



Violence Policy Center

1730 Rhode Island Avenue, NW
Suite 1014
Washington, DC 20036

202.822.8200 voice
202.822.8205 fax
www.vpc.org web

A Shrinking Minority

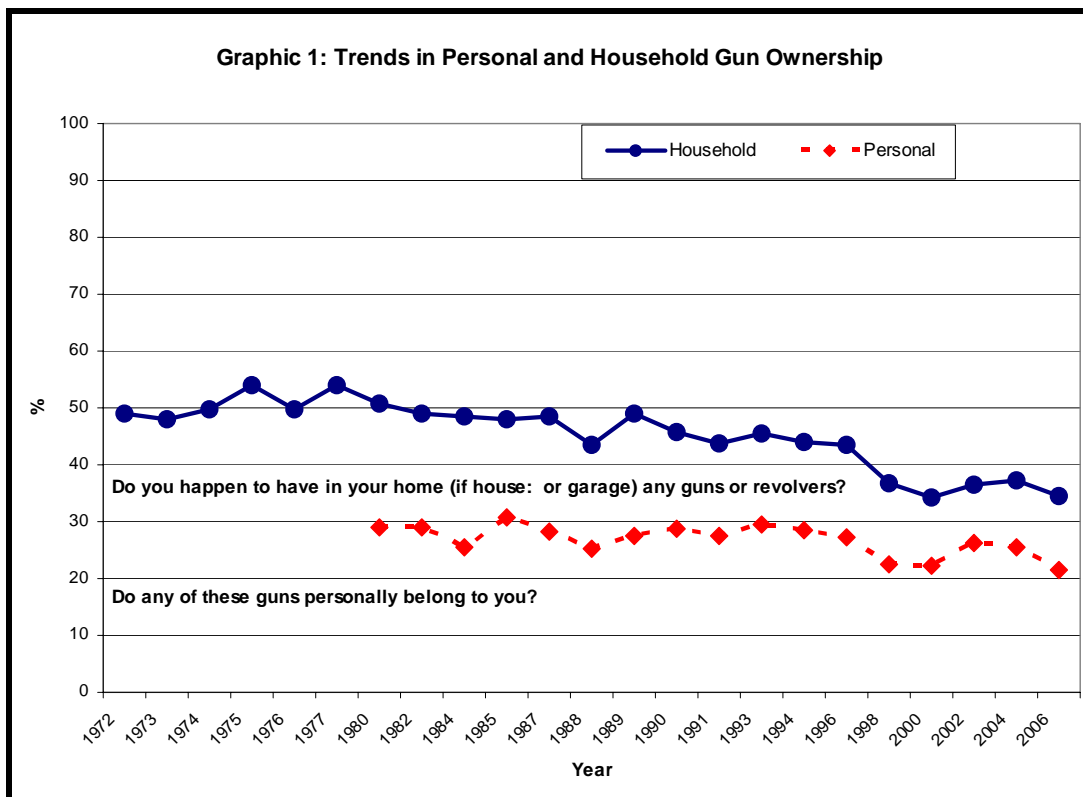
The Continuing Decline of Gun Ownership in America

Gun ownership in America is declining.

During the period 1972 to 2006, the percentage of American households that reported having any guns in the home has dropped nearly 20 percentage points: from a high of 54 percent in 1977 to 34.5 percent in 2006 (see Graphic 1, Graphic 2).

During the period 1980 to 2006, the percentage of Americans who reported personally owning a gun dropped more than nine percentage points: from a high of 30.7 percent in 1985 to a low during the period of 21.6 percent in 2006 (see Graphic 1, Graphic 3).

These numbers, the most recent and comprehensive data available, come from the General Social Survey (GSS). The GSS is conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC)¹ at the University of Chicago. Begun in 1972, the GSS completed its 26th round in 2006. According to NORC, "Except for the U.S. Census, the GSS is the most frequently analyzed source of information in the social sciences" and is "the only survey that has tracked the opinions of Americans over an extended period of time."²



Source: NORC, *Public Attitudes Toward the Regulation of Firearms*

Since 1972, the GSS has asked the question: “Do you happen to have in your home (if house: or garage) any guns or revolvers?” Since 1980, those respondents who stated that they had a gun in their home were then asked, “Do any of these guns personally belong to you?” Presenting survey data from this period, the NORC report concludes, “[G]un ownership has been declining over the last 35 years and the 9/11 terrorist attacks did not reverse that trend.”³

