

Wisconsin Law Review, 1968
(No. 4):1113-1126.
1975 "Firearms and federal law: The

gun control act of 1968." *Journal
of Legal Studies*, Vol. IV, 2
(January):133-198.

THE OWNERSHIP OF THE MEANS OF DESTRUCTION: WEAPONS IN THE UNITED STATES*

JAMES D. WRIGHT
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

LINDA L. MARSTON
Tufts University

The incidence of private weaponry in the United States exceeds that of any other advanced industrial nation. Despite our unique position, little effort is given to analyzing the phenomenon. There is no firm agreement even on the total number of guns in private hands; estimates range from 90,000,000 (the figure supplied by the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence—NCCPV) to 200,000,000 and up—in short, one weapon for every man, woman, and child in the country (Sherrill, 1973: 13). More detailed knowledge, for example, concerning the social and political correlates of gun ownership, is scarce.¹ The present paper adds to the

current knowledge by providing empirical data from a national survey on the characteristics of people who own guns.

Data are taken from the National Opinion Research Center's 1973 General Social Survey (N = 1504), conducted in March-April of 1973 and based on a multi-stage area probability sample of the US population aged 18 and over. One question included in the survey asked, "Do you happen to have in your home or garage any guns or revolvers?" The proportion replying "yes" was just under half (47%). This "one-half" figure is consistent with poll data going back to 1959 (Erskine, 1972:456-457).² For the

* Authors note: We would like to thank the National Opinion Research Center, Roper Public Opinion Research Center, and the Survey Archive for the Social Sciences (University of Massachusetts) for making these data available; the University Computing Center and the Social and Demographic Research Institute (University of Massachusetts) for assisting in the research; and Professor Richard Hamilton, Robert Sherrill, and anonymous referees for reading and commenting on an earlier draft. This research was supported in part by a Faculty Research Grant from the University of Massachusetts.

¹ The major exception is Newton and Zimrick (1969). Even this source, however, provides no information on the social

or political characteristics of people who possess firearms. Limited information is also found in Erskine (1972) and Hamilton (1972: Ch. 12), both of whom note the correlations with region and city size discussed later in the paper. Beyond these three sources, no other prior academic literature on the subject has been found.

² Erskine notes a dip in the reporting of firearms ownership in a 1972 Gallup poll and speculates: "it is possible that weapons have become so controversial that people are now less likely to admit gun ownership than formerly" (1972:456). The 1973 NORC estimate, however, shows no such decline over the figures reported earlier in the decade, suggesting that the 1972 "dip" reflects sampling variability.

better part of 15 years, in short, about half the families in the United States report owning at least one firearm.³ A second point to emphasize, however, is that there has been no apparent *increase* in the proportion owning a weapon, despite a wide-spread expectation to the contrary.⁴

Those who reported owning a gun were next asked, "Is it a pistol, rifle, shotgun, or what?" Of those owning a weapon, 42 percent said they owned a pistol, 58 percent a shotgun, and 62 percent a rifle. A similar breakdown is provided by Erskine (1972:457) on data from 1959. A comparison of those results with our own (Table 1) reveals the following trends: First, in the last

TABLE 1
TRENDS IN WEAPONS OWNERSHIP
IN THE UNITED STATES:
1959-1973

	1959 ^a	1973 ^b	Change
Percent owning any weapon	49%	47%	-2
Percent owning a rifle ^c	55%	62%	+7
Percent owning a shotgun ^c	65%	58%	-7
Percent owning a handgun ^c	32%	42%	+10

^a Source: Gallup poll, September 4, 1959, as reported in Erskine (1972:456).

^b Source: 1973 NORC General Social Survey.

^c Figures for ownership by type are expressed as a percentage of those who owned a weapon, not of the total sample.

³ A methodological question might be raised about the validity of asking respondents whether they own a gun. That nearly half the sample freely confesses to the ownership of a weapon, however, makes us doubt that the problem is a severe one. On the other hand, it is probable that this procedure underreports the illegal ownership of weapons. Assuming that lower status respondents are more likely to own a weapon illegally (or to acquire one illegally), we feel that results reported later may somewhat overstate the relationship between social class and gun ownership.

Fifteen of the total 1504 respondents refused to answer the gun ownership question. We believe that most of the refusers in fact own guns. For example, about three-quarters of the refusers said they were opposed to gun control legislation vs. three-quarters of the total sample who were in favor. The refusers, however, along with all other missing data, are omitted from this analysis.

⁴ For example, the *Final Report* of the NCCPV includes a section on "The Domestic Arms Buildup" and reports that "the number of guns owned by private citizens is rising rapidly" (1970:146). In terms of the absolute number of weapons in private hands, this statement is probably accurate. In terms of the *proportion* of families possessing a weapon, it is misleading. As noted, this proportion has been approximately constant since 1959.

