



Assessing views about gun violence reduction policy: A look at type of violence and expected effectiveness



Susan B. Sorenson

University of Pennsylvania, 3815 Walnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104, USA

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ABSTRACT

Objective. Public opinion polling about gun policy is routinely conducted and often disregarded. The purpose of this research is to explore ways in which surveys can be made more useful to policy makers, researchers, and the general public.

Methods. A stratified random sample of 1000 undergraduates at a private, urban university was recruited for an online survey about proposed gun policies. A total of 51.7% answered the questions analyzed herein. Including but going beyond typical assessments of agreement, the survey elicited respondent evaluations of the effectiveness of seven gun policies under two randomly assigned conditions: the type of gun violence (e.g., homicide, suicide, violent crime) and its magnitude. Participants were asked to estimate the effectiveness of each policy, including the possibility of making things worse.

Results. Participants indicated strong support for all policies and expected each to be effective with one exception – a policy designed to increase the number of guns on the scene, that is, putting armed police in schools. Persons who did not support other policies, on average, did not expect them to make things worse. Telling participants about the scope of the violence did not but the type of gun violence did affect effectiveness ratings.

Conclusions. Asking about expected effectiveness of (vs. general support for) a policy might identify some optimism: Even people who don't support a policy sometimes think it will be effective. Findings suggest that surveys about the effectiveness of gun violence policies likely assess views that exclude suicide, the most common form of gun-related mortality.

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Introduction

Policymakers' disregard for the views of their constituents was perhaps on no better display than when, in 2013, roughly 90% of the American people favored universal background checks for the purchase of a gun (PollingReport.com, accessed 6 January 2015) and Congress failed to pass such legislation. In a representative government, the wishes of the people and the actions of their elected officials are expected to correspond relatively closely. However, that has not been the case when it comes to gun policy, perhaps the single most surveyed policy topic in recent years. Full consideration of the possible reasons for the discrepancy is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, we return to the surveys themselves and the importance of measuring views of the public, views that, in theory and expectation, can shape and inform policy. In addition, measuring views of the public is important in order to provide members of that public with a sense of how their individual opinions compare to those of their fellow citizens.

Survey researchers typically present participants with a dichotomous choice between two abstractions. For example, the [Pew Research Center](http://PewResearchCenter.org)

(December, 2014) asked survey respondents whether they "... support gun rights or gun control", [Fox News](http://FoxNews.com) (April, 2013) asked "Which is more important: protecting the constitutional right of citizens to own guns or protecting citizens from gun violence?", and an [ABC News/Washington Post](http://ABCNews.com) poll (April, 2013) asked which should be a higher priority: "...enacting new laws to try to reduce gun violence, or protecting the right to own guns?" Some polls and on-going surveys assess support for specific types of firearm-related policies that are either in place or under consideration (e.g., restricting ownership of high capacity clips/magazines) and find substantial public support for a wide range of policy options ([Barry et al., 2013](http://Barryet.al.com)). Only a few take the next step and assess perceptions of the efficacy of such policies. And, when they do, respondents typically are asked whether they think the policy will be very effective, somewhat effective, not very effective, or not at all effective. The present investigation includes the possibility that respondents believe that certain policies could make things worse.

Moreover, it is not clear what content surveys intend to assess when they ask respondents about "gun violence." Surveys asking about policies related to "reducing automobile accidents" likely would be met with puzzlement; there are many types and sources of motor vehicle crashes (e.g., distracted driving, pedestrian-involved, speed-related) that require different interventions (e.g., passage and enforcement of

E-mail address: sorenson@upenn.edu.

lower speed limits in school zones, ignition interlock [blow-and-go] devices for repeatedly drunk drivers, bike lanes). Similarly, gun violence takes multiple forms. Public health researchers note that there are more gun-related suicides than gun-related homicides each year in the U.S. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014), that most people who attempt suicide do not go on to commit suicide (Bostwick and Pankratz, 2000), and that many unintentional gun-related deaths are eminently preventable (Vernick et al., 1999, 2003). Such optimism is not necessarily shared by the general public, however; for example, nearly three-quarters in the U.S. consider suicide to be largely not preventable (Miller et al., 2006). Presenting gun violence as a unitary and undefined concept might reflect – and perpetuate – the public's lack of knowledge and their unwillingness or inability to perceive distinctions among forms of gun violence.

The present investigation, unlike most surveys: 1) asked respondents to estimate the effectiveness of the policies, 2) provided a frame of reference for ratings of effectiveness by specifying the outcome that might be affected by the policy, and 3) allowed respondents to indicate that they think the policy might make things worse, not just better. Four hypotheses were tested in a sample of college students: 1) Support for gun violence prevention policies will be high and policies will be perceived to be more effective than harmful; 2) Anticipated effectiveness of a policy will increase if information about the scope of the problem is provided; 3) Expected effectiveness of a policy will be similar for when the type of gun violence is not specified (as is the case with most opinion polls) and for when violent crime is specified; and 4) The anticipated efficacy of gun violence policies will differ by the type of gun violence, in particular, suicide will be viewed as different from other forms of gun violence.

