Cite this article as:
J S Vernick, S P Teret, K A Howard, M D Teret
and G J Wintemute
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*Health Affairs* 12, no.4 (1993):198-208
doi: 10.1377/hlthaff.12.4.198

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Public Opinion Polling On Gun Policy

by Jon S. Vernick, Stephen P. Teret, Kim Ammann Howard, Michael D. Teret, and Garen J. Wintemute

Abstract: Faced with the national epidemic of gun violence, legislators should be especially sensitive to their constituents' support for various policy options. This support is best evidenced by well-conducted public opinion polls. We review public opinion polls on gun policy since 1987. Although the public support for a number of promising interventions targeting the design and manufacture of firearms has not been meaningfully investigated, strong support is evidenced for most other gun-control options. The public also believes, contrary to Supreme Court rulings, that the Second Amendment to the Constitution protects a broad individual right to bear arms.

In an effort to combat the epidemic of gun violence in the United States, federal and state legislatures have proposed a variety of regulatory interventions. In fact, as of 1 July 1993 more than twenty different bills addressing gun violence were pending in Congress. Although the prospects for these specific measures vary, regulating guns is often a politically formidable task. Virtually all gun legislation evokes strong emotions backed by a commitment to political action. Legislators therefore are particularly sensitive to constituents' opinions when voting on gun policy. Those voter opinions often are expressed by special-interest groups in the form of money or letter-writing campaigns but may be reflected more broadly and accurately by well-conducted national public opinion polls.

This DataWatch examines the extent to which public opinion on gun policy has been measured in the past several years. It also explores the nature of the questions that have been asked and their relevance to specific policies most likely to reduce gun violence. We summarize the findings on public support for various gun policy proposals and recommend areas requiring additional investigation. Despite public misunderstanding of the inapplicability of the Second Amendment to most gun laws, the polls we summarize show strong support for most gun policy options.

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Methods And Data Sources

We examined public opinion polls on gun policy at the national level; we excluded local or regional polls from this analysis. To gather national polling information, we (1) examined data maintained by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research; (2) reviewed information from the Library of Congress as reported by the Congressional Research Service; (3) performed an on-line search of newspaper reporting on polls accessed through the Nexis database; and (4) examined polling information obtained from gun policy advocacy organizations.¹

The Roper Center, located at the University of Connecticut, maintains the largest and most comprehensive collection of public opinion survey data in the United States. Its collection contains complete interview data in computer-readable form for more than 8,000 major surveys. Most of the leading survey organizations deposit their polling data with the Roper Center. We performed a computerized search of the full text of all questions contained in the Roper Center database from 1987 through 1992, using the following words or phrases (including their plural forms): gun, firearm, rifle, shotgun, handgun, assault weapon, automatic weapon, Saturday night special, and Second Amendment.

To categorize the gun policy-oriented questions identified by the search, we used a nosology of gun policy. The nosology is based upon a framework of gun regulation developed by Stephen Teret and first briefly described in 1980.² It categorizes regulatory interventions by key points in the “lifespan” of a firearm: its manufacture, sale, possession, and use. Other nosology categories were established for questions proposing nonspecific regulation of guns, questions related to controls on the importation of guns, and Second Amendment-related questions. The nosology itself is presented in greater detail elsewhere in this volume.

We then analyzed the answers to questions corresponding to selected nosology categories to establish public support of or opposition to various gun policy options. These categories were chosen for analysis based on their relevance to the gun policy debate and on the existence of at least two polls with questions fitting that nosology designation. Although space limitations prevent a full description of each question, the generally low variability among answers in the same category indicates that variations in question content probably had only a limited effect on the level of support for most gun policy options.

