the total US population increased from 203 million to 249 million, an increase of 23%. In that same period, the number of persons living in the ten largest US cities actually declined

slightly, from 22,026,938 to 21,905,103, As a percentage of the total population, those living in the ten largest cities dropped from 11% to 9%" (Wright, 2000). Sub-urbanization shows no signs of stopping in the near future, and this will change the landscape of the United States, Dietrich states: "The once sleepy town of Phoenix has grown to the size of Delaware, consuming land at the rate of 1.2 acres per hour. Greater Los Angeles has sprawled to the size of Connecticut. Land in suburban Chicago is developing 11 times faster than the region's population is growing" (Dietrich, 1999). America loses 45.7 acres of good farmland to suburban and urban growth every sixty minutes, but this is highly disputable according to other researchers. (Dietrich, 1999). With the United States becoming more suburbanized and small towns all over being changed drastically it is conceivable that this trend alone could negatively affect gun ownership rates.

**Table 3**

Percentage of respondents who live in open country according to GSS data

Year	Percentage	Number
1972	6.5	1613
1973	4.9	1504
1974	5.1	1484
1975	7.1	1490
1976	6.6	1499
1977	6.6	1530
1978	7.3	1532
1980	7.0	1468
1982	8.9	1860
1983	4.8	1599
1984	3.6	1473
1985	5.4	1534
1986	4.2	1470
1987	3.7	1819
1988	3.7	1481
1989	3.3	1537
1990	2.1	1372
1991	1.6	1517
1993	1.7	1606
1994	2.1	2992
1996	1.2	2904
1998	1.3	2832
2000	1.3	2817

GSS Question: Expanded NORC size code

Source General Social Survey

#### Decreasing Hunting Grounds

Since 1977 the percentage of hunters has sizably dropped from 29.2% to 17.2% in the year 2000(see table 4).

In the United States, hunting has been historically a characteristic of masculine identity. Many males who hunt



define their manhood by way of hunting prowess, sportsmanship, and their hunting reputation. In many subcultures, one of the coming of age indicators for young males was the killing of their first deer or other prey, and this has been passed down for centuries. Hunters in general are finding it harder to hunt due to the lack of decent hunting grounds available to them. Urbanization and suburbanization taking place in the last century have put high demand for development of the once plentiful hunting lands. Public recreation areas are facing persistent threats from infringement by other public uses such as freeways, hospitals, armories, schools, museums, memorials, and business enterprises (Parks and Recreation, 2002). A survey conducted by the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF) in 1999 found that 63 percent of hunters believed that access to hunting and crowded hunting grounds are more difficult problems to overcome compared with five years ago (Bourne, 2001). A United States Fish and Wildlife survey shows that the total count of hunters has decreased by 7 percent in the past five years (Jonsson, 2003). GSS data shows the same downward trend (see table 4). In the last couple of decades the number of hunters has been decreasing due to what has been described as a decrease in available

hunting areas. However this decrease would only affect the respondents who own firearms for recreational uses, not for protection.

**Table 4**

Percentage of respondents or their spouses who hunt according to GSS data

Year	Percentage	Number
1977	29.2	1521
1980	26.4	1465
1982	22.8	1850
1984	25.2	1467
1985	24.4	1531
1987	21.4	1814
1988	20.4	976
1989	21.3	1030
1990	22.2	913
1991	20.9	987
1993	19.6	1074
1994	20.2	1992
1996	21.1	1921
1998	18.0	1877
2000	17.2	1856

GSS Question: Does respondent or spouse hunt

Source: General Social Survey

The 2000 General Social survey discovered a decrease of households with at least one hunter in the household, from 29.2 percent in 1977, to 18.0% percent in 1998 (Carter, 2002). In today's society many hunters will stop

hunting because they will not pay to hunt on private lands. Once satellites began taking images of earth from space it became evident how much actual forestland we were losing per year due to development. Dietrich states "in the United States, instead of moving Americans back into the forest, sprawl has made the forests recede. The trend is illustrated by two recent American forests examinations of satellite data. Urban forest center vice president Gary Moll found that since 1973, urban heavy tree cover in the Baltimore-Washington corridor has declined 32 percent, a loss of 265,000 acres. Similarly, suburban Virginia's Fairfax County has lost 40 percent of its forests in the same period" (Dietrich, 1999). Dietrich's article shows how this has happened for many states, and this is why hunters are having such a hard time finding decent hunting grounds. When they get tired of looking they will eventually refrain from hunting and perhaps stop owning guns. Some conservation officials have predicted a 50 percent decrease in the number of hunters by 2026 (Jonsson, 2003). Somewhere around 75% of gun owners use their guns for recreation, such as hunting, so it is pretty straightforward to see that fewer hunters will equal a drop in gun ownership rates, sooner or later.

