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A SPECIAL REPORT FROM

The **LIFE, LIBERTY, and** HAPPINESS PROJECT

UNLOCKED AND LOADED

GUNS IN THE HOME AND SAFETY PRACTICES IN AMERICA

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The **LIFE, LIBERTY, *and*** **HAPPINESS PROJECT**

The Life, Liberty, and Happiness Project involves four additional principal investigators: Mark Bowler (Department of Psychology), Bob Edwards (Department of Sociology), Melinda Kane (Department of Sociology), and Jonathan Morris (Department of Political Science). It also includes research assistance from Toby Board and Randy Knebel of the Center for Survey Research; Jermaine McNair and Monica Calderon in the Department of Sociology; and Hunter Whittington in the Department of Political Science. The principal investigators of this report, Ann Rafferty, Joseph Lee, and Peter Francia acknowledge and thank the entire team involved in the Life, Liberty, and Happiness Project for their work and contributions.

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REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

■ ON GUNS IN THE HOME:

Nearly two in five American adults report that they have firearms kept in and around their homes, although there are substantial differences by income, area of residence, marital status, and party identification.

- 37% of American adults report that there is a firearm kept in and around their home.
- 49% of home owners report that there is a firearm kept in and around their home compared to 23% of those who rent.
- 47% of those in households earning \$40,000 a year or more report that there is a firearm kept in and around their home compared to 26% of those who have a household income of less than \$40,000 a year.
- 47% of those who are married report that there is a firearm kept in and around their home compared to 29% of those who are widowed, divorced, separated, or never married.
- 53% of those who identify as Republicans report that there is a firearm kept in and around their home compared to 27% of those who identify as Democrats and 29% of those who identify as Independents (i.e., express no leanings towards either major party).
- 47% of those who reside in a rural area report that there is a firearm kept in and around their home compared to 35% of those who live in a household in a metropolitan area.

■ ON GUN SAFETY:

About one in four American adults who report having firearms in their home report unsafe gun storage.

- Among those who report living in firearm-owning households, 25% have one or more loaded and unlocked firearms in their home.
- Overall, nearly one-in-ten Americans (9%) live in a household with one or more loaded and unlocked firearms in their home.

Gun safety storage practices, however, do *not* vary by some of the same indicators as those associated with the possession of a gun in the home.

- When asked about the presence of loaded and unlocked firearms in their residence, the survey results show no major differences between those living in rural versus metropolitan areas, nor are there any major differences separating self-identified Democrats from Republicans.

But, gun safety storage practices do show some differences by income and marital status.

- Those in households earning less than \$40,000 a year are more likely (31%) to report the presence of loaded and unlocked firearms in their residence than are those with household incomes of \$40,000 or more (22%).
- Those who are widowed, divorced, separated, or never married are more likely (30%) to report the presence of loaded and unlocked firearms in their residence than are those who are married (21%).

■ ON GUN POSSESSION, SAFETY, AND MENTAL HEALTH:

There are important differences in gun safety practices based on mental health and feelings of social isolation and depression.

- People reporting mental health problems are equally likely as those without mental health problems to report living with a gun in their home; however, by a margin of 15 percentage points (37% to 22%), they are more likely to report having a loaded and unlocked firearm in their home.
- People who report often feeling left out or isolated from others are more likely to report living in a house with a loaded and unlocked gun (41% and 44% respectively) than those who feel more connected (22% for both those feeling left out and those feeling isolated).
- People who report feeling depressed are less likely to report that they have a gun in their home (33%) than those who do not report feeling depressed (41%). However, among those who live in a household with a gun, those who report some feelings of depression are more likely to report living in a house with a loaded and unlocked gun (31%) than those who do not report feeling depressed (20%).