The search of the Roper Center database yielded 284 questions that contained the words or phrases mentioned above. Fourteen questions, although containing the words searched for, were not relevant to the subject matter of this study. Of the remaining 270 questions, 143 inquired
about the respondents’ opinions on gun policy, and 127 inquired about factual issues such as the respondents’ ownership of guns or reasons for their purchase. Our examination of polling questions from the sources other than the Roper Center database revealed that the Roper Center database contained all of the nationally polled questions identified through these other sources.

The temporal distribution of the surveys and questions from 1987 to 1992 is shown in Exhibit 1. Twenty different polling organizations (or poll sponsors where the polling organization was not indicated) asked the 270 questions. Because many of the questions fit more than one nosology category, the 143 gun policy questions represented a total of 194 topics classified into thirty-nine different nosology categories. Exhibit 2 shows the number of questions asked by seven more general topic areas.

Questions And Answers

The public’s answers to these questions demonstrate, in general, a willingness to accept more control over the manufacture, sale, and possession of guns. The following is an aggregated analysis of the answers to key gun policy questions from the 1987-1992 national polls (summarized in Exhibit 3). We limit our analysis to the 143 policy questions identified in our search of the Roper Center database and exclude the 127 questions examining more factually oriented issues such as the reasons for gun purchase.

Manufacture of firearms. The public favors banning the manufacture of “Saturday night specials” and assault weapons. Three questions sought the public’s opinion of a ban on the manufacture of Saturday night specials

Exhibit 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Surveys</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Polling information from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.
(cheap, poor-quality handguns). Approval ratings for a ban ranged from 68 to 73 percent. Two polls were conducted in 1989 and a third in 1990. Even among a subsample of gun owners queried in 1989, 73 percent responded that “it should be illegal to manufacture and sell inexpensive, foreign-made handguns sometimes called Saturday night specials.”

Exhibit 3
Public Support For Gun Policy Options, Selected Questions, 1987-1992

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gun policy option</th>
<th>Approval range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ban manufacture of Saturday night specials</td>
<td>68% to 73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ban manufacture of assault weapons</td>
<td>72% to 73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stricter regulation of firearm sales</td>
<td>60% to 78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stricter regulation of handgun sales</td>
<td>60% to 65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ban sale of all handguns</td>
<td>40% to 42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ban sale of Saturday night specials</td>
<td>68% to 73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ban sale of assault weapons</td>
<td>72% to 75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seven-day handgun waiting period</td>
<td>80% to 95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ban possession of all firearms</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ban possession of handguns</td>
<td>29% to 43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ban possession of Saturday night specials</td>
<td>68% to 71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ban possession of assault weapons</td>
<td>72% to 73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Register possession of all firearms</td>
<td>67% to 79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Register possession of all handguns</td>
<td>72% to 84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>License carrying of guns outside the home</td>
<td>81% to 88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual right to bear arms protected by Constitution</td>
<td>68% to 90%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Polling information from the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.
Four questions from four different polls conducted in 1989 and 1990 asked respondents their opinion of federal legislation that would outlaw the manufacture of assault weapons. Approval ratings were extremely uniform—72 percent in two polls and 73 percent in the two others. Among gun owners queried in 1989, 73 percent thought that “it should be illegal to manufacture and sell semi-automatic weapons known as ‘assault’ rifles.”

Sale of firearms. The public supports stricter regulation of the sale of all firearms and of handguns in particular but would not support banning the sale of all handguns. However, the public would support banning the sale of Saturday night specials and assault weapons, as well as a waiting period before the purchase of a handgun. Six questions from six different polls conducted from 1989 to 1992 asked whether the sale of firearms should be more strictly regulated. Responses ranged from 60 percent agreeing that “laws covering the sale of firearms should be made more strict” in a 1992 poll to 78 percent reporting a similar response in a 1990 poll. In a 1989 poll 78 percent also thought that “people should be required to provide more information about themselves to the police before being able to buy any firearm.” No questions asking about a total ban on the sale of all firearms were identified.