15 years, the rifle has replaced the shotgun as the most frequently possessed firearm. Second, among those owning a weapon, the incidence of handgun ownership has increased by about ten percentage points. (The increased ownership of pistols is certainly the more interesting result and further analysis is forthcoming.)

These two questions contain all information about weapons ownership available in the 1973 NORC survey, allowing us to draw an intuitively appealing distinction between those owning any weapons vs. those who own handguns. However, there are many other critical distinctions that the data do *not* allow us to draw. Questions on the uses of weapons, the reasons they are owned, the pursuit of leisure-time activities for which weapons would be appropriate, whether (or how often) the weapons are fired, whether or not they are kept loaded and "ready for action," were simply not asked.⁵ What

⁵ Other secondary sources contain *some* information on these topics, but the avail-

follows, then, cannot be a definitive account of the "role of guns in American society." Rather, the effort here is primarily descriptive in focus and suggestive in intent.

SOCIAL CHARACTERISTICS OF GUN OWNERS

It is often assumed that weapons ownership is primarily a working-class phenomenon, or at least has increasingly become so in recent years as the white urban working class arms itself for battle with blacks, students or other dissident minority groups. Schwartz has provided one statement of this view:

Now it is not only the Minutemen who are arming but also the suburbanites! Now the people who are talking about and preparing for guerrilla warfare are not people who can be dismissed as "Communist-chasing weirdos" in California but often are urban, working, lower-middle-class "ethnics"—white as well as black—and more than a few upper-class and upper-middle-class students (1973:10)!

Many of the same themes, set in a different context, are argued by Coser:

In the wilderness of the cities, just as in the wilderness of the frontier, the gun becomes an effective equalizer.

able evidence does not present a clear picture. A 1966 Gallup poll, for example, asked persons whether they or anyone in their family "goes hunting." Of the 3490 respondents who answered the question, 37.7 percent said that they did. The same survey found 47.4 percent of the sample saying that they owned at least one weapon. Assuming that most people who hunt own their own guns, this would suggest that about 80 percent of the privately owned weapons are used for recreational purposes. The inclusion of activities other than hunting would certainly raise this figure. On the other hand, the *Final Report* of the NCCPV estimates that about 66 percent of householders with guns "include self-defense as one reason, among others, for owning a firearm" (1970:149).

Within the status structure of the gang, through a true transvaluation of middle-class values, success in defense of the 'turf' brings deference and 'rep' which are unavailable anywhere else. Here the successful exercise of violence is a road to achievement (1966:10).

The "anger" of the blue-collar class, and the potential for violence which it poses are often considered an important predisposing factor in this tendency (see Ransford, 1972 and especially Hamill; 1969).

Overall, the evidence fits rather poorly with these assumptions (see Table 2). Following earlier results reported by Hamilton (1972:546) and Erskine (1972:457), the data show weapons ownership highest in the small towns and rural areas, decreasing as city size increases. The rural—big city difference amounts to about 35 percentage points. Likewise, weapons ownership is disproportionate in the South; the South-non-South difference amounts to 22 percentage points. (Figures are for all weapons considered equally.) The patterns for pistol ownership are generally weaker (here and elsewhere in the analysis), but tend to follow the same general lines. Also, whites are about ten points more likely to own a weapon than non-whites, but for pistols, there is essentially no difference. Contrasting the themes discussed above, then, the first conclusion is that weapons ownership is primarily a rural, not an urban, phenomenon.

In addition to being predominantly Southern and rural, gun owners are also disproportionately Protestant and upper status, again in some contrast to the common assumption. The Protestant-Catholic difference amounts to about 21 percentage points for all weapons considered equally. Approximately one-fourth of the Protestants report owning a handgun, which is

TABLE 2
WEAPONS OWNERSHIP BY SELECTED BACKGROUND VARIABLES

	Proportion Owning Any Weapon	Proportion Owning a Handgun	N
Total	47.3	19.9	1495
City Size			
Rural	65.5	23.1	348
Small towns	52.0	23.3	348
Medium cities	43.1	17.6	204
Suburbs	43.3	19.5	224
Large cities	30.5	15.3	371
Region			
South	62.3	31.3	478
Non-South	40.2	14.6	1017
Race			
White	48.7	20.2	1303
Non-White	38.0	18.1	192
Religion			
Protestant	56.3	25.4	932
Catholic	35.1	11.6	388
Jew	14.3	4.8	42
None	32.3	12.6	96
Other	21.2	5.9	33
Education			
Less than 8	46.9	21.8	143
Less than 12	44.4	17.6	405
High school	52.1	22.5	482
Some college	46.3	20.8	257
College graduate	43.3	16.3	203
Occupational prestige			
10-19	43.3	17.3	134
20-29	43.9	17.5	228
30-39	46.1	20.1	330
40-49	51.0	23.8	361
50-59	48.3	24.1	147
60-69	50.0	17.5	96
70-89	55.2	17.2	29
Income			
Less than \$4,000	30.4	13.3	227
\$4,000-7,000	41.8	18.0	206
\$7,000-10,000	44.4	16.1	243
\$10,000-15,000	58.4	24.5	346
Over \$15,000	54.9	23.7	370