### Educational Attainment

Another demographic factor that affects gun ownership rates in the United States is educational attainment. The Current Population Survey (CPS) has been tracking educational attainment since 1949, and both high school and college graduations have increased. Since, 1972 the percent of respondents who have completed their Bachelor's degree has nearly doubled from 7.4% to 14.0% in 2000 (see table 5). In the Current Population Survey of 2000 the data suggests that college education is increasing among individuals aged 25-44 (Economic Trends, 2001). Continuing with this segment in 1986 forty-three percent of high school graduates went on to college, and this has increased to fifty-nine percent in 1996 (Heller, 1998). Catherine Ross's article "Neighborhoods and Guns in Middle America" states: "Logistic regression shows that gun ownership is low in neighborhoods where a high-percentage of adults are college educated" (Ross, 2001). Table five exhibits the increasing amount of people that are completing the Bachelors degree.

**Table 5**

Percentage of respondents who have completed their Bachelor's degree

Year	Percentage	Number
1972	7.4	1608
1973	8.7	1499
1974	8.6	1481
1975	8.9	1487
1976	9.0	1493
1977	8.4	1520
1978	7.8	1526
1980	9.2	1463
1982	7.9	1852
1983	11.2	1597
1984	10.1	1470
1985	9.2	1534
1986	11.1	1469
1987	10.1	1809
1988	11.1	1478
1989	9.9	1530
1990	11.9	1370
1991	12.8	1510
1993	14.0	1602
1994	14.5	2985
1996	13.5	2895
1998	14.6	2820
2000	14.0	2808

GSS Question: Highest year of school completed

Source: General Social Survey

In the United States, 27 percent of men and women age 25 and older had a bachelors degree in 2002, which is one percentage point higher than in 2001 (U.S. Census, 2002).

“Adjustment for individual-level race, ethnicity, sex, age,

education, income, and household structure indicates that the presence of well-educated neighbors affect the likelihood of gun ownership, over and above individual characteristics. In addition, people who are college educated themselves are less likely to have a gun in the household" (Ross, 2001). Higher education is a trend that is on the rise in the United States, so it is feasible to imagine that this demographic factor has affected the rates of gun ownership. To continue with this idea, the majority of previous literature argues that the higher a person's educational attainment, the less likely it is for that person to own a gun, but this is not the case in this study.

#### Female Headed Households

In the past few decades we have higher divorce rates and a greater tolerance of children of unwed parents, and this has led to a dramatic increase in the number of single parent families in the last couple of decades. According to table 6 the percentage of married respondents between 1972 and 2000 has dropped dramatically. The rise of female headed households could account for much of the decrease in gun ownership rates at the household level.

**Table 6**

Percent of respondents that are currently married according to GSS data

Year	Percentage	Number
1972	71.9	1613
1973	71.5	1504
1974	71.8	1484
1975	67.2	1490
1976	65.0	1499
1977	63.7	1530
1978	62.7	1531
1980	60.6	1468
1982	53.4	1860
1983	60.4	1599
1984	56.3	1473
1985	56.8	1534
1986	56.2	1470
1987	50.3	1818
1988	53.2	1481
1989	55.1	1537
1990	53.0	1371
1991	53.0	1517
1993	53.5	1605
1994	51.5	2991
1996	47.9	2903
1998	47.5	2831
2000	45.4	2816

GSS Question: Marital Status

Source: General Social Survey

Somewhere around sixty percent of divorcing couples have children, and since 1970 the actual number of households run by single parents has doubled (Lindsey, 1997). In 1972, 71.9% percent of United States adults were

married, but this has since plummeted to 45.4% in the year 2000 (see table 6). The fact of the matter is that females will head the majority of single parent households. Female-headed households are the fastest growing type of family in America right now. Since the rate of people living alone has increased from 9.5% in 1972 to 26.3% in the year 2000 (see table 7), these people living by themselves could be responsible for the downward trend in gun ownership.