Four questions contained in polls conducted in 1987, 1988 (two polls), and 1990 queried respondents’ support for stricter regulation of the sale of handguns. Approval percentages ranged from 60 to 65 percent. In one other poll only 26 percent of respondents believed that “anyone who wants to buy a handgun should be allowed to.” Clear support is lacking, however, for a complete ban on the sale of all handguns. In three polls conducted in 1988, 1989, and 1992, only 40 to 42 percent of respondents would favor “a ban on the sale of all handguns, except those that are issued to law enforcement officers.” Opposition was expressed by 52 to 56 percent. Regarding the sale of Saturday night specials, 68 to 73 percent of respondents supported a total ban.

Approval ratings for a federal ban on the sale of assault weapons ranged from 72 to 75 percent, including 73 percent of gun owners in one 1989 poll. These questions were contained in eight polls conducted from 1989 to 1991. Two additional questions from another survey asked separately about approval of a ban on the sale of U.S.-made assault rifles (60 percent approved) compared with those made abroad (67 percent approved).

Four additional questions from a single survey conducted in 1989 asked about the public’s perception of the likely effect of a ban on the sale of assault weapons. Responses were mixed. A beneficial outcome was predicted by a majority of respondents in two of the questions (“would have an impact” [57 percent] and “would reduce the number of random killings by unstable people” [58 percent]), but a majority also believed that banning
the sale of assault weapons would “make it more difficult for law-abiding citizens to obtain them but not affect the ability of criminals to obtain them” (65 percent) and would not “reduce the number of drug and crime-related killings” (50 percent). Finally, in one separate 1989 survey question, 43 percent of respondents rated President Bush’s handling of an assault weapon ban as “excellent/pretty good.”

Several polls probed the acceptability of imposing waiting periods before the purchase of a handgun. Seven questions from seven separate polls conducted between 1989 and 1992 questioned respondents’ support for a seven-day waiting period for handgun purchases, or specifically for the Brady bill, a piece of handgun-control legislation that has been debated in Congress since 1987. (In late 1993 Congress passed a version of the Brady bill that includes a five-day waiting period to enable background checks of handgun purchasers.) On these questions, approval ranged from 80 percent in a 1991 poll to 87 percent in a 1989 poll of gun owners.

Five identical questions appeared in a series of Gallup polls from 1988 to 1991. Of these, 87 to 95 percent of respondents expressed approval for “a national law requiring a seven-day waiting period before a handgun could be purchased in order to determine whether the prospective buyer has been convicted of a felony or is mentally ill.”

Five additional questions did not directly address levels of popular support for a seven-day waiting period. Examples in this group include questions asking respondents’ opinions of the likely effectiveness of a waiting period (56 percent believed that it would not decrease murders) or whether they believed that President Bush supported the Brady bill (63 percent believed that he did).

Possession of firearms. Although the public should not support outlawing the possession of all firearms or of handguns in particular, it would favor banning the possession of Saturday night specials and assault weapons. The public also supports requiring the possession of all guns to be registered and requiring a license to carry a gun outside of one’s home. We identified only one question that asked respondents whether they “favor or oppose making it illegal for civilians to own all guns of any type.” Sixty-four percent expressed disapproval (29 percent approved). Two other questions from the same 1989 survey queried respondents’ opinions of the likely effect of a total gun ban. In one question, 67 percent thought such a ban “would give criminals an added advantage.” In the other, 38 percent reported that they would “feel less safe,” and 39 percent thought it “wouldn’t make a difference.”

In response to six questions contained in six surveys conducted from 1987 to 1991, between 50 and 65 percent of respondents would not support a total ban on the possession of handguns. In the most recent such poll, 53
percent responded that “there should not be a law that would ban the possession of handguns except by the police and other authorized persons;” 43 percent supported such a law.\(^{21}\)

In response to one question from a 1989 poll, 62 percent of respondents agreed that “prohibiting the public from having handguns would give criminals an added advantage.”\(^{22}\) One other question contained in a 1991 poll found that 66 percent of respondents opposed a proposed constitutional amendment “to give individual citizens the right to possess handguns and semi-automatic weapons.”\(^{23}\) However, 71 percent of respondents to a 1989 poll favored “federal legislation banning the manufacture, sale, and possession of cheap handguns known as Saturday night specials.”\(^{24}\) In 1990 the comparable approval rate was 68 percent.

