CHAPTER 8
PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARD GUN CONTROL

A DEEPLY PERSONAL ISSUE

The gun control issue has become prominent over the past fifty years, as gun users have carried out political assassinations, assassination attempts, and violent crimes. Americans mourned the deaths of President John F. Kennedy (1917–1963); his brother, the presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy (1925–1968); and the civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968). Presidents Gerald R. Ford (1913–2006) and Ronald Reagan (1911–2004) were victimized by would-be assassins, as were the presidential candidate George C. Wallace (1919–1998) and the civil rights leaders Medgar Evers (1925–1963) and Vernon E. Jordan (1935–).

The White House has been shot at on several occasions. In October 1994 the convicted felon Francisco Martin Duran (1968–) fired twenty-nine rounds at the White House from a Chinese-made assault rifle. Because of his felony conviction, Duran did not pass a background check when he tried to purchase a handgun, but no such check was required for his purchase of the rifle. Duran was convicted of the attempted assassination of President Bill Clinton (1946–). Robert W. Pickett (1953–), a former Internal Revenue Service auditor, fired shots at the White House in February 2001 and was subdued by Secret Service agents who shot him in the knee. Pickett had cleared an instant background check in Indiana to buy a handgun despite his history of mental illness. In August 2006 the former University of Maryland basketball star Lonny Baxter (1979–) was sentenced to two months in jail after he and Francis I. Martin (1971–) fired shots from a vehicle while driving near the White House. Nobody was injured.

However, political assassinations and assassination attempts are not the only events that bring gun control issues to the forefront of the collective American mind. In 2006 forty-six law enforcement officers were shot and killed in the United States in the line of duty. (See Table 5.6 in Chapter 5.) Between 1999 and 2005, 207,751 people were killed in this country by firearms. (See Table 6.3 in Chapter 6.) Among those deaths were over 100 children aged twelve and under each year. (See Table 7.2 in Chapter 7.)

THE DEBATE IS BITTER AND POLARIZING

Some Americans are convinced that more federal regulation of firearms is necessary to reduce the number of murders and injuries that are inflicted with guns and to ensure a safer, more civilized society. Others who support private ownership of guns insist that the right to bear arms is guaranteed by long-standing custom and by the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. These gun rights advocates believe that no cyclical increase in crime, no mass killing, or any rash of political murders should lead the nation to violate the Constitution and the individual rights it guarantees. They also claim that knives and other instruments are used to kill people and that there is no talk of regulating or banning them.

The National Rifle Association of America (NRA) generally believes that if more law-abiding citizens carried weapons, they would be better prepared to stop criminals from committing murders and other violent crimes. For example, gun rights advocates claim that the twenty-three people killed at a cafeteria in Killeen, Texas, in 1991 might still be alive if a law-abiding citizen with a gun had been at the scene.

Both supporters and opponents of gun control agree that some means should be found to keep guns out of the hands of criminals. Not surprisingly, the two sides approach this issue differently. The two different strategies for gun control involve “deterrence” (discouraging by instilling fear) and “interdiction” (legally forbidding the use of). Advocates of deterrence, most notably the Second Amendment Foundation and the NRA, recommend consistent enforcement of current laws and instituting tougher penalties to discourage individuals from using firearms in
crimes. They maintain that interdiction will not have any effect on crime, but will strip away the constitutional rights and privileges of law-abiding Americans by taking away their right to own guns.

Advocates of interdiction, led by organizations such as the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, the Brady Center to Prevent Gun Violence, and the Violence Policy Center, believe that controlling citizens’ access to firearms will reduce crime. Therefore, they favor restrictions on public gun ownership.

EVALUATING PUBLIC OPINION POLLS

Public opinion polls, like all sources of information, must be used with care. Pollsters select sample populations because it is impossible to interview every American on a given question. The selection is usually performed randomly using computers. Most major pollsters interview between one thousand and two thousand people to establish a valid sample. Other pollsters may interview far fewer than five hundred, and the sample could be too small to fairly represent the opinions of all adult Americans. Generally, the larger the sample, the greater the chance for an adequate representation and a valid result.

The polling errors that concern most people are those caused by bias in the presentation of questions, which may influence the response. For example, is the question vague? Is it too long? Is it threatening? Is it leading? If the questions are asked in an in-person interview, was the interviewer too forceful or threatening? Did respondents provide answers they thought would please interviewers? Were respondents disqualified because of membership in gun control or gun rights organizations? What was the purpose of the poll? Who hired the polling organization, and what is its stand on the issue?

Respondents may be unwilling to candidly discuss their use of weapons. In addition, polling does not always determine how important a person considers an issue to be. The issue may be of absolutely no concern to the respondent, but when asked, the respondent then thinks about the topic and provides an answer. Five minutes after the question has been asked, the issue may completely disappear from his or her mind.