twice the figure for Catholics. Of the standard measures of SES, education shows the weakest patterns, with weapons "peaking" in the middle-education groups. The patterns for income and occupational prestige, however, are sharp and nearly linear: as SES in-

creases, so too does the probability of owning a gun. The difference for all weapons between most and least affluent amounts to 25 percentage points; for pistols only, slightly more than 10 percentage points. Our second conclusion, then, is that weapons ownership

TABLE 3
REGRESSION OF WEAPONS OWNERSHIP ON REGION, RELIGION, CITY SIZE,
EDUCATION, OCCUPATION, AND INCOME (WHITES ONLY)

Independent Variable	Unstandardized Coefficient	Standard Error	F-ratio
Constant	.615	.142	18.84 ^b
Region	— .148	.036	17.33 ^b
City size	— .067	.011	35.60 ^b
Religion			
Protestant	.255	.107	5.66 ^a
Catholic	.072	.108	.44
Jew	— .096	.138	.49
None	.072	.122	.35
Education	— .005	.006	.63
Occupation	— .000	.001	.04
Income	.039	.006	44.10 ^b

^a Significant at .01.

^b Significant at .001.

$R^2 = .145$.

is primarily a middle-class, not a working-class phenomenon.

Since all the variables so far discussed are highly inter-correlated, multiple regression analysis was employed to separate genuine and spurious effects (Table 3).⁶ Data reported in this

⁶ The coding of variables for this analysis was as follows:

For the dependent variable, a respondent is given a 1 if he or she possesses a weapon and a 0 if not. Thus, the raw coefficients can be interpreted as simple conditional probabilities.

Region: South = 1; Nonsouth = 2.

City size: 2 = Rural; 3 = under 50,000; 4 = 50-250,000; 5 = suburbs near large cities; 6 = cities over 250,000.

Religion is entered as a series of dummy variables, with "other" as the omitted category.

Education ranges from 0 to 20 and expresses single years of education.

Occupation is categorized by the Duncan SES codes.

Income is represented by twelve ordinal categories ranging from "under \$1000" to "\$25,000 and over."

Data shown in Table Three are for all weapons considered equally. Equivalent results are obtained when pistol ownership is substituted for the dependent variable. Significant predictors of pistol ownership are

analysis are for white respondents only. Of the substantial zero-order effects apparent in Table 2, only the effect for occupational prestige disappears with the remaining variables held constant. Net of all other variables, the South-non-South difference is about 15 points, the Protestant-Catholic difference, about 18 points. Similarly, weapons ownership increases significantly with income and declines with city size. Finally, the six variables in the analysis account for approximately 14.5 percent of the total variance in weapons ownership.

Among whites outside the South, the upper-status, Protestant "distinctiveness" in weapons ownership is especially pronounced (Table 4). At all levels of income, the non-South, white Protestants are much more likely to own a gun, the difference being greatest in the upper reaches of the income scale. Perhaps the most dramatic result

region, income, and religion, all significant at .05 or beyond. Multiple R^2 for pistol ownership = .076, somewhat lower than the figure shown for all weapons.

TABLE 4
WEAPONS OWNERSHIP BY RELIGION, BY INCOME
(WHITE NON-SOUTH ONLY)

Income	Percent Owning Any Weapon			
	Protestants		Non-Protestants	
Less than \$3,000	27.3	(33)	0.0	(19)
\$3,000-6,000	48.7	(78)	17.5	(40)
\$6,000-10,000	45.6	(79)	30.5	(59)
\$10,000-20,000	58.1	(179)	41.7	(120)
Over \$20,000	75.8	(66)	34.0	(50)
	Percent Owning a Pistol			
Less than \$3,000	6.1	(33)	0.0	(19)
\$3,000-6,000	19.2	(78)	2.5	(40)
\$6,000-10,000	13.9	(79)	10.2	(59)
\$10,000-20,000	23.9	(180)	15.0	(120)
Over \$20,000	31.8	(66)	8.0	(50)

shown in the table is the amount of weaponry possessed by white Protestants with yearly incomes of \$20,000 or more. Slightly more than three-quarters of the group own at least one weapon, and nearly a third own a hand-gun.⁷ Outside the South, then, it is clearly not the "working, lower-middle class ethnics," who are the most heavily armed segment of the society.