Three questions from polls conducted in 1989 and 1990 sought the public’s opinion of a ban on the possession of assault weapons. Approval ratings ranged from 72 to 73 percent.\(^{26}\) Five other questions sought opinions on related topics. In one 1989 survey 62 percent of respondents reported that they thought an assault weapon ban would not infringe on the “right to bear arms.”\(^{27}\) An additional 59 percent (in a different 1989 poll) believed that public safety interests associated with an assault weapon ban should outweigh any constitutional protection.\(^{28}\) In other questions 53 percent of respondents believed that banning assault rifles would take them only from law-abiding citizens; 46 percent believed that limits on assault weapons would decrease drug-related violence (44 percent thought they would not); and 32 percent thought that “outlawing only future sales” was the best option for disposing of existing assault rifles in the event of a ban.\(^{29}\)

Four questions from four different polls conducted in 1988 and 1989 (two polls each year) addressed the issue of registering the possession of all guns. Approval ranged from 67 to 79 percent.\(^{30}\) Six questions contained in six polls conducted in 1989, 1990, and 1991 queried the public’s support for mandatory registration of handguns. Approval for this policy option was even stronger than for a registration requirement applicable to all guns. Approval ranged from 72 percent in a 1989 poll of gun owners to 84 percent in another 1989 poll.\(^{31}\) Finally, four questions from polls conducted in 1988 (two polls), 1989, and 1991 asked, “Would you favor or oppose a law requiring that any person who carries a gun outside his home must have a license to do so?” Approval rates ranged from 81 to 88 percent.\(^{32}\)

**Constitutionality.** The public believes that individuals have a constitutional or otherwise protected right to own guns. Nine questions contained in seven different polls queried the public’s opinion on a variety of topics related to the Second Amendment (the “right to bear arms”). These polls were conducted from 1989 to 1991. Three questions (from two polls) asked respondents if they believed individuals have the right to own guns. For one
In the first subsample 68 percent of respondents believed that the right to own a gun was guaranteed either by the Constitution or by regular law; 74 percent of the other subsample supported this “right." In another 1989 poll 84 percent of respondents reported that the “people have the right to own a gun, if that’s what they want to do”.

Two questions asked a sample of gun owners if they believed the right to own a gun was protected by the Constitution. In a 1989 poll 90 percent said that they believed that it was protected; in a 1991 poll 77 percent thought that it was projected.

Four additional questions (from three polls) queried other aspects of public opinion on the Second Amendment. In two different 1989 polls 62 percent believed that an assault weapon ban would not infringe on the right to bear arms, and 59 percent believed that any constitutional protection is outweighed by public safety interests. In a 1991 poll 66 percent of respondents opposed “amending the Constitution to give individual citizens the right to possess handguns and semi-automatic weapons,” but 50 percent also opposed “amending the Constitution to outlaw the carrying of concealed firearms by individual citizens.”

Other survey evidence. In April 1993 the survey research firm LH Research prepared an important new gun violence survey for the Harvard School of Public Health, under a grant from The Joyce Foundation of Chicago. Results of that survey were released 3 June 1993, after primary data collection and analysis for this DataWatch had been completed.

