



Two years after Newtown—public opinion on gun policy revisited



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Introduction

On December 14, 2012, the devastating shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut prompted a national conversation about gun policy in the United States. Two weeks after the shooting, in January 2013, we fielded a national opinion survey to gauge public support for policies designed to reduce gun violence. At the time, published research on public attitudes about policy options to curb gun violence was fifteen years old. In 2013, we found that large majorities of Americans – both gun owners and non-owners – supported a wide range of gun violence prevention policies, including policies to enhance the background check system for gun sales, prohibit certain dangerous persons from having guns, improve oversight of gun dealers, and prevent people with mental illnesses from having guns (Barry et al., 2013).

In the months following the Newtown shooting, Congress considered legislation introduced by Senators Manchin and Toomey to strengthen the national background check system for gun sales by requiring background checks for internet and gun show sales. Prior research suggests that laws that extend pre-sale background check requirements to sales by private parties prevent the diversion of guns to criminals and prevent homicides (Webster et al., 2013, 2014). In our 2013 study, we found that 89% of the public overall and 84% of gun owners supported background checks for all gun sales. The Manchin–Toomey bill fell six votes shy of the needed 60 to clear the Senate, but policy change did occur in various states—with some, like New York, strengthening gun sales or ownership laws and others,

like Alabama and Georgia, allowing weapons to be carried more easily in public places.

One concern raised about our 2013 study was that public attitudes in the months following Sandy Hook were uniquely shaped by the tragedy. This was a fair criticism—the horrific loss of elementary school children's lives could certainly prompt a public outcry for policy change in manner that might not persist once the public moved beyond the initial shock of the event. In December 2014, a widely-cited Pew Research Center poll appeared to support this notion (Pew Research Center, 2014). The Pew Center poll asked respondents “[W]hat do you think is more important—to protect the right of Americans to own guns, or to control gun ownership?” Fifty-two percent of respondents affirmed the rights of gun-owners, a 7 point increase compared with an identical question in January 2013.

There are a number of concerns about the Pew Center question. First, it frames policies to keep guns from criminals, including background check requirements, as controls on gun ownership though ownership is banned for only a small and dangerous portion of the population. Second, the concept of priming is well-established in social science research, and use of the terms “rights” versus “control” may prime respondents in a manner that could be more pronounced over time with increased political polarization. Third, while this question may capture a general public mood, it provides little direction to policymakers on public support for specific policies. To examine how attitudes have changed since Sandy Hook, we conducted a two-year follow up public opinion study.

Methods

We fielded the survey from January 2 through 16, 2015, exactly two years from the dates our 2013 survey was fielded, and used the same sampling approach and survey research firm, GfK. As with the 2013 survey, the sample for the 2015 survey was drawn from GfK's KnowledgePanel®, a probability

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based web panel designed to be representative of the U.S. adult population. GfK forms its panel using random-digit dialing and address-based sampling covering 97% of all U.S. households (GfK, 2013). Panel members without Internet access or hardware were provided it when they agree to participate, and the panel includes households with listed and unlisted numbers and those with only cell phones. The GfK panel used probability sampling at the first stage of recruitment when individuals are approached to participate in the panel, and the panel recruitment rate was 16.6%. Panelists typically take around 2 surveys each month and GfK encourages participation by offering cash awards and other incentives. Academic researchers in a number of disciplines, including public health, medicine, sociology, economics and political science have used GfK to field surveys or experimental studies (Emery et al., 2014; Gollust et al., 2013; Henderson and Hillygus, 2011; Lin et al., 2014). Panelists aged 18 and older were invited to participate in this survey and the 2015 survey completion rate was 70%—nearly identical to our 69% 2013 completion rate. In both surveys, to make estimates representative of the U.S. population, all analyses used survey weights developed based on data extracted from the U.S. Current Population Survey to adjust the sample for known selection deviations and survey nonresponse. We oversampled gun-owners to compare rates stratified by

ownership status. In both surveys, we asked respondents about 18 gun policies using identical wording and tested differences in support among gun-owners and non-owners using Pearson's chi-square test.