Life, Liberty, and Happiness

GUNS IN THE HOME AND SAFETY PRACTICES IN AMERICA

The prevention of firearm-related injuries is an important public health concern. According to the National Safety Council, there were 38,658 people who died from gun-related injuries in 2016, nearly as many as those who died in auto crashes in 2016 (40,327).¹ Of these 38,658 gun-related deaths, the majority were suicides (59%), followed by homicides (37%).² In addition to deaths, there are a large number of gun-related non-fatal injuries each year. While these are often difficult to estimate accurately, the number of gun-related injuries annually certainly exceeds the number of gun-related fatalities.³

Although gun control policy is often divisive and polarizing, there is near universal agreement that responsible gun ownership involves following some basic gun safety practices – a point that even prominent gun-rights organizations acknowledge. The National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF), for example, offers ten safety rules for gun owners to follow. Among these rules is that “firearms should be unloaded when they are not actually in use.”⁴ Likewise, the National Rifle Association (NRA) recommends that “safe gun handling” requires that gun users “always keep the gun unloaded until ready to use.”⁵

Yet, little is known about how many Americans actually follow such basic rules of gun safety and how reported safety practices vary by individual characteristics. With more than 393 million civilian-owned firearms in the United States⁶ and their clear implications for public health, this report sheds new light on the presence of guns in the homes of Americans, and the unsafe practice of keeping guns loaded and unlocked. The results are based on a representative, nationwide survey that was a part of the Life, Liberty, and Happiness Project, conducted by the Center for Survey Research (CSR) in the Thomas Harriot College of Arts and Sciences at East Carolina University (ECU). (See page 16 for additional information about the survey methodology).

1 The National Safety Council, “2017 Estimates Show Vehicle Fatalities Topped 40,000 for Second Straight Year,” <https://www.nsc.org/road-safety/safety-topics/fatality-estimates> and the National Safety Council, “Guns: Firearm-related Deaths,” <https://injuryfacts.nsc.org/home-and-community/safety-topics/guns>.

2 The National Safety Council, “Guns: Firearm-related Deaths,” <https://injuryfacts.nsc.org/home-and-community/safety-topics/guns>.

3 Sean Campbell, Daniel Nass, and Mai Nguyen, “The CDC Is Publishing Unreliable Data on Gun Injuries. People Are Using Anyway,” *FiveThirtyEight*, October 4, 2018, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/the-cdc-is-publishing-unreliable-data-on-gun-injuries-people-are-using-it-anyway>.

4 National Shooting Sports Foundation, “Firearms Safety – 10 Rules of Safe Gun Handling,” <https://www.nssf.org/safety/rules-firearms-safety/>.

5 National Rifle Association, “NRA Gun Safety Rules,” <https://gunsafetyrules.nra.org>.

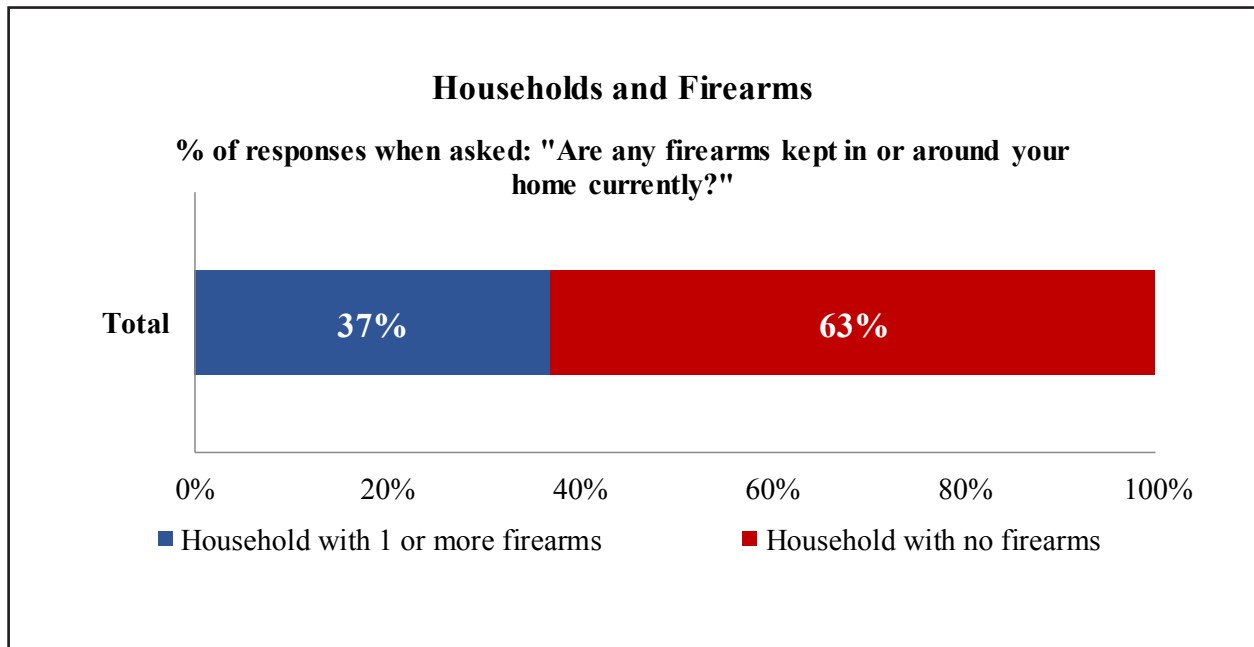
6 Christopher Ingraham, “There Are More Guns Than People in the United States, According to a New Study of Global Firearm Ownership,” *The Washington Post*, June 19, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2018/06/19/there-are-more-guns-than-people-in-the-united-states-according-to-a-new-study-of-global-firearm-ownership>.

