



# Why Do You Keep Them There? A Qualitative Assessment of Firearms Storage Practices<sup>1</sup>

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Thousands of children are killed or injured each year in the United States after gaining access to firearms. Storage methods are inconsistent and influenced by various contextual factors in the home. We explored reasons underlying parents' choices of firearm storage. Thirty individuals were interviewed regarding firearm storage methods used in their homes and reasons for choosing those methods. Storage practices varied within and across households. Qualitative results suggested that storage practices were related to child presence and age, intended use of firearms, and perception of risk associated with potential access by unsafe individuals. Implications for injury prevention are discussed.

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IN JUNE 2013, a 10-year-old boy accidentally discharged a single 9 mm round into his chest after he and a friend discovered the handgun while playing in a garage (Summers, London, & Stickney, 2013). In October 2013, a 12-year-old boy brought a 9 mm caliber handgun to school, later using the firearm to murder another student and a teacher (Shoichet, Watts, & Johnston, 2013). The firearms in each of these incidents were not purchased by the shooters, and were not provided by an adult. Federal regulations prevent individuals under the age of 18 from purchasing long guns (i.e., rifles or shotguns) and ammunition for long guns; individuals under the age of 21 likewise may not legally purchase handguns or handgun ammunition. In each of the previous incidents, the children gained access to a firearm as the result of unsafe storage practices.

Although not every unauthorized access to a firearm by a minor results in injury or death, either of these outcomes are possible. In fact, from 2001 to 2010, approximately 30,567

unintentional injuries related to firearms occurred in the United States among individuals under 18 years of age, averaging approximately 3,056 per year (National Center for Injury Prevention, Control, 2013). An additional 1,261 fatalities occurred during the same period among individuals under 18 years of age, averaging approximately 126 per year (National Center for Injury Prevention, Control, 2013). Proper storage is the responsibility of every firearm owner and is an obvious solution to reducing unintentional injuries and deaths from firearms. However, this seemingly simple solution is surrounded by multiple factors, some of which are the focus of our study.

## Firearms Storage Practices

A general illustration of firearms storage practices used in homes in the United States already is present in the literature. Research suggests that at least one firearm is stored loaded and unlocked in 20% to 50% of households that contain firearms, and that a portion of these households include children (Johnson, Miller, Vriniotis, Azrael, & Hemenway, 2006; Schuster, Franke, Bastian, Sor, & Halfon, 2000; Stennies, Ikeda, Leadbetter, Houston, & Sacks, 1999). One study reported that a large portion of households appear to

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store firearms unloaded (63%) and ammunition was stored separately (69%), but nearly half did not store firearms in a locked fashion, and some (18%) stored a firearm unlocked and loaded (Coyne-Beasley, Schoenbach, & Johnson, 2001). In a more recent study, 93% of participants reported that the firearm in question during an interview was stored locked and unloaded (Johnson, Runyan, Coyne-Beasley, Lewis, & Bowling, 2008). Thus, safe storage practices are used in some homes, but the overall pattern of storage practices varies considerably across households.

### Factors Related to Firearm Storage Practices

Parental status is one factor that has been examined in relation to storage practices. One might assume the presence of children in the home would motivate many parents to use storage practices. Some evidence suggests that parents are indeed more likely to store their firearms in a safe manner, away from children (Coyne-Beasley et al., 2001). However, the relation of parental status to storage practices in the literature is inconsistent, with other evidence suggesting that the presence of young children does not always motivate use of safer storage practices (Connor, 2005). Further complicating the relationship, some households may comprise more than one storage method, especially if firearms are stored in multiple locations and for different purposes. Stennies et al. (1999) reported that firearms were more likely to be stored unloaded and locked in households with children, but that children remained exposed to other unsecured firearms. Thus, while some parents do use safer storage practices, other factors that may reduce the likelihood of safe firearm storage among parents must be considered.

Sex of the firearm owner and reporting person is another important factor to consider in relation to firearm storage practices. One study, in particular, has uncovered several important differences in beliefs about firearms storage between males and females living in the same households (Coyne-Beasley, Baccaglini, Johnson, Webster, & Weibe, 2005). Moderate agreement was found between reports from males and females regarding whether a firearm was present in the home and likewise whether or not the firearm was kept loaded. Both male and female participants reported that storage of firearms was the male's responsibility. An overwhelming number of males (83%) reported that they owned the firearms that were kept in the home versus only 17% of women. Another study focusing specifically on women living in homes that contain firearms found participants to be highly-motivated to store firearms safely; a finding linked to perception of greater behavioral control (Johnson et al., 2008). Overall, disparities exist in terms of which sex is associated with being primarily responsible for storage of firearms in the home and with respect to the presence and condition of firearms being stored.

The choice of storage method can also vary based on the intended use of a firearm within a particular household, and must be determined by the adult owner of the firearm. For

example, storing firearms used for hunting unloaded and locked will not affect their intended use. However, other aspects of firearm use present a more complicated decision for storage. Locking a firearm kept for home defense can be counterproductive if the firearm is not quickly accessible (Coyne-Beasley & Johnson, 2001). Indeed, at least one study has reported that increased perception of a firearm's utility for home defense was associated with a less-favorable attitude toward storing the firearm locked (Johnson et al., 2008). Thus, the reasons underlying variations in storage practices are important to consider, as such reasons may result in conflict between storage practices and child safety.

### Aims and Research Questions

Our overall aim was to expand knowledge of factors surrounding firearm storage practices including individual storage practices, personal experience with firearms, and views on firearms ownership. The following questions drove our research: What specific storage practices do participants choose to store firearms? Why do participants choose to store firearms in the way they recorded? What experiences or beliefs helped form the participants' opinions on firearm storage? What experiences or beliefs helped form participant opinions on the restrictions of firearms? We also expected that storage practices may be associated with certain demographic factors, such as presence of children in the household and sex of the reporting person.

### Method

#### Sample

Thirty participants were recruited from the population in a small town of approximately 23,000 containing a university in the Pacific Northwest (age  $M = 34.23$ ; age  $SD = 13.37$ ; 43% male). Eighty percent of participants reported personally owning at least one firearm or the presence of at least one firearm in the home that was owned by another member of the family. The remaining 20% of participants reported owning no firearm and having none in the home. Fifty-seven percent of participants lived in a household with at least one child under the age of 18, with an average child age of 9.61 ( $SD = 2.84$ ) and an average of 2.24 ( $SD = 1.03$ ) children living in each home. Twenty percent of the sample had some college education, 20% had earned a college degree, 17% had some education at the university level, 13% had earned a university degree, 17% had some graduate training, 10% had a graduate degree, and 3% had some post-graduate training. Corresponding to the demographic characteristics of the local population, the sample was entirely Caucasian. The study was approved by the university's institutional review board.

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