**Table 7**

Percentage of respondents with only one person in their household according to GSS data

Year	Percentage	Number
1972	9.5	1613
1973	10.2	1503
1974	11.3	1482
1975	13.4	1490
1976	15.7	1497
1977	17.1	1530
1978	19.3	1532
1980	19.6	1468
1982	22.2	1860
1983	19.3	1599
1984	22.4	1473
1985	22.4	1534
1986	21.4	1470
1987	23.1	1819
1988	22.1	1481
1989	21.3	1537
1990	24.1	1372
1991	24.9	1516
1993	23.5	1606
1994	25.4	2992
1996	25.6	2904
1998	27.5	2832
2000	26.3	2817

GSS Question: Only one person in household

Source: General Social Survey

In the last decade or two postponement of marriage by women has alone had an affect in increasing the percentage of female headed households. A few decades ago female-headed households were the exception in the United States,

but now it is the old style nuclear family that is the exception. In 2000 women living alone represented 58 percent of one-person households. Single mother families increased from 3 million in 1970 to 10 million in 2000 (U.S. Census, 2000). Single mother families grew from 12 percent of all families in 1970 to 26 percent in 2000, which is a dramatic increase (U.S. Census, 2000). Of course with households headed by women increasing every year, many women have been forced to shoulder all of the household and childrearing duties (Buvinic, 1997).

Since more households are run by females there is a greater chance that the household will not own or report owning a gun. Gun ownership has always been less for women than men. Many more women gun owners are married than unmarried, and even if they are unmarried, widows are more likely to own a firearm than divorced women. This is the case because many widows have inherited their deceased husband's firearms. Tom Smith states: "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 percent of women owning a gun and 4.5 percent to 8 percent 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 a 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" (Smith, Smith, 1995).

With more and more women consistently living alone hypothetically gun ownership rates will decrease, because women who live alone are not as likely to own a gun, and women in general are also less likely to report owning a gun no matter what living arrangements they are in. Looking at previous trends it is likely that every year in the future when the General Social Survey is conducted there will be more females that head their households, who do not own guns or will not report owning guns, which will make the gun ownership rate continue to drop.

All available data thus points to the same conclusion, namely, that the percentage of households whose adult members report that there is a gun in the home has fallen substantially from the early 1970's. All four of the demographic factors cited above could have an impact on the gun ownership rates in the United States. All of these demographic factors combined could easily explain the

decline in gun ownership over the last 10 years, and this hypothesis will be evaluated in the results section of this paper.

### **CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODS**

Data used for this thesis are from the General Social Survey, one of the largest national surveys done in the United States. The General Social Survey was an obvious choice due to its 30 years of asking gun-related questions. Once the GSS data was obtained, frequencies on the gun ownership question were gathered for all 30 years using the statistical program SPSS. This tabulation (see table 1) showed that the year with the highest percentage of respondents stating that they have a gun in their household was 1977, and that the year with the lowest percentage of respondents stating they have a gun in their household was 2000. With these two years in mind it was obvious that these two years were the years that needed to be concentrated on, because these are the two years with the largest differences. The next phase in the research was to figure out what variables could affect this 18.2% decrease. After reviewing the previous literature, it was determined that certain variables needed to be looked at extensively, and the variables that were researched were; educational attainment, do you or your spouse hunt, female headed households, urbanization and sub-urbanization, political

party affiliation, marital status, religious affiliation, region, ethnic origin, views themselves as liberal or conservative, views on gun control, and age. In the literature review, the four main demographic factors were discussed at great lengths, but when these factors didn't show what was expected many other factors were explored. These variables were all chosen to show where the decrease occurred, and also to see where the decrease is not occurring because this is just as important. Every variable that is stated above was analyzed and put through cross-tabulations for the years 1977 and 2000, to see which variables decreased during this time span. All of these cross-tabulations were put into tables at the end of the conclusion section.

