

Youth Opinions About Guns and Gun Control in the United States

Young activists and mass-shooting survivors in the United States have recently been organizing protests and demanding increased gun control measures. Although national polls have tracked adult opinions about gun control policies for decades, little is known about how youth feel about guns and/or gun control. Because the youth perspective is a powerful factor in the public debate, the goal of this study was to characterize youth opinions on guns and gun control.

Methods | Participants came from the National MyVoice Text Message Cohort¹ and were recruited through targeted Facebook and Instagram advertisements to match national benchmarks based on weighted samples from the 2016 American Community Survey, including age, gender, race/ethnicity, educational level, family income, and region of the country. MyVoice is a large-scale longitudinal mixed methods study of youth. Although MyVoice is not a nationally representative sample, participants are recruited on the basis of the American Community Survey benchmarks to ensure a meaningful and diverse sample. This study was approved by the University of Michigan Institutional Review

Board. Consent was obtained from participants; parental consent was waived.

Between July 2017 and January 2018, MyVoice participants (n = 1153) were asked the following questions using an open-ended text message survey: (1) What are your thoughts about having guns in your home? (2) Do you think gun control laws would affect mass shootings? Why? (3) Who, if anyone, should not be allowed to own guns? The investigative team (M.V.S., A.L.M., K.R.S., and T.C.) identified themes in text message responses. The presence of each theme was then independently coded (interrater reliability for each theme was 95%).

Results | Among 1153 participants, 772 responded to the survey (response rate, 67%). Demographic characteristics of these 772 respondents (458 [59.3%] female; 544 [70.7%] white; mean [SD] age, 18.32 [3.14] years) are shown in **Table 1**. **Table 2** summarizes themes and responses and gives representative quotations. Approximately one-third of youths in the sample (263 of 772 [34%]) were “against” guns in the home, and the remaining two-thirds (506 of 772 [66%]) were either “pro” or “conditionally pro” guns in the home, stating that gun ownership is acceptable under certain conditions, such as when there is proper storage for the gun or when it is kept away from children. Most respondents (468 of 757 [62%]) believed that gun control laws could decrease mass shootings (“Yes!! They would make it harder to get guns right away, or at all if u have a record of crime or instability”). However, one-third of respondents (247 of 757 [33%]) felt that gun control laws would not be enough to affect mass shootings (“Bad people will still find a way to get what they want and the good people will not be able to protect themselves”). Respondents were particularly concerned about gun access for individuals with mental illness, criminal records, and histories of violence.

Discussion | The response rate exceeded 60%, which has been used as the threshold of acceptability and a measure of survey quality.² However, possible limitations of this study include self-selection bias and systematic differences between responders and nonresponders regarding their perspectives on gun control.

Our findings revealed that the nuances of gun control in the United States are not lost on youth. Although most youths in the sample felt that individuals should have the right to own guns, the majority of youths believed that gun control laws would reduce mass shootings. Our findings are consistent with earlier studies of high school students that showed that, although many students supported access to guns,³ most also supported more restrictive gun control policies.⁴ Our findings also align with recent polls of adults showing that the United States is polarized on this issue, with 42% of adults having a gun in the home and 48% in favor of an assault rifle ban.⁵

Youths, having been the target of several mass shootings, are positioning themselves as both the present and the future of the gun control debate and are taking the lead in the public discourse. Similar to their adult counterparts, most youths in

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of the Study Sample

| Characteristic | No. (%) of Responders |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Age, mean (SD) (n = 772) | 18.32 (3.14) |
| Gender (n = 770) | |
| Male | 269 (34.9) |
| Female | 458 (59.5) |
| Other | 43 (5.6) |
| Race (n = 770) | |
| White | 544 (70.7) |
| Black | 61 (7.9) |
| Asian | 81 (10.5) |
| Other ^a | 84 (10.9) |
| Hispanic/Latino (n = 770) | |
| Yes | 93 (12.1) |
| No | 677 (87.9) |
| Free/reduced lunch (n = 764) | |
| Yes | 224 (29.3) |
| No | 540 (70.7) |
| Primary residence (n = 764) | |
| Parent | 480 (62.8) |
| Spouse and/or children | 44 (5.8) |
| Dormitory | 48 (6.3) |
| Apartment with others | 154 (20.2) |
| Alone | 23 (3.0) |
| Other | 15 (2.0) |
| Parent marital status (n = 764) | |
| Married/together | 558 (73.0) |
| Divorced/separated | 168 (22.0) |
| Other | 38 (5.0) |

^a American Indian or Alaska Native; Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander.