In the 2015 survey, we also asked respondents about five new evidence-informed policies designed to restrict firearm ownership based on history of violent or dangerous behavior and recommended by the Consortium for Risk-Based Firearm Policy (McGinty et al., 2014). Specifically, the policies would restrict gun ownership, in some cases temporarily, for persons: subject to a temporary domestic violence restraining order (for the duration of the order), convicted of two or more offenses for driving while intoxicated, or convicted of two or more misdemeanor crimes involving illegal drugs. We also examined support for authorizing law enforcement to temporarily remove guns from individuals believed to pose an immediate threat of harm to self or others and development of a gun violence restraining order process (recently enacted in California and being considered in other states) that would allow family members to ask the court to temporarily remove guns from a relative or intimate partner at risk of harming himself or others.

Unlike the 2013 gun policy survey conducted following the Newtown tragedy, this survey data collection in 2015 did not occur in the aftermath of a

Table 1
Public support for gun policies in 2013^a and 2015, overall and by gun-ownership status^b.

	2013			2015		
	Overall (N = 2703)	Non-gun-owners (N = 843)	Gun-owners (N = 947)	Overall (N = 1326)	Non-gun-owners (N = 802)	Gun-owners (N = 524)
<i>Assault-weapon and ammunition policies</i>	<i>Percent in favor</i>			<i>Percent in favor</i>		
Banning the sale of military-style, semiautomatic assault weapons that are capable of shooting more than 10 rounds of ammunition without reloading	69.0	77.4	45.7***	63.0	67.2	46.1***
Banning the sale of large-capacity clips or magazines that allow some guns to shoot more than 10 bullets before reloading	68.4	75.5	47.8***	59.9	63.7	44.8***
<i>Prohibited person policies</i>						
Prohibiting a person convicted of a serious crime as a juvenile from having a gun for 10 years	83.1	84.4	80.0	73.2	73.2	73.2
Prohibiting a person under the age of 21 from having a handgun	69.5	76.4	52.3***	66.0	69.7	51.0***
Prohibiting people who have been convicted of each of these crimes from having a gun for 10 years:						
Public display of a gun in a threatening manner excluding self defense	71.1	69.8	71.3	68.4	66.8	75.1**
Domestic violence	73.7	72.4	73.7	70.6	69.2	76.4**
Assault or battery that does not result in serious injury or involve a lethal weapon	53.0	60.3	49.0***	55.9	56.5	53.4
Drunk and disorderly conduct	37.5	39.7	32.1*	41.7	42.7	37.8
Carrying a concealed gun without a permit	57.8	60.3	49.0***	54.2	54.4	53.2
<i>Background check policies</i>						
Requiring a background check system for all gun sales to make sure a purchaser is not legally prohibited from having a gun	88.8	89.9	84.3**	83.7	83.4	84.7
Requiring state 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	85.4	85.3	85.6	82.0	80.9	86.2*
<i>Policies affecting gun dealers</i>						
Allowing the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms to temporarily take away a gun dealer's license if an audit reveals record-keeping violations and the dealer cannot account for 20 or more guns	84.6	86.4	78.9*	78.8	78.8	79.0
Allowing 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	73.2	77.0	62.9***	72.3	73.5	67.2*
Allowing the information about which gun dealers sell the most guns used in crimes to be available to the police and the public so that those gun dealers can be prioritized for greater oversight	68.8	74.1	56.5***	79.1	79.6	77.5***
Requiring a mandatory minimum sentence of 2 years in prison for a person convicted of knowingly selling a gun to someone who cannot legally have a gun	76.0	77.7	70.7**	70.8	70.9	70.5
<i>Other gun policies</i>						
Requiring people to obtain a license from a local law enforcement agency before buying a gun to verify their identity and ensure that they are not legally prohibiting from having a gun	77.3	83.5	59.4***	72.2	75.5	59.2***
Requiring by law that a person lock up the guns in the home when not in use to prevent handling by children or teenagers without supervision	67.2	75.3	44.4***	69.1	73.7	50.4***
Allowing people who have lost the right to have a gun due to mental illness to have that right restored if they are determined not to be dangerous	31.6	31.6	34.0	38.6	37.5	42.7

^a Data from the 2013 survey reprinted from Barry CL, McGinty EE, Vernick JS, Webster DW (2013). After Newton—public opinion on gun policy and mental illness. *New England Journal of Medicine* 368(12): 1077–81.

^b Responses among gun-owners and NRA members were compared with responses among non-gun-owners using chi-square tests; P-values are for this comparison. *P < 0.05; **P < 0.01; ***P < 0.001.

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