In this research there are three main hypotheses to be examined: (1) across the board actual declines in gun ownership, possibly from anti-gun legislation passes in the 1990's, (2) the apparent trend is an illusion resulting from changing demographics, which is the hypothesis with which this research began, and (3) the real ownership percentage has not declined, but people are now much more hesitant to admit to gun ownership than they used to be.

What patterns would we expect to see in the evidence if hypothesis (1), (2), or (3) were correct?

If hypothesis (1) is correct then we would either see a decrease in ownership pretty much across the board, not decreases that are concentrated in one group, and we would also expect to see a decline in gun sales as the demand for firearms slackened. If hypothesis (2) is correct then we would expect to that the "decreasing guns in households" trend would disappear once demographic change was controlled for. Finally if hypothesis (3) is correct, we would see across the board declines everywhere, but there would be no evidence of gun manufacturer's sales slackening.

## CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The differences between men and women in gun ownership are inconsistent with women having a sharper decrease than men in this category. Gun ownership has decreased for both, men at (12.9%) percentage points, and women at (21.5%) percentage points from 1977 to 2000 (see Table 10). As one can see, men's decrease is more of a realistic decrease which could be caused by demographic factors, but the decrease for women seems too drastic to be caused by demographic factors alone. These topics will be further assessed later in this thesis.

For every demographic factor that this thesis examined, the one universal pattern is that the decreases are about the same everywhere, with a few exceptions to be discussed. For example: education was one of the many variables studied which had decreases in every group and, when this factor was controlled, the trend remained in all categories for this variable. For education, there were decreases in every group, but not the way previous literature would have you believe. Most previous literature on education and gun ownership will state that the higher the respondent's education the less likely they are to own



a gun, but this is not the case according to my results. According to these results, respondents with the highest education show the least decrease in gun ownership at (-10.5%) percentage points, on the contrary respondents with the lowest education had the biggest decrease at (-25.6%) percentage points during this same time period (see table 8). The results show the relationship between education and gun ownership has itself changed, in 1977 it was pretty obvious that the more education you had the less likely you were to own a gun, whereas in 2000 this is clearly not the case. To be able to rule out hypothesis (2), first we will need to see if controlling for the demographic factors eliminates the trend, which for the education variable it does not, because the downward trend is evident in every category of educational attainment. As far as the declining gun ownership rate goes, rising educational attainment does not explain this trend.

Marital status was examined because it has changed significantly over the past couple of decades, and it is important to see if there are differences between married and unmarried respondents who own a gun. Married men showed the biggest decline in this category, decreasing 14.9% percentage points. In the men's category, two groups show

increases in gun ownership: widowed men (+3.0%) and separated men (+2.2%) percentage points respectively (see table 9). It is important to note that the two men's categories that did have increases were not married, which to some people this could be seen as men who are single are not concerned with the negativity that surrounds gun ownership. For women's marital status, every group showed a large decrease except never married women whose category stayed constant over this time period. The largest decrease in gun ownership among women was for widowed women with a decrease of (20.9%) percentage points.

The percentage of hunters has also been decreasing almost simultaneously with the gun ownership rate. It is necessary to see if the decreases are larger for women or men, because the differences between them are starting to show a pattern of women decreasing more than men. For the question do you or your spouse hunt, the male's largest decrease at (9.2%) percentage points was for the category neither the respondent nor spouse hunted. In this category there were two groups that stayed constant between 1977 and 2000, which were does spouse hunt, or do both respondent and spouse hunt. Among women, the largest decrease (18.7% percentage points) was for women who themselves hunt (see

Table 11). When asked do both you and spouse hunt among women respondents the percent stayed constant.

Owning a gun according to city size was examined to test for the effects of urbanization and sub-urbanization. Every city size category showed a decrease in gun ownership with an overall mean of (-15.6%) percentage points. The largest decrease in this group was for an unincorporated medium city with a decrease of (34.9%) percentage points. The city size that had the least decrease was in a suburb of a medium city at (7.7%) percentage points (see Table 12). This suggests that even in the open country where guns have always been a way of life; things are changing because their gun ownership rate is decreasing as well.