The polling organization might not include the number of times there was no response. If these “no replies” come predominantly from one group, it might influence the answers so that they do not truly represent national opinion on a given issue. Pollsters are aware of these weaknesses, so they usually indicate how reliable they consider their polls to be. Many polls indicate a plus or minus (+/−) 2% to 4% accuracy rate.

IS GUN CONTROL AN IMPORTANT ISSUE?

A thirty-four-year overview (1984–2007 inclusive) of public attitudes about the issues government ought to be addressing is presented by Ann L. Pastore and Kathleen Maguire of the U.S. Department of Justice in Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics 2003 (2003, http://www.albany.edu/sourcebook/). In most of those years, few to no adults polled mentioned guns or gun control spontaneously as one of the three most important issues the government ought to be addressing. However, 1999 and 2000 saw a spike in interest, with 10% of respondents mentioning gun control as an important issue in 1999 and 7% in 2000, possibly due to the spotlight placed on the gun control issue after “permanent” Brady went into effect in late 1998. (See Chapter 3.) At that time the five-day waiting period for handgun purchasers was replaced by a national computerized criminal identification system that was designed to quickly screen purchasers of both handguns and long guns (rifles and shotguns). Great debate surrounded the elimination of the five-day waiting period to purchase firearms. In addition, controversy arose regarding how long records relating to background checks should be kept. After these and related issues died down, the percentages of poll respondents identifying gun control as one of the three most important issues the government ought to be addressing dropped to 1% or less for 2001 through 2007.

Just months before the 2008 presidential election, PollingReport.com indicated in “Problems and Priorities” (June 2008, http://www.pollingreport.com/prioriti.htm) that gun control was not cited as a top issue in thirteen national polls from January through June. Instead, topics such as the economy, the war in Iraq, education, jobs, health care, energy, and illegal immigration proved to be the top priorities for the American public.

OPINION DIVIDED ON GUN CONTROL LAWS

The Gallup Organization conducted a poll in January 2006 to gauge public attitudes about gun control laws. One question asked was: “Would you like to see gun laws in this country made more strict, less strict, or remain as they are?” (See Figure 8.1.) Fifty-one percent of the respondents favored stricter gun control laws, down from 54% in 2001. Fourteen percent suggested that gun laws should be made less strict, a percentage that remained unchanged from 2001. Thirty-two percent wanted gun laws to remain the same, a slight increase from 31% in 2001.

According to Lydia Saad of the Gallup Organization, in Shrunken Majority Now Favors Stricter Gun Laws (October 11, 2007, http://www.gallup.com/poll/101731/Shrunken-Majority-Now-Favors-Stricter-Gun-Laws.aspx), this same question was asked, but the responses “less strict” and “remain the same” were grouped together. (See Figure 8.2.) Between 1991 and 2007 the percentage of those wanting
stricter gun control laws declined considerably, whereas the percentage of those wanting gun control laws to be less strict or to remain the same rose. The result was that in 2007 the nation was evenly split on the question.

The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press also polls Americans on this issue, but it asks a slightly different question: “What do you think is more important—to protect the right of Americans to own guns, or to control gun ownership?” Most respondents, since Pew began asking this question in 1993, believed that it was best to control gun ownership rather than protect the right of Americans to own guns. (See Table 8.1.) In April 2007, 60% of respondents believed that it was best to control gun ownership, up from 58% in February 2004 and 55% in April 2000. The 2007 percentage is less, however, than the percentages of respondents in May 1999 (66%) and in March 2000 (65%) who wanted to control gun ownership. In 2007, 32% of respondents thought it best to protect the right of Americans to own guns. In June 2003 the percentage of respondents feeling this way was at a high of 42%.

In Shrunken Majority Now Favors Stricter Gun Laws, Saad notes that most women (60%) favored more strict gun laws, whereas most men (57%) favored gun laws that were less strict or that stayed the same. Most nonwhites (65%) favored more strict gun laws, whereas most whites (51%) favored gun laws that were less strict or that stayed the same. (See Table 8.2.) Easterners had the highest proportion (60%) favoring stricter gun laws, as did those who lived in urban centers (56%), Democrats (68%), and people with no guns in their households (62%). Furthermore, Saad states that most respondents not in favor of stricter gun laws wanted to keep the gun laws the same rather than make them less strict.

Saad reports that respondents were also asked about banning handguns. In general, from 1982 to 2006 the percentage of people who said handguns should not be banned had increased, and the percentage of those who said they should be banned had decreased. (See Figure 8.3.) In 2006, 68% of respondents said handguns should not be banned, whereas 30% said they should be banned.