Graphic 2: Household Gun Ownership in the United States, 1972 to 2006⁴							
Year	Percent Households	Year	Percent Households	Year	Percent Households	Year	Percent Households
1972	49.1	1981	not asked	1990	45.8	1999	not asked
1973	47.9	1982	48.9	1991	43.7	2000	34.3
1974	49.7	1983	not asked	1992	not asked	2001	not asked
1975	54	1984	48.5	1993	45.5	2002	36.4
1976	49.7	1985	48.1	1994	43.9	2003	not asked
1977	54	1986	not asked	1995	not asked	2004	37.3
1978	not asked	1987	48.6	1996	43.4	2005	not asked
1979	not asked	1988	43.4	1997	not asked	2006	34.5
1980	50.8	1989	48.9	1998	36.7		

Graphic 3: Personal Gun Ownership in the United States, 1980 to 2006⁵							
Year	Percent Personal Ownership	Year	Percent Personal Ownership	Year	Percent Personal Ownership	Year	Percent Personal Ownership
1972	not asked	1981	not asked	1990	28.7	1999	not asked
1973	not asked	1982	29.1	1991	27.6	2000	22.3
1974	not asked	1983	not asked	1992	not asked	2001	not asked
1975	not asked	1984	25.5	1993	29.4	2002	26.3
1976	not asked	1985	30.7	1994	28.5	2003	not asked
1977	not asked	1986	not asked	1995	not asked	2004	25.4
1978	not asked	1987	28.2	1996	27.2	2005	not asked
1979	not asked	1988	25.2	1997	not asked	2006	21.6
1980	29	1989	27.4	1998	22.6		

The NORC study reports, "Some have speculated that the 9/11 terrorist attacks undermined support for the regulation of firearms, arguing that fear of terrorism increased the public desire for firearms for self-defense. However, this was not the case."⁶ Referring to earlier findings published by NORC researchers, the study reported that "except for a small bulge in handgun applications in September-October, 2001 which had already started to subside by November, there was no increase in firearm purchases in response to the 9/11 attacks."⁷

The Gun Industry Creates Its Own Reality

The importance of this downward trend is not lost on the gun industry, which works to maintain its political clout by consistently overestimating the number of Americans who own guns. In a June 2006 press release, National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF) President Doug Painter states that "...gun sales and ownership in our country continue to rise."⁸ The NSSF is the self-described "trade association for the shooting, hunting and outdoor industry."⁹ In the release, the NSSF adds without attribution, "The number of American households with at least one firearm is now estimated at nearly 47.8 million."¹⁰ According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, in 2005 there were an estimated 108,819,000 households in America.¹¹ Using NSSF's figures, 43.9 percent of American households have a gun—more than nine percentage points higher than the most recent NORC household gun ownership figure.

The NSSF is not alone in its efforts to puff up the facts about how many Americans have guns in their homes or personally own firearms. The National Rifle Association (NRA) routinely claims that nearly half of all American households have guns and also misleadingly boasts, "The number of gun owners is also at an all-time high."^{12 13}

So why are the gun industry and gun lobby whistling as they walk together through the graveyard? Because they recognize that the gun culture in America is fading away, and with it, the customers and activists that America's gunmakers and gun lobby rely on.

When talking to the news media, gunmakers work to present themselves as a vibrant, growing industry that is an inextricable part of American society. Yet, for the past decade, when talking amongst themselves in industry publications, the issue, as voiced in one gunmaker's ad in 1998 is, "It's not `who your customers will be in five years.' It's `will there be any customers left?'"¹⁴ This fact is openly acknowledged in gun industry publications and among the associations that act on the industry's behalf. Discussions of the continuing decline in gun ownership, and the inability to find replacement buyers to take the place of the aging primary market of white males, are often characterized by tones of panic and, at the same time, resignation. Reasons

commonly cited by the gun industry and gun lobby for the continually diminishing number of gun owners and future gun buyers include the following:

- A lack of interest in guns by youth.¹⁵
- The end of military conscription.¹⁶
- The decreasing popularity of hunting.¹⁷
- Land use issues that limit hunting.¹⁸
- Environmental and zoning issues that force shooting ranges to close and limit new range construction.¹⁹
- The increase in single-parent homes headed by women.²⁰

In response to these changes, the gun industry has increasingly focused its marketing and sales efforts on women and children. At the same time, it is working to not only lower “barriers” to children and hunting, but also create and market new shooting activities in the hopes of ensuring a future customer base.

As the findings of the NORC data reveal, these efforts have, so far, been unsuccessful in the face of longstanding demographic and social trends.