Political Party affiliation is a demographic factor that is important to note, because we need to know which party is affected by this decrease the most. The answer Democrats, with not strong democrats decreasing at (25.6%) and independent near democrat with a decrease of (23.1%) percentage points respectively. Republicans which have always been more in favor of guns had the smallest decrease at (6.9%) percentage points (see table 13). As you can see, the decreases in gun ownership are in every political party, maybe a little less in some, but still the decreases

are everywhere. It is interesting to note that most anti-gun legislation in the past couple of decades was passed during the Clinton administration. If the (gun ownership trend) were either a reflection of anti-gun laws or a result of increasing sensitivity about guns, one would expect Democrats (and Liberals) to show big changes in ownership and the traditionally pro-gun Republicans to show small or no changes, and this is what the results show. To see if the latter statement is true one needs to find the differences in gun ownership between Liberals and Conservatives, which is what this thesis looks at next.

Now that the political party affiliation gun ownership rates are known, the next step is to find out where the decreases are between liberals and conservatives. For men the largest decrease in gun ownership is for respondents who consider themselves slightly liberal with a decrease of (29.1%) percentage points (see table 14). Male respondents who consider themselves to be conservative have generally stayed constant from 1977 to 2000. The extremely conservative group in the men's category actually had an increase of (13.4%) percentage points (see table 14). For this group it is easy to see that the conservatives have been relatively stable for this time period. The major

decreases in gun ownership for this group have been from the respondents who consider themselves liberal. For the female respondents there were decreases across the board, with the mean average decrease for all groups being (23.8%) percentage points. The largest decrease was found in women respondents who consider themselves extremely liberal at (29.1%) percentage points (see Table 14). So in this table you can see the pattern that is happening, with women having very dramatic decreases, and men having moderate decreases, we will need to look farther to see if this trend continues. For both men and women the largest decreases in gun ownership were for liberals, which are expected if the decline was from anti-gun laws, or the increasing social sensitivity about guns.

Now that the decrease between men and women is starting to show, it is important to know which race is showing the largest decrease, increase, or staying stable. The race of the male respondents that had the largest decrease from 1977 to 2000 is the race named "other" that is neither white nor black, with a decrease of (21.9%) percentage points (see table 15). All races for male respondents had decreases, and they had a mean decrease average between them of (16.6%) percentage points. The

female respondents group that had the largest decrease is also the "other" group which is not black or white with a decrease of (29.3%) percentage points (see table 15). All races of female respondents had decreases in gun ownership, and had an average mean decrease of (24.7%) percentage points, which is substantially larger than the men's average decrease.

What region of the United States has shown the biggest decrease in gun ownership? The Mountain and South Atlantic regions have had the largest decreases in gun ownership with decreases of (31.4%) percentage points for the Mountain region and for the South Atlantic (30.3%) percentage points (see Table 16). The region with the smallest decrease is the Pacific region with a decrease of (7.8%) percentage points. All regions in the United States show decreases in gun ownership with a combined mean average of (19.1%) percentage points. There were no regions close to being constant through this time period.

Religious affiliation seemed the next logical variable to analyze for the decrease in gun ownership. For males the protestant religion had the biggest decrease in gun ownership with a decrease of (15.0%) percentage points (see table 17). Only one category in the men's group increased

their gun ownership rate, and that was the Jewish religion, and the Jewish religion increased (5.4%) percentage points between 1977 and 2000. For the female respondents the largest decrease was no religion, which decreased (30.6%) for this same time period (see Table 17). The lowest decrease for gun ownership was the Jewish religion which only decreased (4.6%) percentage points. All categories in the female groups decreased in gun ownership, and they had a mean average decrease of (19.2%) percentage points (see table 17). It is interesting to note that in both male and female respondents the religious group that has relatively remained constant is the Jewish religion. Protestants have had higher percents of gun ownership compared with Catholics since the General Social Survey began in 1972, so another key finding is that the gap between Protestant and Catholic gun ownership is narrowing (see Table 17).