Table 2. Questions, Themes, Responses, and Representative Quotations

| Question, Theme | No. (%) (N = 772) | Representative Quotation |
|---|----------------------|--|
| What are your thoughts about having guns in your home? | | |
| Pro | 214 (28) | <p>"Although personally I don't have any, I believe it is our right as Americans to own guns to protect ourselves from all threats, thanks to the second amendment. When I'm an adult, I'll own weapons without a doubt."</p> <p>"Well I'm from Detroit so it's a necessity."</p> <p>"My dad has guns in the home. I go hunting with him. I feel safer if there is a gun in the house."</p> |
| Conditional | 292 (38) | <p>"It's alright to have 1 or 2 for protection, but they must be locked away very carefully so they may not be reached by children. And there is no need for a whole arsenal."</p> <p>"I think if someone wants to own a gun for protection or hunting, they should be able to only if they keep said guns in a gun safe."</p> <p>"I think it's fine as long as they aren't automatic/semiautomatic and are stored in a gun safe."</p> |
| Against | 263 (34) | <p>"They are a threat. Dangerous. The main point is to kill. Why would I want that?"</p> <p>"A home is not a place for guns."</p> <p>"I wish no one had guns."</p> |
| Do you think gun control laws would affect mass shootings? Why? | | |
| Yes, mass shootings would decrease | 468 (62) | <p>"Yes it would limit access and it worked in Australia."</p> <p>"Yes!! They would make it harder to get guns right away, or at all if you have a record of crime or instability."</p> <p>"Yes. Less guns, less deaths. Basic logic."</p> |
| Yes, mass shootings would increase | 16 (2) | <p>"Yes. Gun control laws take guns away from law-abiding citizens while not stopping criminals from getting them. If gun control laws were stronger, there would be more mass shootings, and more people killed."</p> <p>"If there were stricter gun control laws that might upset some people and lead to mass shootings."</p> <p>"Yes, people tend to do things more often when they are put on restrictions."</p> |
| No impact on mass shootings | 247 (33) | <p>"No, I do not. Bad people will still find a way to get what they want and the good people will not be able to protect themselves."</p> <p>"No, mental health care is needed instead."</p> <p>"Not really, we have gun laws now and there are still mass shootings."</p> |
| Don't know | 19 (3) | <p>"I'm not entirely sure. It might mitigate mass shootings to some extent, but other issues would arise."</p> <p>"Maybe, because sometimes the guns used are unchecked."</p> <p>"I think it could have some effect. I think I would need more specific examples to be able to decide."</p> |
| Who, if anyone, should not be allowed to own guns? ^a | | |
| Mentally ill | 373 (50) | "Mentally ill people, but not people with simple things such as anxiety." |
| Criminal record | 372 (50) | "Obviously convicted criminals of felonies more serious than just traffic violations should not be allowed to." |
| Violent | 168 (22) | "Anyone with a history of being a danger to themselves/others." |

^a Youths could endorse more than 1 theme in their response.

our study were not suggesting a ban on all guns or repeal of the Second Amendment; instead, they supported legislative action that they believed would make their country safer.

Murphy Van Sparrentak, MSW
Tammy Chang, MD, MPH, MS
Alison L. Miller, PhD
Lauren P. Nichols, MPH
Kendrin R. Sonnevile, ScD, RD

Author Affiliations: Department of Health Behavior Health Education, University of Michigan School of Public Health, Ann Arbor (Van Sparrentak, Miller); Institute for Healthcare Policy and Innovation, Department of Family

Medicine, University of Michigan Medical School, Ann Arbor (Chang, Nichols); Department of Nutritional Sciences, University of Michigan School of Public Health, Ann Arbor (Sonneville).

Corresponding Author: Kendrin R. Sonnevile, ScD, RD, Department of Nutritional Sciences, University of Michigan School of Public Health, 1415 Washington Heights, Ste 3855 SPH 1, Ann Arbor, MI 48109 (kendrins@umich.edu).

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Concept and design: Chang, Miller, Sonnevile.

Acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data: Van Sparrentak, Chang, Nichols, Sonnevile.

Drafting of the manuscript: Van Sparrentak, Chang, Miller, Sonnevile.
Critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content: All authors.
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COMMENT & RESPONSE

Inconsistent Reporting of Potential Conflicts of Interest

To the Editor I write to acknowledge inconsistent reporting of potential conflict of interest disclosures in an Editorial¹ and Letter,² both published in *JAMA Pediatrics*. In the manuscript I submitted for the Editorial,¹ I had disclosed that I receive book royalties and that my work is funded by the Laura and John Arnold Foundation. However, the funding information was erroneously removed by a manuscript editor during the editing process. I did not disclose this information in the Letter in Reply² that was subsequently published. In each of these, my disclosure statement should have read as follows: "Dr Prasad reports receiving royalties from his book *Ending Medical Reversal*; that his work is funded by the Laura and John Arnold Foundation; that he has received honoraria for Grand Rounds/lectures from several universities, medical centers, and professional societies; and that he is not compensated for his work at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Portland, Oregon, or the Health Technology Assessment Subcommittee of the Oregon Health Authority." I apologize for any confusion this has caused and have requested that these articles be corrected online.

Vinay Prasad, MD, MPH

Author Affiliations: Division of Hematology Oncology, Knight Cancer Institute, Oregon Health & Science University, Portland; Department of Public Health and Preventive Medicine, Oregon Health & Science University, Portland.

Corresponding Author: Vinay Prasad, MD, MPH, Division of Hematology Oncology, Knight Cancer Institute, Oregon Health & Science University, 3181 SW Sam Jackson Park Rd, Portland, OR 97239 (prasad@ohsu.edu).

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his work at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Portland, Oregon, or the Health Technology Assessment Subcommittee of the Oregon Health Authority.

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Measuring Trends in Infant Mortality Due to Unintentional Suffocation

To the Editor A recent issue of *JAMA Pediatrics* contained a Research Letter titled "Infant Mortality Due to Unintentional Suffocation Among Infants Younger Than 1 Year in the United States, 1999-2015," by Gao et al.¹ The authors reported a 1.27-fold increase in mortality during the observed period and state that "the continuous increase of unintentional suffocation from 1999 to 2015 among US infants younger than 12 months is concerning. Our results show that the increase was primarily a result of increases in deaths from suffocation and strangulation in bed."¹ They conclude that "there is insufficient evidence to interpret the mechanism behind our results."¹

The reader may reasonably conclude that actual number of deaths owing to suffocation had increased during this period. However, there has been a decline in total sudden infant deaths in the reported period of the study, from 7.0 per 1000 live births in 1999 to 5.9 in 2015.² Therefore, there appears to be a change in the distribution of cause of deaths. We believe that a parsimonious explanation for the increase in deaths attributed to suffocation is misclassification bias arising from a change over time in the diagnosis of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).

We note that in the United States, the rate of SIDS declined considerably, from 130.3 deaths per 100 000 live births in 1990 to 39.4 deaths per 100 000 live births in 2015.³ In contrast, rates for unintentional suffocation started to increase beginning in 1997 and rose from 12.4 in 1999 to 28.3 deaths per 100 000 live births in 2015.¹

The increase in death due to unintentional suffocation reported by Gao et al¹ is readily accommodated within the large reduction in death attributed to SIDS. Indeed, so great has been the decline in SIDS that with the reclassification of certain SIDS as suffocation, the actual rate of suffocation may be falling, not increasing. This is to be expected following the reconceptualization of SIDS highlighted by a task force in 2000 that has enabled more accurate attribution of sudden infant death by cause.⁴

The Research Letter by Gao et al¹ serves to highlight the alarming number of preventable deaths owing to suffocation. However, this is likely not a new epidemic, rather an old one unmasked.

Michael J. Davies, MPH, PhD
 Alice R. Rumbold, PhD

Author Affiliations: The Robinson Research Institute, The University of Adelaide, Adelaide, Australia.

Corresponding Author: Michael J. Davies, MPH, PhD, Lifecourse and Intergenerational Health Research Group, The Robinson Research Institute, The University of Adelaide, Adelaide, SA 5005, Australia (michael.davies@adelaide.edu.au).