Methods

Sample

A stratified random sample of 1000 undergraduates (250 freshman, 250 sophomores, 250 juniors, and 250 seniors) at a northeastern university was recruited to participate in an online survey about gun policy in March 2013. Researchers were provided with only the e-mail addresses of the individuals sampled. To have reasonable confidence that the person who completed the questionnaire was the one invited to participate, at the conclusion of the survey, respondents were asked to provide the e-mail address at which the investigators contacted them. After this validity check was completed, e-mail addresses were removed from the data analysis file.

A total of 517 respondents completed the survey questions analyzed herein and provided an e-mail address that was on the sample list. This yielded a participation rate that compares favorably to similar online surveys. The self-reported demographics (i.e., age, gender, ethnicity, international status, socioeconomic status, school year, and academic division) of the resulting sample were comparable to those of the undergraduate student body.

Data collection instrument

The questionnaire asked about seven policies that were proposed by various sources (Vice President Biden's Commission on Gun Violence, the Johns Hopkins Gun Policy Research Center, and the National Rifle Association). See Table 1 for a list of the policies. Respondents were asked to respond yes or no to indicate whether they "do or do not" support each policy.

The section on support was followed by an embedded experiment. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of five types of gun violence (homicide, suicide, rampage/mass shooting, violent crime, or accidental shooting). Respondents then were randomly assigned to the provision of information: half were presented with a statement of fact about the scope of the violence (see Table 2) and half were not. Fig. 1 shows the eleven conditions to which respondents were assigned – ten indicating a type of gun violence and one in which no form of gun violence was specified. The size of the groups ranged from 45 to 49. Respondents were asked to consider this information – the type and, if provided, the scope of the violence – when answering questions about effectiveness.

Table 1
Proposed policies examined.

1. Ban the sale of military-style, semiautomatic assault weapons that are capable of shooting more than 10 rounds of ammunition without reloading
2. Ban the sale of large-capacity ammunition clips or magazines that allow some guns to shoot more than 10 bullets before reloading
3. Require a background check system for all gun sales to make sure a purchaser is not legally prohibited from having a gun
4. Require states to report a person to the background-check system who is prohibited from buying a gun either because of involuntary commitment to a hospital for psychiatric treatment or because of being declared mentally incompetent by a court of law
5. Allow cities to sue licensed gun dealers when there is strong evidence that the gun dealer's careless sales practices allowed many criminals to obtain guns
6. Maximize enforcement efforts to prevent gun violence and prosecute gun crime
7. Put armed police officers in every school

The next section addressed expected effectiveness. Survey research that asks about anticipated effectiveness typically asks respondents to indicate whether they think a policy will be very effective, somewhat effective, not very effective, or not effective at all. This standard practice eliminates half of the potential distribution of responses; respondents do not have the option of indicating that the proposed policy might not be simply ineffective but might make things worse. Thus, after each policy, we provided a scale from –100 ("a LOT worse") to +100 ("a LOT better") with "0" marked as "no effect" and asked respondents to slide a marker to the point on the scale that corresponded to their assessment of the influence the proposed policy would have on that type of gun violence. Respondents were asked to make such a rating for each policy and "All of these policies together." The mean and median expected effectiveness ratings were compared and the findings were similar, suggesting that the ratings distributions were not badly skewed; means are reported herein. In order to compare findings to those obtained with current survey practice, we included one condition that did not specify the type of gun violence. In other words, standard practice does not provide a referent, thus, when answering a question, respondents could be thinking of homicide or violent crime or any one of several forms of gun violence.

Statistical analysis

Simple frequencies were calculated for each question and by condition for expected efficacy. Descriptive results are displayed graphically. Multivariate regressions and their accompanying F-tests were conducted to examine the impact of type of violence on the expected effectiveness of each policy. And, finally, we calculated the difference between the expected efficacy ratings for suicide and the expected efficacy ratings for the other forms of gun violence in order to assess whether the anticipated effectiveness of the policies differed for suicide.

Table 2

Type of gun violence, with and without information about its magnitude, specified in questions about effectiveness.

1. How do you think each policy would affect suicide?
2. About half of the suicides in the U.S. are by a firearm. How do you think each policy would affect suicide?
3. How do you think each policy would affect homicide?
4. About 2/3s of the homicides in the U.S. are by a firearm. How do you think each policy would affect homicide?
5. How do you think each policy would affect violent crime?
6. About 23% of the violent crime in the U.S. involves a gun. How much do you think each policy would affect violent crime?
7. How do you think each policy would affect accidental shootings?
8. About 600 people are accidentally shot and killed each year in the U.S. How do you think each policy would affect accidental shootings?
9. How do you think each policy would affect rampage/mass shootings?
10. In 2012, 45 people were killed in rampage/mass shootings in the U.S. How do you think each policy would affect mass shootings?
11. How effective do you think the policy would be? (i.e., no type of gun violence was specified)

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