One important factor that has not been addressed was age, and the decreases by different age groups were needed to see where the decreases are occurring. The male respondent's age group that had the largest decrease in gun ownership was males ages 18-29 years old with a decrease of (20.6%) percentage points (see Table 18). The only age group for men that increased their gun ownership was males

aged 65 and up, and they had an increase in gun ownership of (4.5%) percentage points. In the female respondents the age that had the largest decline in gun ownership is women aged 30-49 years old, and they had a decrease of (29.8%) percentage points (see table 18). All age groups in the female respondents show a decline in gun ownership from 1977 to 2000, with a mean average decrease of (20.7%) percentage points. It is interesting to note that in both males and females the decreases are larger with the younger age groups, maybe this is because of the anti-gun policies, and social desirability effects that have occurred because of them. Many of the older respondents still believe in traditional values, and many of the anti-gun beliefs are not part of their belief system, like it is for the younger respondents who grew up hearing about all the negative effects of guns.

One last item that had to be looked at prior to making a conclusion was gun manufacturer's sales of firearms during this same 23 year period. Much of the data so far has pointed to a universal decline in gun ownership, so for this to be true than the gun manufacture's sales should be on the same decline. In 1972 gun manufacturers sales were increasing until 1987, and from 1987-1993 there was a



significant increase in gun sales, but since 1993 gun manufacturers sales have declined. This could have happened due to the Brady Bill being put in place in 1994; so many purchases could have been by people who were thinking that they would not be able to buy a gun once the Brady Bill was put in affect. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco & Firearms states "a peak of gun sales in 1993 of nearly 8 million small arms, of which 4 million were handguns. In recent years, sales have fallen back to about half of that peak level nearly 4-1/2 million annually" (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco & Firearms, 2000). All the data examined seems generally to support the idea that gun ownership has in fact declined, and it is not an artifact of changing demographics and probably not a strong function of changing social desirability, although some data do hint in that direction.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research looked at many different types of variables to get a true sense of where the decline was coming from, and the answer is the decline is almost everywhere. This decrease is not totally from demographics as this research set to prove, even though these factors can and do contribute to the decrease, but they are not the sole reasons for this decrease. If guns have become "taboo" subjects and if people have stopped reporting gun ownership because it is now highly socially undesirable to be a gun owner, then we should see an equivalent increase in support for gun control measures, which is what was found in table 19. On the gun control measure issue the General Social Survey question "do you favor or oppose gun permits" was researched for the years 1977, 1990, and the year 2000, to see if any increase had occurred. In 1977, 73.0% of respondents favored gun permits by 1990 80.1%, and in the year 2000 it had increased to 82.0% of respondents who favored gun owners to have a gun permit (see Table 19). Once politicians and lawmakers started a war against owning guns, guns became less socially acceptable for people to own. Once guns were no longer seen as socially acceptable,

people stopped buying guns, or maybe got rid of their guns, which has led to this decrease. The real conclusion is that the decrease is widespread, and for women it is most likely caused by a social desirability affect. The increase in urbanization and sub-urbanization, the increase in female headed households, higher educational attainment, and decrease in hunters and hunting land all can affect this rate, but these factors did not cause this large decrease in gun ownership for females, but did cause some of the decrease for males. Many people believe that under-reporting causes the gun ownership decrease and it could affect the decrease, but in this case it did not cause it, and that's why gun manufacturer's sales are declining. If all of this was due to under-reporting then in reality the gun sales should stay constant, but they did not. The decrease in gun ownership over the last couple of decades is due to people seeing guns as a taboo type item now, and they don't want to be known as someone that owns one. So the politicians, lawmakers, media, and anti-gun activists should be the people credited with the decrease in gun ownership in the United States over the past few decades.

Hypothesis (1) would be the correct cause of this decrease, even though both other hypotheses could affect

the percentages this is what is causing the decrease. The reason for choosing hypothesis (1) over hypothesis (3) is because gun manufacturer's sales have slackened over the last decade, which would not be the case if hypothesis (3) was the cause. Both of these hypotheses would see decrease across the board, which we see from the results of this research, but hypothesis (1) needs for gun sales to be declining which they are. So for the overall decline in gun ownership in the home is most likely caused by changing attitudes toward gun ownership due to anti-gun legislation passed in the 1990's. However for male respondents, some of the decrease is from demographic trends such as less area for sports and recreation, because their decreases are not as sharp as they are for women. So we have a differentiated conclusion with part of the trend, the downward drift in reported household ownership among men, we conclude is real and reflects mainly a decline in hunting and recreation with guns. It is known that most guns are owned for recreational purposes and, as these activities decline, so will ownership. The other part of the trend, the more extreme decline among women, appears to result from factors, and the best conclusion is that it is the "Hilary

Effect", which is increased social sensitivity about gun ownership concentrated among women.