GUN POSSESSION

ON GUN POSSESSION IN THE HOME, THE RESULTS SHOW:

► **Nearly two out of five U.S. adults report living in a household with a firearm.**

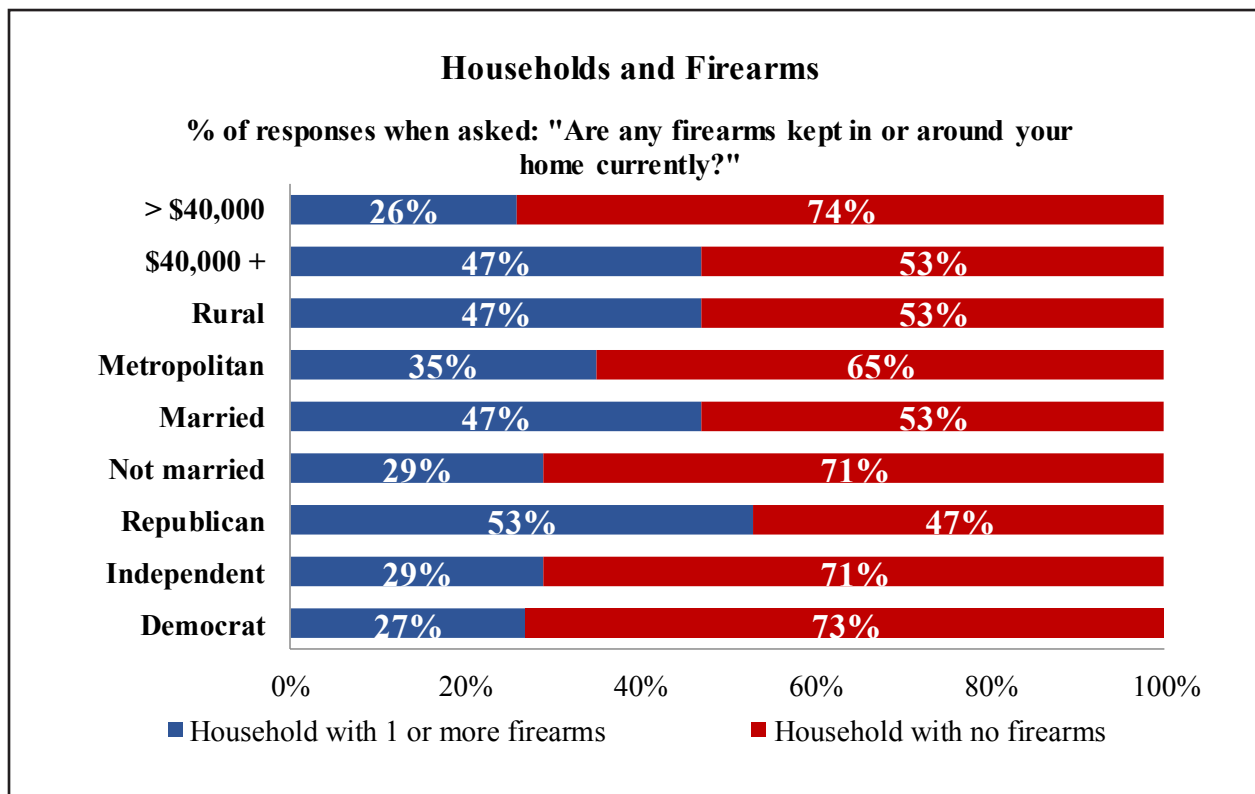
When asked, "Are any firearms kept in or around your home currently?," approximately 37% of Americans answered "yes" compared to 63% who answered "no." This estimate falls within the range of the 34% to 43% that the Pew Research Center and Gallup have reported respectively for the percentage of U.S. homes that have guns.⁷



⁷ Rich Morin, "The Demographics and Politics of Gun-Ownning Households," Pew Research Center, July 15, 2014, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/07/15/the-demographics-and-politics-of-gun-owning-households> and Gallup, "Guns," <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1645/guns.aspx>.