In Public Attitudes towards the Regulation of Firearms (March 2007, http://www-news.uchicago.edu/releases/07/pdf/070410.guns.norc.pdf), Tom W. Smith of the National Opinion Research Center discusses the results of the 2006 General Social Survey (GSS), which show the levels of public support for various measures to regulate firearms. According to Smith, 91% of GSS respondents wanted gun use to be illegal for those under the influence of alcohol just as driving an automobile is illegal while under the influence. (See Table 8.3.) Eighty-five percent of respondents wanted sales of high-power/50-caliber rifles—those that can penetrate armor from a mile away—to be restricted to the police and military. A similar proportion—82%—wanted

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**Figure 8.1**

Adult poll respondents’ views on stricter vs. less strict gun laws, 2001–06

![Graph showing the percentage of respondents favoring stricter or less strict gun laws from 2001 to 2006.](http://www.gallup.com/poll/27229/Gallup-Summary-Americans-Gun-Control.aspx)


**Figure 8.2**

Adult poll respondents’ views on stricter vs. less strict laws governing the sale of firearms, selected years, 1991–2007

![Graph showing the percentage of respondents favoring stricter or less strict laws governing the sale of firearms from 1991 to 2007.](http://www.gallup.com/poll/101731/Shrunken-Majority-Now-Favors-Stricter-Gun-Laws.aspx)

sales of semiautomatic assault weapons to be limited to police and the military as well.

What do teens think about gun control laws? Julie Ray of the Gallup Organization reports in *Growing up with Guns* (April 15, 2003, http://www.gallup.com/poll/8197/Growing-Guns.aspx) that in 2003 twelve hundred young people aged thirteen to seventeen were asked: “In general, do you feel that the laws covering the sale of firearms should be made more strict, made less strict, or kept as they are now?” Most girls (66%) responded that gun sales should be made stricter. Only 26% said the laws should be kept as they were. A much smaller percentage of boys (43%) responded that gun sales should be made stricter, and 42% said the current laws were adequate.

**Restrictions on Assault Weapons**

The assault weapons ban, a ten-year prohibition on the sales of assault rifles and high-capacity ammunition, expired on September 14, 2004. Assault-type guns, or assault weapons, generally refer to military-style semiautomatic firearms. Military-style simply means the weapons look like guns used in the military; they are not military weapons. Semiautomatic means the weapons fire only a single shot for each pull of the trigger, but that bullets are...
automatically loaded into the chamber. However, the phrase “assault weapons” is often used by the media and the public to refer to machine guns, which are military weapons. Thus, the meaning of the phrase “assault weapons” is not always clearly understood or defined. High-capacity ammunition refers to magazines that carry up to forty rounds of ammunition (forty bullets). A magazine is a device that holds the bullets so they can be loaded into a firearm at one time.

The Opinion Research Corporation International conducted a survey for the Consumer Federation of America and published the results in Consumers Support Renewing and Strengthening the Federal Assault Weapons Ban (February 2004, http://www.consumerfed.org/pdfs/assaultweaponreport.pdf). The survey revealed that 68% of nongun owners supported renewing the ban on assault weapons, whereas 61% of all respondents and 50% of gun owners agreed. Support for other new gun control measures, such as background checks for older weapons, further age restrictions, and banning assault weapon kits, received even stronger support.

The Annenberg Public Policy Center reported in the National Annenberg Election Survey (September 6, 2004, http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/Downloads/Political_Communication/naes/2004_03_guns_09-06_pr.pdf), which was released just before the election. Humphrey Taylor of Harris Interactive considered this in his essay “The Gun Control Enigma” (May 13, 2000, http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/index.asp?PID=89). The problem, he explains, is political. Taylor notes that even though most people favor gun control and have favored it for years, the Democratic Party, which supports gun control, has not been able to transform “public support for gun control to any political advantage.”

In “Time Magazine/SRBI Election 2004” (October 2004, http://www.srbi.com/Time-Trended_Data-2004-10-16.pdf), a poll conducted in 2004 by Time and the research organization Schulman, Ronca, and Bucuvalas Inc., respondents were asked: “Would you ever vote for a candidate who does not agree with you on . . . gun control, or is this issue so important that you could not vote for a candidate who disagrees with you?” Only 32% of adult Americans said they would not vote for a candidate who disagreed with his or her position on gun control. The fact that a candidate’s stance on gun control plays a relatively small role in determining if people vote for him or her seems to support Taylor’s theories.

In general, the Republican administration of George W. Bush (1946–) defended gun rights, and Senator John McCain (1936–), the Republican presidential nominee for the 2008 election, supported gun rights as well. Barack Obama (1961–), the Democratic presidential nominee, generally favored gun control measures. The 2008 congressional and presidential elections were expected to influence whether gun laws changed soon.