**Table 8**

Percentage of respondents who have a gun in their home and the highest level of school they completed

Year	1977	2000	Difference
0-11	51.4%	25.8%	-25.6%
12	56.3%	36.7%	-19.6%
13-15	48.7%	35.7%	-13.0%
16-20	40.8%	30.3%	-10.5%
Total:	50	30	-20

All respondents that refused to answer this question were taken out of the percents.

0-11= kindergarten through eleventh grade

12= completed high school

13-15= Some college but no four year degree

16-20= Four year college degree up to a PHD.

**Table 9**

Respondent's marital status according to having a gun in their household

Category	1977	2000	Difference
Married Men	61.2%	46.3%	-14.9%
Widowed Men	38.5%	41.5%	+ 3.0%
Divorced Men	53.7%	46.0%	- 7.7%
Separated Men	28.6%	30.8%	+ 2.2%
Never Married	36.4%	23.0%	-13.4%

Category	1977	2000	Difference
Married Women	55.9%	37.6%	- 18.3%
Widowed Women	37.1%	16.2%	- 20.9%
Divorced Women	29.6%	14.7%	- 14.9%
Separated Women	23.7%	9.3%	- 14.4%
Never Married	12.5%	12.4%	- 0.1%

All refused totals were taken out of these percents.

These are all percents in their individual categories.

All percents were acquired through the General Social Survey in 1977 & 2000.

**Table 10**

Percent of respondents saying yes to having a gun in their household

Year:	1977	2000	Difference
Men:	55.3%	42.4%	-12.9%
Women:	46.9%	25.4%	-21.5%

Refused answers excluded

All percents were taken from the 1977 and 2000 general social survey.



**Table 11**

The percentage of respondents that have a gun in their home and state they hunt

Male respondent

Year:	1977	2000	Difference
Respondent	82.6%	74.1%	-8.5%
Spouse	no data	50.0%	no difference
Both	100%	100%	no difference
Neither	38.8%	29.6%	-9.2%

Female respondent

Year:	1977	2000	Difference
Respondent	72.0%	53.3%	-18.7%
Spouse	87.5%	73.1%	-14.4%
Both	93.5%	93.8%	+0.3
Neither	34.5%	17.8%	-16.7%

All refused answers have been excluded.

These percents are for each individual category respondent, spouse, both, neither.

All data was determined using General Social Survey data from 1977 & 2000.

**Table 12**

Respondents gun ownership percentage according to their city size

Year:	1977	2000	Differences
City GT 250,000	26.9%	16.7%	-10.2%
City 50-250,000	43.4%	29.8%	-13.6%
Suburb (large city)	42.6%	26.9%	-15.7%
Suburb (med city)	39.6%	31.9%	-7.7%
UNINC, LRG CITY	52.9%	36.4%	-16.5%
UNINC, MED CITY	61.6%	26.7%	-34.9%
City 10-49,999	61.2%	43.6%	-17.6%
Town GT 2,500	61.6%	45.5%	-16.1%
Smaller Areas	62.5%	50.3%	-12.2%
Open country	77.2%	65.6%	-11.6%
			Mean= -15.6%

All refused answers were excluded.

All percents are based on respondents who stated they own a gun.

All percents were determined using General Social Survey data in 1977 and 2000.

**Table 13**

Respondents gun ownership percentages according to their political party affiliation

Year	1977	2000	Differences
Strong democrat	44.9%	25.4%	-19.5%
Not strong democrat	52.5%	26.9%	-25.6%
Ind, near democrat	50.3%	27.2%	-23.1%
Independent	44.5%	25.7%	-18.8%
Ind, near republican	54.6%	37.0%	-17.6%
Not strong republican	56.4%	40.9%	-15.5%
Strong republican	54.7%	47.8%	-6.9%
Other Party	0%	19.4%	+19.4%

All refused answers were excluded

All percents are based in their individual categories, and all data was determined using General Social Survey data in 1977 and 2000.