► **Gun possession in the home varies by several indicators that include income, area of residence, marital status, and party identification.**

Specifically, guns are more likely to be in the homes of those who earn more money: 47% for those earning \$40,000 or more report there is a firearm in their home compared to 26% for those in households earning less than \$40,000 a year. This is also true for those who live in rural areas as opposed to metropolitan areas (47% to 35%). Additionally, there is an 18 percentage point gap in home gun possession between those who are married (47%) and those who are widowed, divorced, separated, or never married (29%). By political party identification, Republicans are more likely to report a gun in their home (53%) than are Democrats (27%) or Independents who express no partisan leanings (29%).



- ▶ **Americans who report living in firearm-owning households are more likely to be male, white, and older compared with Americans living in households without guns.**

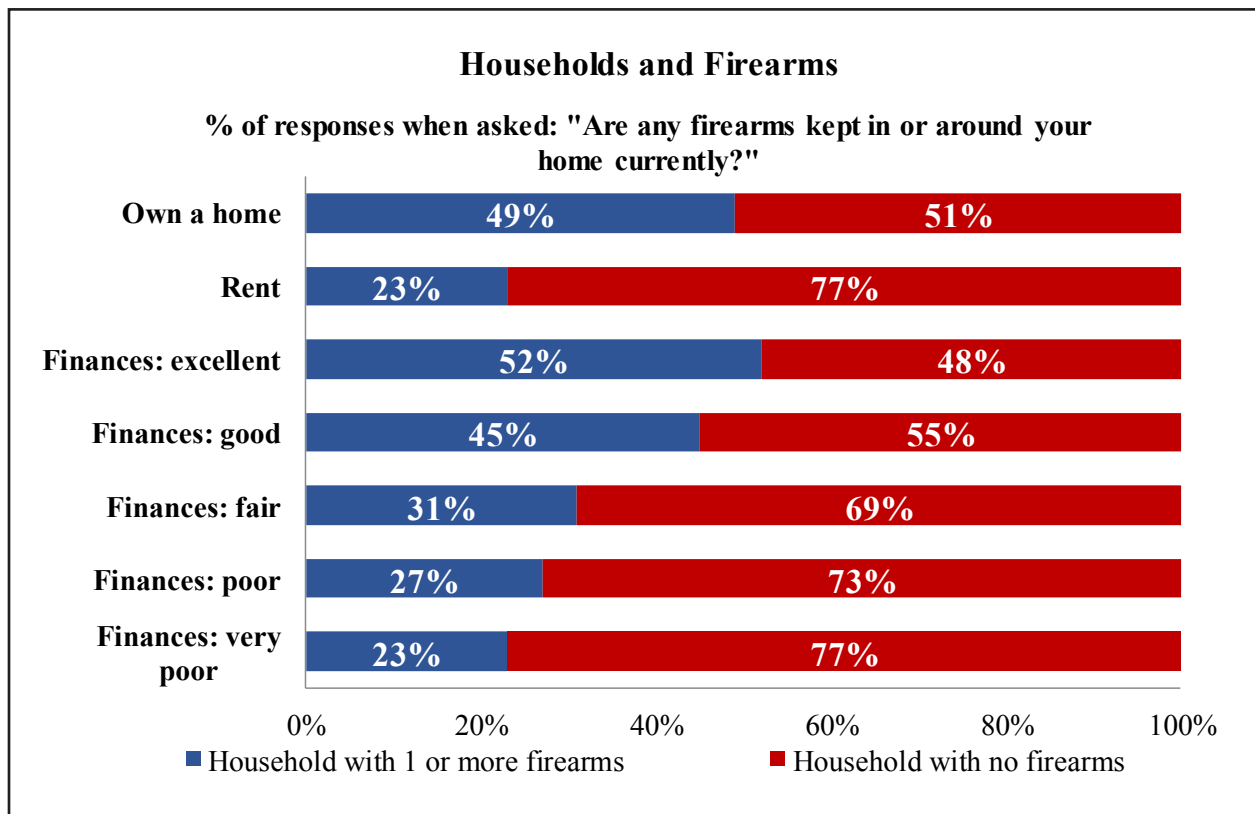
Approximately 55% of those living in firearm households are male compared to 44% who are female; the near opposite is the case among households with no firearms. Of those with a gun in their home, 64% are white. By comparison, of those without a gun in their home, only 54% are white. Some 42% of survey participants in households with a gun are 55 years of age or older compared with 33% of non-gun households.

