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In-home firearm access among US adolescents and the role of religious subculture: Results from a nationally representative study



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ABSTRACT

Religious participation is linked to numerous positive safety outcomes for adolescents. Scant attention, however, has been paid to associations between religious participation and safety risks among adolescents. Using data from Add Health (N = 18,449), a nationally representative school-based sample of US adolescents, this study examines the relationship between adolescents' religious affiliation and easy access to firearms at home. Regression analyses adjust for complex sampling design and compare easy firearm access at home among conservative Protestant adolescents to adolescent firearm access in other religious traditions. Conservative Protestant adolescents have a substantially greater likelihood of easy access to a gun at home compared to adolescents of all other major religious traditions in the United States. Recognizing differences in adolescent firearm access between subcultural groups can help public health interventions more effectively identify and address the needs of vulnerable populations. The paper's conclusion considers suggestions for effective policy and programmatic initiatives.

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Public outcry over the 2012 Newtown shooting helped revive a national debate concerning the destructive potential of guns in the lives of adolescents and children. Religious participation—frequently ignored in this debate—is associated with an array of positive safety outcomes for adolescents; however, in the case of home gun access certain religious characteristics may increase risk. Though few are religion-focused, a number of studies going back to the 1970s have found that adults with Protestant religious affiliation—measured as one undifferentiated group—are more likely than other Americans to own a gun (Celinska, 2007; DeFronzo, 1979; Dixon and Lizotte, 1987; Ellison, 1991a, 1991b; O'Connor and Lizotte, 1978; Jiobu and Curry, 2001; Kleck and Kovandzic, 2009). The majority of American Protestants are affiliated with conservative Protestantism (Putnam and Campbell, 2010). As the largest religious tradition in the United States, conservative Protestants comprise over one third of American adults. And while Christians have been declining as an overall share of the American population for some time, conservative Protestants have experienced this decline at a much lower rate compared to Mainline Protestants

List of abbreviations: Add Health, National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health.

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and Catholics.¹ Scholars have suggested that conservative Protestants are more likely to own a gun compared to the general population (Greeley and Hout, 2006). Indeed, a recent analysis of General Social Survey confirms that conservative Protestants have the highest rate of personal handgun ownership compared to other major religious groups in the United States (Yamane, 2016).

Yet youth gun access is distinct from adult gun ownership,² and while prior research has shed light on sociodemographic variations in youth gun access (Sorenson and Vittes, 2004), the role of religion has been left unexamined. The present study moves beyond studies of religion and guns that largely focus on adult gun ownership and adolescent studies of socio-demographic factors by examining religion, adolescents, and guns—specifically, whether adolescents who are members of the conservative Protestant religious subculture are more likely to have easy access to a gun at home. Known differences in fertility across religious groups underscores the importance of this research for the lives of youth. Conservative Protestants have one of the highest fertility rates of any major religious tradition, either matching or potentially outpacing Catholics³ in recent data (Chaves 2011; Westoff and Marshall 2010; Smith and Cooperman 2015)—in other words, a disproportionately greater share of American youth are raised in conservative Protestant households. Using data from The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), this is the first nationally representative study to investigate the relationship between religious subcultures and adolescents' easy access to a firearm at home. Studying the influence of religious subcultures on youths' gun access could aid in developing effective policy and programmatic initiatives, advancing understanding of religious and subcultural impacts on gun safety among young people, and pointing to promising avenues for future research.

1. Firearms and young people

In the last century the predominant causes of child mortality have shifted from infectious diseases to injuries (Guyer et al., 2000). Access to a firearm is an important risk factor in this context. For young Americans, gun injuries are the second most common cause of death (US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). American children are eleven times more likely to be fatally shot by accident compared to children in other high-income countries (Richardson and Hemenway, 2011). Gun injuries are also a common source of hospitalization, morbidity, and disability among children and adolescents (Leventhal et al., 2014). Most accidental gun injuries to children happen at home, and most unintentional gun fatalities are other-inflicted, with the shooter overwhelmingly likely to be a friend or young family member, such as an older sibling (Hemenway et al., 2010). Guns are also the second most likely method of suicide among adolescents (US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014), and adolescents with a history of suicidality or mental illness have equal likelihood of in-home gun access as other adolescents (Simonetti et al., 2015). In a sample of over thirty-nine injury prevention experts, access to a gun at home was rated as the most serious danger out of major household injury risks for children (Katcher et al., 2006).

Access to guns at home is widespread among youth; in nationally-representative data, one-third of adolescents lived in a home with a gun, and 41% of those had easy in-home access to and ability to shoot the gun (Simonetti et al., 2015). The majority of gun owners do not store guns in a locked place in the home and are no more likely to store guns safely if children are present (Connor, 2005). Completed youth suicides are more likely when a gun is in the home, regardless of whether the gun is locked away or stored separately from ammunition, though increased safety measures reduce some risk (Brent et al., 1991). Injury, morbidity, and mortality findings such as these have led a variety of health organizations to caution the public regarding in-home firearm storage. For example, the America Pediatric Association has maintained that “the absence of guns from children’s homes and communities is the most reliable and effective measure to prevent firearm-related injuries in children and adolescents” (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2012). Identifying determinants of youth gun access at home is an important public health and economic⁴ concern because of links between gun access and increased risk for physical injury, morbidity, disability, and premature death.

2. Religion and firearm access among adolescents

Research on religion and adolescent risk behaviors generally finds protective effects for religious involvement (Burdette and Hill, 2009; Hill et al., 2009), including protective effects for conservative religious groups (Dew et al., 2008). However, Hill and Cobb (2011, 251) note that among young Americans, “religious conservatism may increase the odds of military enlistment—an extremely risky occupational pursuit” (Burdette et al., 2009). Similarly, in the case of access to a firearm at home, there are several reasons to expect that belonging to conservative Protestantism may increase the likelihood of risk.

Guns serve as emotionally-charged symbols of identity and meaning for many gun enthusiasts (Mencken and Froese, forthcoming)—symbols that can become fused with notions of sacredness. Charlton Heston (1998) expressed this sentiment well in a famous National Rifle Association presidential address:

¹ The decline has been low enough that the conservative Protestant population is actually growing in absolute terms, while Mainline Protestants and Catholics are declining in absolute numbers (Smith and Cooperman, 2015).

² Adult gun ownership is important for a number of reasons (e.g., completed suicide risk), but youth in-home gun access is distinct in part because there are many adult gun owners who do not have children in the home. Adults who do live with children may also underestimate the level of access children have to their guns.

³ Particularly compared to non-Hispanic white Catholics.

⁴ Major economic impacts include the health care and social service costs associated with gun injury and deaths.

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