Endnotes

1. "Public Attitudes Toward the Regulation of Firearms," Tom W. Smith, NORC/University of Chicago, March 2007. The percentages of gun-owning households cited in the report comes from the General Social Survey, which is conducted annually by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC). According to NORC, "The General Social Survey (GSS) is one of NORC's flagship surveys and our longest running project. The GSS started in 1972 and completed its 26th round in 2006. For the last third of a century the GSS has been monitoring social change and the growing complexity of American society. The GSS is the largest project funded by the Sociology Program of the National Science Foundation. Except for the U.S. Census, the GSS is the most frequently analyzed source of information in the social sciences....It is the only survey that has tracked the opinions of Americans over an extended period of time. The GSS is also a major teaching tool. We know of over 14,000 research uses such as articles in academic journals, books, and Ph.D. dissertations based on the GSS and about 250,000 students annually who use it in their classes."
2. See, [http://www.norc.org/projects/General + Social + Survey.htm](http://www.norc.org/projects/General+Social+Survey.htm), downloaded April 5, 2007.
3. "Public Attitudes Toward the Regulation of Firearms," Tom W. Smith, NORC/University of Chicago, March 2007. The NORC findings are consistent with other recent surveys on gun ownership in the United States. The study, "Prevalence of Household Firearms and Firearm-Storage Practices in the 50 States and the District of Columbia: Findings From the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2002," published in the September 2005 issue of *Pediatrics* found, "Nationally, 32.6% of adults reported that firearms were kept in or around their home," according to survey data from the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS). The BRFSS is a "state-based surveillance system operated by state health departments in collaboration with the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention....In 2002, all 50 states and the District of Columbia participated, and 240,735 persons aged ≥18 years completed the interview." Catherine A. Okoro, et al, *Pediatrics*, Vol. 116, No. 3, September 2005; p. e370, e371, downloaded from www.pediatrics.org on September 8, 2005.
4. "Public Attitudes Toward the Regulation of Firearms," Tom W. Smith, NORC/University of Chicago, March 2007, additional data from NORC.
5. "Public Attitudes Toward the Regulation of Firearms," Tom W. Smith, NORC/University of Chicago, March 2007, additional data from NORC.
6. For example, an article in the May 2005 issue of *Shooting Industry* stated that "the terrorist attacks in 2001 raised consumers' awareness regarding self-defense, thus expanding the overall market." Ray Oeltjen, "The Future of Handguns: Battered But Better, The Handgun Market is Back!," *Shooting Industry*, May 2005, p. 25.
7. "Public Attitudes Toward the Regulation of Firearms," Tom W. Smith, NORC/University of Chicago, March 2007. See, Tom W. Smith, "Surge in Gun Sales? The Press Misfires," *The Public Perspective*, Vol. 13, No. 4, July 2002/August 2002, Pg. 5.
8. "Gun Sales Rise as Crime and Accident Rates Fall," National Shooting Sports Foundation press release, June 5, 2006, Newtown, CT, http://www.nssf.org/news/PR_idx.cfm?Aol=generic&PRloc=common/PR/&PR=060506.cfm, downloaded April 3, 2007.
9. "Gun Sales Rise as Crime and Accident Rates Fall," National Shooting Sports Foundation press release, June 5, 2006, Newtown, CT, http://www.nssf.org/news/PR_idx.cfm?Aol=generic&

PRloc = common/PR/&PR=060506.cfm, downloaded April 3, 2007.

10. "Gun Sales Rise as Crime and Accident Rates Fall," National Shooting Sports Foundation press release, June 5, 2006, Newtown, CT, http://www.nssf.org/news/PR_idx.cfm?Aol=generic&PRloc=common/PR/&PR=060506.cfm, downloaded April 3, 2007.

11. *Projections of the Number of Households and Families in the United States: 1995 to 2010*, Jennifer Cheeseman Day, U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports, p25-1129, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1996, p. 5.

12. For example: "With firearms found in about half of all American households..." "Eddie Eagle Frequently Asked Questions," *Eddie Eagle Fact Sheet*, <http://www.nrahq.org/safety/eddie/fact.asp>, downloaded March 30, 2007; and, "The number of gun owners is also at an all time high. Almost half of all households in America have guns," *Firearm Facts 2007*, <http://www.nraila.org/Issues/FactSheets/Read.aspx?id=83>, downloaded April 2, 2007.

13. Such exaggerations are not the sole purview of national organizations. In a press release opposing a statewide assault weapons ban, the pro-gun group Maryland Shall Issue asserted, "Approximately half of the homes in Maryland have at least one firearm..." See, "Maryland Sportsmen Up in Arms Over Proposed Gun Ban," Maryland Shall Issue press release, January 23, 2007, Annapolis, MD, downloaded from *Nexis*, April 5, 2007. In fact, the most reliable state-by-state survey on household gun ownership found that only 22 percent of Marylanders have any firearms in their households. See, Catherine A. Okoro, et al, "Prevalence of Household Firearms and Firearm-Storage Practices in the 50 States and the District of Columbia: Findings From the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2002," *Pediatrics*, Vol. 116, No. 3, September 2005, p. e372, <http://www.pediatrics.org>, downloaded September 8, 2005.