Demographic Characteristics of Those Who Report Living in Firearm-owning Households Compared with Households Without any Firearms and the US Population in 2017			
	Gun in Home (n=406)	No Guns in Home (n=688)	U.S. Adult Population*
Male	55%	45%	49%
Female	44%	54%	51%
Other/Non-Binary	1%	1%	–
Black	10%	15%	13%
White	64%	54%	60%
Hispanic (of any race)	16%	19%	18%
Other	10%	12%	10%
18-54 years	58%	67%	63%
55 years or older	42%	33%	37%

*U.S. population figures come from the Census Factfinder 2017 ACS 1-Year Estimates and 2012-2016 ACS Estimates.

► **Firearm presence in the home is related to home ownership and household financial situation.**

Home-owners are much more likely to report keeping firearms in their household compared to those who rent (49% versus 23%). The proportion who report firearms in their home is associated with perceived household financial situation, from 26% of those who report a poor or very poor financial situation to 52% of those whose household financial situation is excellent.

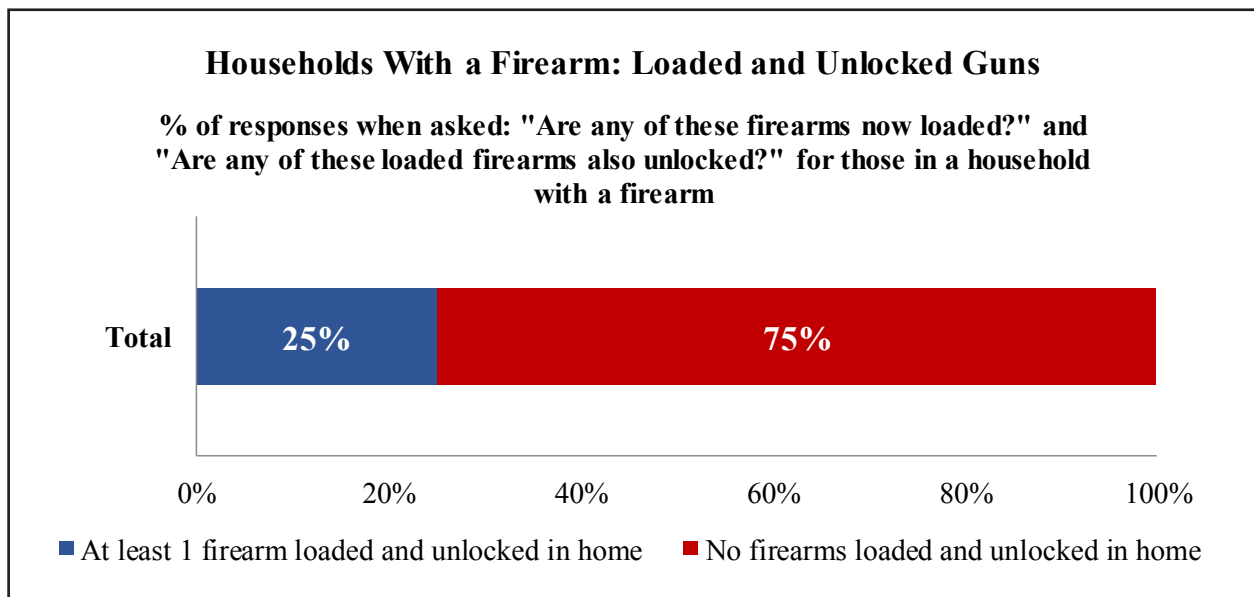


GUN SAFETY

ON GUN SAFETY STORAGE PRACTICES, THE RESULTS SHOW:

- ▶ Among those who report living in firearm-owning households, 25% have one or more loaded and unlocked firearms in their home.