**Table 14**

Respondents with a gun in their household, and consider themselves as Liberal or Conservative

Year	1977	2000	Differences
Sex: Male			
Extremely Liberal	30.4%	24.3%	-6.1%
Liberal	46.4%	28.6%	-17.8%
Slightly Liberal	53.5%	24.4%	-29.1%
Moderate	60.4%	42.8%	-17.6%
Slightly Conser	59.5%	47.2%	-12.3%
Conservative	58.2%	58.0%	-0.2%
Extremely Conser	38.5%	51.9%	+13.4%
Year	1977	2000	Difference
Sex: Female			
Extremely Liberal	42.9%	13.8%	-29.1%
Liberal	34.1%	17.5%	-16.6%
Slightly Liberal	39.5%	20.4%	-19.1%
Moderate	48.2%	25.8%	-22.4%
Slightly Conser	53.5%	28.2%	-25.3%
Conservative	56.5%	30.6%	-25.9%
Extremely Conser	72.0%	43.8%	-28.2%
All refused answers were excluded			

**Table 15**

Respondents with a gun in their household using the Race of the respondent

Male respondents

Year	1977	2000	Differences
White	57.4%	45.0%	-12.4%
Black	39.7%	24.0%	-15.7%
Other	33.3%	11.4%	-21.9%

Female respondents:

Year	1977	2000	Differences
White	49.0%	28.6%	-20.4%
Black	30.8%	6.4%	-24.4%
Other	40.0%	10.7%	-29.3

All refused answers were excluded

All data is from the General Social Survey

**Table 16**

Region of the interview compared with Respondents who have a gun in their home

Year:	1977	2000	Difference
New England	23.0%	13.1%	-9.9%
Middle Atlantic	34.9%	17.2%	-17.7%
East North Central	52.7%	36.0%	-16.7%
West North Central	55.4%	40.3%	-15.1%
South Atlantic	64.2%	33.9%	-30.3%
East South Central	68.0%	41.8%	-26.2%
West South Central	50.4%	33.7%	-16.7%
Mountain	66.7%	35.3%	-31.4%
Pacific	39.1%	31.3%	-7.8%

All data is from the General Social Survey in 1977 and 2000.

All refused answers were excluded

**Table 17**

Current religious affiliation compared with respondents who have a gun in their household

Male respondents

Year:	1977	2000	Differences
Protestant	62.4%	47.4%	-15.0%
Catholic	43.2%	33.8%	-9.4%
Jewish	22.2%	27.6%	+5.4%
None	41.2%	38.7%	-2.5%
Other Specify	30.0%	0%	-30.0%

Female respondents

Year	1977	2000	Differences
Protestant	52.9%	29.6%	-23.3%
Catholic	34.0%	16.5%	-17.5%
Jewish	10.5%	5.9%	-4.6%
None	50.0%	19.4%	-30.6%
Other Specify	20.0%	0%	-20.0%

All data is from the General Social Survey in 1977 & 2000

All refused answers were excluded.

**Table 18**

The age of respondents who have a gun in their household

Male Respondents

Year	1977	2000	Difference
Age 1	50.9%	30.3%	-20.6%
Age 2	58.0%	40.5%	-17.5%
Age 3	61.6%	42.9%	-18.7%
Age 4	45.9%	50.4%	+4.5%

Female Respondents

Year	1977	2000	Difference
Age 1	43.0%	18.0%	-25.0%
Age 2	52.1%	22.3%	-29.8%
Age 3	48.3%	36.0%	-12.3%
Age 4	37.2%	21.3%	-15.9%

Age 1 = people 18-29 years old

Age 2 = people 30-49 years old

Age 3 = people 50-64 years old

Age 4 = people 65-100 years old

All data was determined using GSS data for the years 1977 and 2000.

All refused answers are excluded



**Table 19**

Respondents who favor or oppose gun permits

Year	#Favor	#Oppose	%Favor
1977	1094	405	73.0%
1990	719	179	80.1%
2000	1479	332	82.0%

All refused answers were omitted.

Data is from the 1977, 1990, and 2000 General Social Surveys.

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