14. *Shooting Sports Retailer*, Vol. 16, No. 5, September/October 1998, front cover, ad for New England Firearms.

15. As one California wildlife official stated, "Instead of waking up at 4 a.m. and going hunting, it's easier for kids to sleep in until 9 and play video games." See, "Growth curbing Inland hunting," *Press Enterprise* (Riverside, CA), September 1, 2005, p. A1. Or, as an article in *American Demographics* noted, "Indeed, enthusiasm for hunting and fishing among young people has been declining since the early 1990s....Hunting has had similar declines [to fishing], with overall participation among 18- to 24-year-olds, dropping to 6 percent last year, from 9 percent in 1991. Those ages 18 to 24 make up just 10 percent of the nation's 13 million hunters today, down from 14 percent in 1991. Moreover, a special report by the Fish and Wildlife Service in February 2000 found that blacks and Hispanics are far less likely to hunt and fish than the general population. Industry experts warn that unless more boys and girls—black, Hispanic and white—are recruited, these time-honored wildlife sports could die out." See, Pamela Paul, "Hook & Bait," *American Demographics*, November 2002, p. 10.

16. For example, "After World War II NRA membership tripled, exceeding 250,000 in 1947. Starting in 1946 the organization finally began to expand beyond its historic base of military and civilian target shooters to include hunters. This new focus rose in part from the large number of World War II veterans who, having been exposed to firearms, had taken up hunting upon their return home." See, Josh Sugarmann, *National Rifle Association: Money, Firepower & Fear*, National Press Books, (Bethesda, MD), 1992, p. 34.

17. The toll is likely to continue: the industry's own studies predict that the number of hunters will plummet another 24 percent by the year 2025 if "recruitment and retention" efforts fail. See,

"Youth Hunter Recruitment Efforts Increasing," *The New Firearms Business*, October 15, 2005, p. 2.

18. Absorption of rural land by expanding suburbs has decreased the number of places where hunters can hunt. As one Florida hunter characterized the situation, "Now there are Wal-Marts and shopping centers where I used to hunt." See, "Summit aims to boost Florida hunting," *Orlando Sentinel*, July 31, 2005, p. C15. *The Wall Street Journal* adds, "Available land for hunting has shrunk significantly in the past few years. Part of this stems from the real-estate boom, which has city-dwellers and suburbanites buying weekend homes in rural areas, then posting 'No Trespassing' signs to keep out hunters. It also reflects stepped-up drilling on public land. In 1999, the U.S. Bureau of Land Management approved 1,803 permits for oil and gas drilling on its lands; last year, that number more than tripled, to 6,399, according to a recent Government Accountability Office report." See, "Hunting's Identity Crisis," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 5-6, 2005, p. P4.

19. For example, the 2001 Violence Policy Center study *Poisonous Pastime: The Health Risks of Shooting Ranges and Lead to Children, Families, and the Environment* quoted a Michigan hunter safety coordinator who, in 1990, told a national shooting range symposium that shooting ranges are "like a waste disposal facility" and that the attitude most people have toward shooting ranges is "not in their neighborhood, and definitely not next door." Tom Diaz, *Poisonous Pastime: The Health Risks of Shooting Ranges and Lead to Children, Families, and the Environment*, Violence Policy Center, May 2001, p. 1, citing International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, *Proceedings of the First National Shooting Range Symposium* (1990), p. 107.

20. "Some observers have attributed the decline in hunting among modern teens to the increase in the number of single-parent households. Most one-parent homes are run by single mothers—not only do they have little time to take their kids hunting or fishing, but according to this line of thinking, they often don't hunt or fish themselves." See, Chris Madson, "Making Time: Finding ways to fit hunting into the schedules of American kids," *Wildfowl Magazine Online*, http://www.wildfowlmag.com/conservation/WIFP_0609_CON/index.html, downloaded April 5, 2007. *The Wall Street Journal* reports, "In keeping with the industry's push for growth, they're working hard to lure women. They also expect that effort to pay future dividends if moms bring their kids along, too, and groom the next generation of Daniel and Danielle Boones." See, "Hunting's Identity Crisis," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 5-6, 2005, p. P5. According to other informed observers of the business of guns, "retention and recruitment efforts are being ramped up and range from trying to repeal laws that limit youth hunting to psychology-based campaigns aimed at getting young people familiar with gun use." "Youth Hunter Recruitment Efforts Increasing," *The New Firearms Business*, October 15, 2005, p. 2.