Our survey asked respondents living in households with firearms, "Are any of these firearms now loaded?" and "Are any of these loaded firearms also unlocked?" This means that 9% of all American adults live in a household with a loaded and unlocked firearm.



Of those living in a household with a loaded and unlocked firearm, 66% are male compared with 51% among firearm-owning households without a gun stored in this unsafe manner. Among survey respondents who report living in firearm-owning households, the proportions living in households with a loaded and unlocked firearm are similar by age, race, ethnicity, and education.

Gender Differences by Firearm Storage Practices, among Those Living in Firearm-owning Households

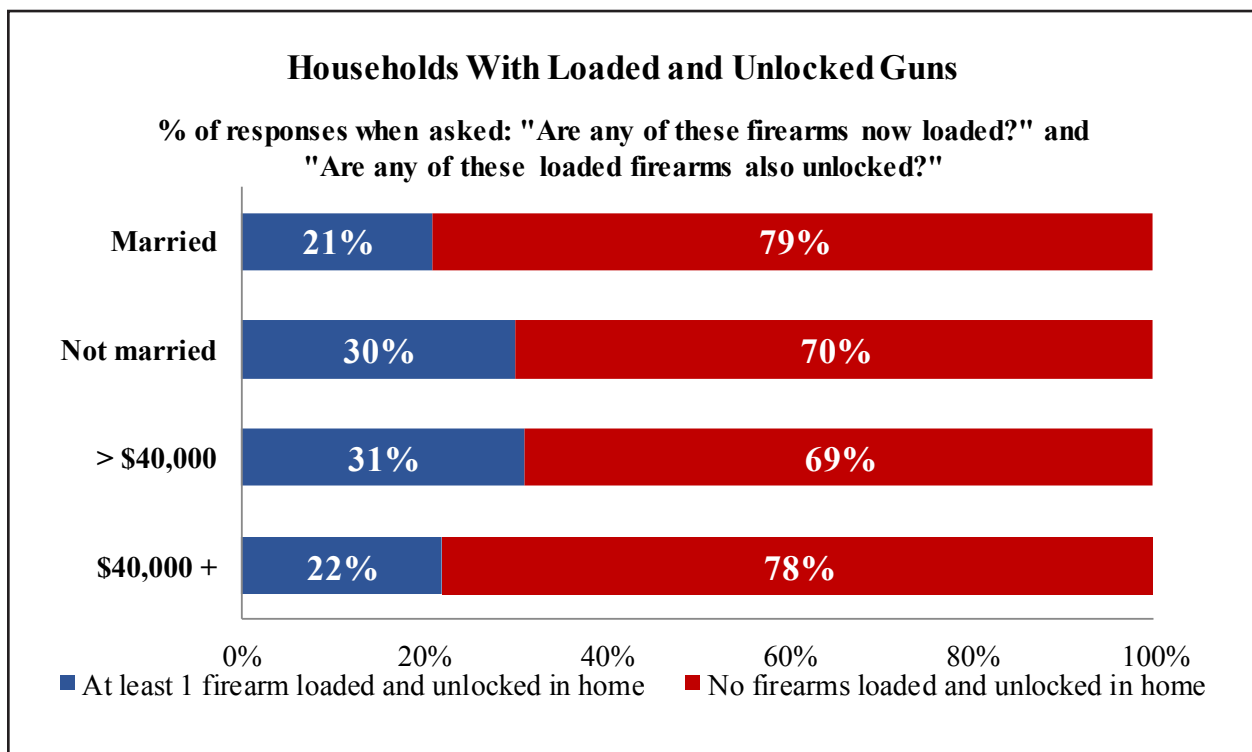
	Firearm Loaded and Unlocked in Home (n=88)	No Firearm Loaded and Unlocked in Home (n=304)
Male	66%	51%
Female	33%	48%
Other/Non-Binary	1%	1%

- ▶ **Although Americans living in rural areas and those who identify as Republicans are more likely to have a gun in their home compared with others, safety practices do not vary to a large extent.**

Among those who report a gun in their home, residents of rural and metropolitan areas do not differ significantly when it comes to having a loaded and unlocked gun kept in their home. Likewise, while Republicans are more likely to live in households with firearms, unsafe storage practice is not statistically related to party affiliation.