**TABLE 8.3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public support for measures to regulate firearms, 2006</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prohibiting gun use when under the influence of alcohol</td>
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<tr>
<td>Limiting sales of high power/50-caliber rifles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Limiting sales of semi-automatic assault weapons</td>
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<tr>
<td>Criminal background checks for private gun sales</td>
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<tr>
<td>Police permits to purchase guns</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stricter gun control after terrorist attacks</td>
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<tr>
<td>Illegal gun sales to be punished more than illegal drugs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Latest Harris Poll (September 24, 2004, http://www.harrisinteractive.com/harris_poll/index.asp?PID=498) that a large majority (71%) of respondents supported the renewal of the ban on assault weapons and high-capacity ammunition. Only 26% opposed the ban. Opinions were similar across political party affiliation.

Despite widespread support, the federal ban on the sale of assault weapons was allowed to expire in September 2004. Bills to reinstate the ban were introduced into the 108th and 109th Congresses, but the bills died. On February 13, 2007, the Assault Weapons Ban and Law Enforcement Protection Act of 2007 (H.R.1022) was introduced into the U.S. House of Representatives. In March of that year the bill was referred to the Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, and Homeland Security. As of June 2008, the federal ban had not been reinstated, and the bill appeared to have been abandoned.

WHY SO LITTLE GUN LEGISLATION?

Polls consistently show support for stricter gun controls, yet little legislation has successfully made its way through Congress.
**SOME STUDENTS FEEL UNSAFE AT SCHOOL**

In *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2007* (December 2007, http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2008/2008021.pdf), Rachel Dinkes, Emily Forrest Cataldi, and Wendy Lin-Kelly report that the percentage of students who were afraid of being attacked at school or on the way to or from school decreased from nearly 12% in 1995 to about 6% in 2001, a number that remained stable as of 2005. Significant differences were noted, however, when the 2005 data were analyzed by race and ethnicity, with 9% of African-American students and 10% of Hispanic students reporting that they were afraid at school or traveling to or from school, compared to only 4% of white students. The percentage of fearful students decreased as grade increased, from grade six (10%) through grade twelve (3%). A greater percentage of students in urban schools (10%) were fearful than their suburban or rural counterparts (both at approximately 5%).

Do students have a reason to be fearful? Table 7.3 in Chapter 7 shows that the percentage of students in grades nine through twelve who reported carrying a weapon such as a gun, knife, or club on school property declined from 11.8% in 1993 to 6.1% in 2003 and remained somewhat stable through 2005. Student bullying was reported as happening at least once a week in 22.3% of high schools and 43% of middle schools during the 2005–06 school year, according to discipline reports analyzed by Dinkes, Cataldi, and Lin-Kelly. In addition, undesirable gang activity was reported by 38.7% of high schools and 31.5% of middle schools; undesirable cult or extremist group activity was reported by 11% of high schools and 5% of middle schools.

**PUBLIC RESPONSES TO CRIME CONCERNS**

How many adults are so concerned about crime that they turn to guns for self-defense? According to a Gallup poll conducted in 2007, 23% of respondents had bought guns and 12% carried guns for self-defense. (See Table 8.4.) Larger percentages chose to avoid certain locations (48%), keep a dog (31%), or install special locks or burglar alarms in their homes (31%).

Table 2.6 in Chapter 2 shows that 41.6% of GSS respondents had a gun in their home in 2006. This was a higher level of gun ownership than indicated by surveys in 2004 (35.7%) and in 2002 (33.5%). The level of gun ownership appears to reflect public opinion on whether having a gun in the home makes it a safer place. An October 2006 Gallup poll found that 47% believed having a gun in the home made the home safer, whereas in 2000, 35% thought a gun made the home safer. (See Figure 2.2 in Chapter 2.)

According to Saad, in *NRA Viewed Favorably by Most Americans* (April 15, 2005, http://www.gallup.com/poll/15868/NRA-Viewed-Favorably-Most-Americans.aspx), Americans tend to consider guns a danger in most public places. In 2005, 50% of those surveyed believed armed judges would make courtrooms more dangerous, compared to 43% who thought courtrooms would be safer if judges were armed. In the same survey, respondents overwhelmingly agreed that schools would become more dangerous if teachers and administrators were armed with guns; 73% believed schools would be more dangerous if officials were armed, compared to 22% who believed schools would be safer. People were more open to the idea of airline pilots being armed with guns; 62% believed that airplanes would be safer places if the pilots were armed, compared to 33% who thought arming the pilots would make planes more dangerous.

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**TABLE 8.4**

Respondents reporting whether they engaged in selected behaviors because of concern over crime, 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avoid going to certain places or neighborhoods you might otherwise want to go to</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keep a dog for protection</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had a burglar alarm installed in your home</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bought a gun for protection of yourself or your home</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carry mace or pepper spray</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carry a gun for defense</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carry a knife for defense</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: The data are based on telephone interviews with a randomly selected national sample of 1,010 adults, 18 years of age and older, conducted October 4–7, 2007. The responses for each category may not add up to 100% because some respondents may have answered “don’t know” or may have refused to answer.