Although many of the questions from this poll involved gun ownership and perceptions of societal violence, nine questions queried respondents’ approval of specific gun policy proposals. Support for a seven-day waiting period (89 percent) and federal registration of all guns (82 percent) remained very strong. Clear support also was expressed for requiring a carry permit for guns outside of the home (72 percent), a federal law prohibiting carrying guns across state lines (70 percent), one-gun-per-month purchase restrictions (67 percent), and a “special tax on guns such as on cigarettes” (62 percent). Sixty-three percent of respondents favored banning the sale of all automatic and semiautomatic guns, and, for the first time in any of the polls identified, a majority favored “a federal law banning the ownership of all handguns, except those given permission by a court of law” (52 percent in favor, 43 percent opposed). Significantly, the only policy option not supported by a majority of respondents was a federal handgun ban supplemented with a plan to buy back handguns from existing owners at $200 per gun (45 percent in favor, 47 percent opposed).
A significant amount of polling has taken place nationally on gun policy issues. Given the generally supportive public opinion for a variety of gun-control policies, legislators can feel more confident that a number of proposed laws intended to reduce gun violence would enjoy widespread support. In fact, every gun policy option we summarize, other than proposals to completely ban the sale or possession of all firearms or handguns, is favored by a majority of Americans. In some polls more than four of ten respondents would support banning all handguns. Information from the most recent Joyce Foundation-sponsored poll suggests that a substantial number of Americans would support even such sweeping measures. Our results are consistent with those reported in much earlier polls, indicating little recent change in strong public support for most gun-control options.

Not all relevant categories of gun policy have been polled, however; in fact, some of the categories that are most promising for the reduction of gun violence have been totally ignored. It has been recognized that policies that focus on the manufacture and design of handguns may be more effective in reducing the incidence of gun injuries than those that concentrate on the possession and use of handguns. But too little is known about public opinion on these critical issues.

For example, while several questions in the national polls asked about banning the manufacture of certain guns, there were no questions about regulating the design of guns as we do for other consumer products or about taxing guns at the manufacturer level. Only one question asked about the imposition of strict liability on manufacturers for injuries caused by their products (43 percent were in favor in 1991). Similarly, with regard to gun sales, a number of questions addressed weapon bans or waiting periods, but none asked about licensure or taxation of sellers (other than in the recent Harvard/Joyce poll). These areas demand careful survey investigation. Other specific policy options warranting further survey research include (1) federal or state regulation of gun design, similar to the regulation of other products, to reduce the number of gun injuries and deaths; (2) safety device requirements for handguns (such as grip safeties and load indicators); (3) higher taxes on the manufacture or sale of guns, with the proceeds potentially dedicated to programs designed to reduce violence; (4) the imposition of strict product liability on gun manufacturers for deaths and injuries associated with their products; and (5) broadening the categories of persons prohibited from owning or carrying a firearm to include high-risk categories not now affected.

Finally, the public’s misperception of the meaning of the Second Amendment is noteworthy. In fact, Supreme Court opinions make clear
that the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution does not confer a right upon individuals to own any firearms they desire. There is no constitutional prohibition to federal legislation restricting access to firearms, other than those laws that might affect state militias. The Second Amendment places no restrictions whatever on state laws.42 Educational efforts to improve voters’ and legislators’ understanding of the Second Amendment could greatly improve our society’s chances of reducing the unacceptable toll of gun violence.

This study was funded in part by a contract to the authors from The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and The California Wellness Foundation.

NOTES

16. Louis Harris poll (23 March 1989).
30. Louis Harris poll (23 March 1989); Gallup polls (9 and 25 September 1988); and Yankelovich poll for Time/CNN (13 February 1989).
38. LH Research poll for the Harvard School of Public Health and The Joyce Foundation (1 April 1993). Unlike the other polling questions identified for this analysis, the complete Joyce Foundation poll was readily available for review. Many of the items that preceded the gun policy questions in the Joyce poll addressed attitudes toward levels of violence in society. These earlier questions may have sensitized respondents to the problem of gun violence and influenced their support for the various gun policy options. The extent to which the context of questions contained in other polls may have influenced responses in either direction is unknown.
40. Baker et al., “Firearms and the Public Health.”