- ▶ **Married Americans and those with higher household incomes are the least likely to keep a gun loaded and unlocked.**

As noted previously, a higher proportion of Americans who are currently married have at least one firearm in their home compared with those who are widowed, divorced, separated, or never married. However, among those living in firearm-owning households, those who are married are less likely to have a loaded and unlocked gun kept in their home (21%) compared with those widowed, divorced, separated or never married (30%). Likewise, among those living in firearm-owning households, those earning less than \$40,000 a year are more likely (31%) to report the presence of loaded and unlocked firearms in their residence than are those with household incomes of \$40,000 or more (22%).



GUN POSSESSION, SAFETY, AND MENTAL HEALTH

Gun presence in households, ownership, storage practices, and use are complicated topics. Mental health is frequently a topic when addressing gun violence. However, among those with mental health problems, most gun deaths are not from people with mental illness killing others, but killing themselves.⁸ To explore more deeply, we examine mental and emotional health in relationship to household gun presence and unsafe storage practices.

ON GUN SAFETY STORAGE PRACTICES, THE RESULTS SHOW:

► **Firearm presence does not vary by mental health problems, but firearm safety does.**

The survey asked, “Are you limited in any way in any activities because of mental or emotional problems?” along with a similar question about physical limitations. Those who are limited by mental or emotional problems are equally likely to report living in households with firearms compared with those who are not limited (37% in each group). However, among those living in firearm-owning households, those with mental limitations are nearly twice as likely to have a loaded and unlocked firearm compared with those without mental or emotional problems (37% vs. 22%). Being limited by physical problems was not associated with household firearm presence or unsafe gun storage.

Prevalence of Household Gun Presence and Prevalence of Having at Least One Gun Kept Loaded and Unlocked		
	Percent Who Live in a Household with Firearm(s)	Percent Who Have a Loaded and Unlocked Firearm in Household (among those living in a firearm-owning household)
Total	37%	25%
Limited by Mental or Emotional Problems		
Limited	37%	37%
Not Limited	37%	22%

⁸ Jeffrey W. Swanson, Michele M. Easter, Allison G. Robertson, Marvin S. Swartz, Kelly Alanis-Hirsch, Daniel Moseley, Charles Dion, and John Petril, “Gun Violence, Mental Illness, and Laws that Prohibit Gun Possession: Evidence from Two Florida Counties,” *Health Affairs* 35, no. 6 (2016): 1067-1075.

- ▶ Americans who feel depressed or hopeless are equally or less likely to have firearms kept in their households; however, among firearm-owning households, they are more likely to live in a household with a loaded and unlocked firearm.

Those who strongly or somewhat agree with the statement, “Sometimes I feel depressed” are less likely to live in a household with a gun; however, among those who do live in firearm-owning households, those who agree with this statement are more likely to have a loaded and unlocked gun in the home (31% vs. 20%). Similarly, those who agree with the statement, “There are times when things look pretty bleak and hopeless to me” are less likely than others to live in a firearm-owning household, but they are also more likely to have a gun that is not safely stored.

Prevalence of Firearm Presence and Prevalence of Unsafe Storage		
Agreement with negative statements	Firearm in Home	Loaded and Unlocked Firearm (among those in firearm-owning households)
<i>Sometimes I feel depressed.</i>		
Agrees with statement	33%	31%
Does not agree or neutral	41%	20%
<i>There are times when things look pretty bleak and hopeless to me.</i>		
Agrees with statement	34%	34%
Does not agree or neutral	40%	19%

- ▶ Americans who often feel disconnected from others are equally likely to have guns in their home compared to those who are not socially disconnected; however, among those who live in firearm-owning households, social isolation is associated with unsafe gun storage.

Among Americans who live in firearm-owning households, those who often feel left out are more likely to have a loaded and unlocked gun in their home compared with those who feel left out just sometimes or hardly ever (41% vs. 22%). In addition, those living in firearm-owning households who often feel isolated from others are more likely to have a loaded and unlocked gun in their home (44% vs. 22%).

Prevalence of Firearm Presence and Prevalence of Unsafe Storage by Social Isolation		
<i>How often do you...</i>	Firearm in Home	Loaded and Unlocked Firearm (among those in firearm-owning households)
<i>Feel left out?</i>		
Often	37%	41%
Sometimes or hardly ever	37%	22%
<i>Feel isolated from others?.</i>		
Often	34%	44%
Sometimes or hardly ever	38%	22%

CONCLUSION

Firearm violence is a serious public health issue, and firearm presence and safe storage are key components. Suicide is the tenth leading cause of death in the United States, and suicides have increased 30% since 1999.⁹ Although suicide is usually caused by multiple factors, the decision to take one's own life is often impulsive and firearms are a very lethal means. Limiting access to a firearm can be an important deterrent to suicide.¹⁰ Unintentional firearm injuries and deaths are also a concern given that these tragedies are preventable. As the results in this report suggest, millions of Americans who possess guns in their homes fail to follow basic and universally accepted safety procedures – keeping guns locked and unloaded when not in use, as recommended by nearly all public safety experts.

⁹ Deborah M. Stone, Thomas R. Simon, Katherine A. Fowler, Scott R. Kegler, Keming Yuan, Kristin M. Holland, Asha Z. Ivey-Stephenson, and Alex E. Crosby, "Vital Signs: Trends in State Suicide Rates – United States, 1999-2016 and Circumstances Contributing to Suicide – 27 States, 2015," *Morbidity and Mortality Report*, June 8, 2018.

¹⁰ J. John Mann and Christina A. Michel, "Prevention of Firearm Suicide in the United States: What Works and What is Possible," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 173, no. 10 (2016): 969-979.

SURVEY METHODS

The analysis in this report is based on a mixed mode of responses from mail, telephone, and the Internet. In total, the sample consisted of completed responses from 1,152 adults, 18 years of age or older, living in all 50 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. The mail surveys were delivered to 1,500 randomly selected addresses in the United States. There were 118 addresses that were returned as undeliverable. The selected households were contacted in four waves, starting with an informational postcard that introduced the survey, the survey, a reminder to complete the survey, and a second copy of the survey. One hundred and fifty-six were filled out and returned, producing a response rate of 11%. The mail surveys were collected between May 29 and July 13, 2018.

The telephone portion of the survey was conducted by interviewers under the direction of Qualtrics Experience Management. Random digit dialing was used to contact cell phones and landlines (70% cell phone, 30% landline). One hundred and sixty-seven respondents were interviewed on a cell phone, and 71 were interviewed by landline (total phone interviews = 238). The response rate was 5% for the cell phone sample and 9% for the landline sample. The phone interviews were conducted between May 31 and June 5, 2018. The margin of error for the mail and telephone portion of the sample is plus or minus 5.1 percentage points (at the 95% level of confidence).

The online portion of the survey was conducted among a national sample of 758 adults age 18 or older, living in all 50 states. Respondents for this portion of the survey were selected from a group of over one million people that participate in the Qualtrics survey platform on a daily basis. Participants self-selected into the survey, rather than through random selection. Thus, an estimate of sampling error could not be calculated. To avoid self-selection bias, participants were not told the nature of the survey when asked to participate. The online interviews were conducted between June 1 and June 18, 2018.

The combined sample of mail, telephone, and online respondents were weighted using an iterative proportional fitting algorithm that matches age, sex, gender, and education to population parameters derived from the U.S. Census.

See the comparisons between the unweighted sample and the population parameters from the Census below:

Age	<i>Sample</i>	<i>Census</i>
18-24	12%	12%
25-34	17%	18%
35-44	18%	16%
45-54	14%	17%
55-64	16%	17%
65-74	15%	12%
75 or older	8%	8%

Sex	<i>Sample</i>	<i>Census</i>
Male	45%	49%
Female	55%	51%

Race	<i>Sample</i>	<i>Census</i>
White	57%	60%
Hispanic/Latino/Spanish	15%	18%
Black or African American	14%	13%
Asian	6%	6%
Other or two or more	9%	4%

Education	<i>Sample</i>	<i>Census</i>
Less than high school	4%	13%
High school/some college/ GED/ technical/trade/vocational	63%	48%
Associate's Degree	8%	8%
Bachelor's Degree	18%	19%
Graduate Degree	7%	12%

Note: Some categories may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.



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