Lacking more detailed information, it is difficult to know what interpretation should be placed on these initial results. The regional and city size effects seem understandable: most of the

legitimate recreational and sporting uses for weapons require access to rural, unpopulated areas. The South-non-South differences, however, remain even with city size controlled, suggesting the need for more interpretation. Killian has suggested one possibility: "As the black revolution turned from non-violence to defensive violence, the black sections of Southern communities took on a new and menacing character for white southerners" (1970:61). One possible response to this "menace" would be to purchase a gun. Indirect evidence from the NORC survey gives partial support for this interpretation. Among Southern whites, weapons owners, especially those who own pistols, are distinctly more hostile to blacks than non-owners. Outside the South, on the other hand, no similar relationship appeared.⁸

⁷ Another study of an upper middle class and predominantly Protestant population also uncovered a high incidence of pistol ownership—about 27 percent. In this case, the population studied was the United States House of Representatives. (The evidence is reported in an article in the *Washington Post*, "27% of House Members Own Handguns," Monday, June 30, 1975, p. 3.) Following the data reported above, the study also found that Congressmen from the South and from small town and rural areas were the most likely to own a pistol. (Thanks to Fred Best for calling this item to attention.)

⁸ One question, for example, asked whether respondents would favor or oppose laws prohibiting the inter-marriage of blacks and whites. Among white Southerners who own a pistol, 59 percent said they would favor such legislation, as did 55 percent of those owning any weapons. Among white Southerners owning no weapon, however,

The relationship of weapons ownership to status and religion is initially more problematic. One possibility is that owning a gun is simply a part of the American Ethos, one means through which the white Protestants and the upper-middle class affirm their commitment to the "American Way." A second interpretation is that the higher strata have become insecure in their position and paranoid about attacks upon it, and have armed themselves accordingly. A related possibility, suggested by Schrag (1970:13ff), is that white Protestants see themselves the true bearers of the "frontier tradition" and the "spirit of the West."⁹ Still another interpretation, suggested by an anonymous reviewer, is that the higher status white Protestants may be uncommonly attached to the formal symbols of American democracy, in particular, the "right to keep and bear arms."¹⁰ The possession of a firearm, that is, would be a natural behavioral consequence of one's belief in the right of a free people to rise in revolt against an unjust government. In addition to these "cultural" hypotheses, there are some psychological and social-psychological possibilities. Weapons ownership in the Protestant, upper-middle class, for example, may be a perverse

form of "conspicuous consumption" for the gun owner, symbolizing his "accomplishment" and sustaining his "rugged, manly" self-image. The possession of a firearm would also mark one as capable of "defending" self and family against any attackers. A third possibility is that weapons ownership may be tied to the sense of *machismo*; in this respect, weapons ownership in the Protestant, upper-middle class may serve many of the same functions that "tough talk" in bars and taverns serves for the urban, working class. Finally, three more prosaic possibilities can be noted. First, guns are relatively expensive trinkets, especially hunting weapons and high-quality side-arms; thus, those with more money are more likely to possess them. Second, those with money are also more likely to engage in recreational activities which require guns—hunting, skeet-shooting. These are the activities of the "landed gentry" more than the industrial working class. And finally, those who have money are obviously more likely to possess things thought worth "protecting," and therefore more likely to own the means of their protection. There is little in the currently available evidence allowing one to choose among these many possibilities.

GUNS IN CITIES

Most of the rural weaponry indicated in Table 2 is probably more or less innocuous from a "social problems" point of view. Although the evidence does not allow a direct determination, it seems likely that these weapons are used for light hunting or other recreational purposes. Any consequent human death or injury may thus be accidental. The "logic" of firearms possession in the cities and suburbs is not as apparent. Here, weapons are

the proportion drops to 46 percent. The equivalent figures for whites outside the South were 25 percent in favor among pistol owners, 32 percent in favor among gun owners generally, and 31 percent in favor among non-owners. Three additional items concerning race consistently produced equivalent results (data available from the authors on request).

⁹ On this score, see also Frantz (1969). According to this source, "the frontier heritage established the idea of the individual's arming himself" (1969:151).

¹⁰ Evidence discussed later, however, casts some doubt on this interpretation. As it happens, the clear majority of gun owners say they *favor* stricter gun controls.

TABLE 5
THE CORRELATES OF WEAPONS OWNERSHIP IN CITIES AND SUBURBS,
WHITE RESPONDENTS ONLY

	Proportion Owning Any Weapon	Proportion Owning a Handgun	N
Occupational prestige			
10-29	24.7	11.8	93
30-59	38.1	18.2	286
60-89	42.2	20.0	45
Education			
Less than 12	27.9	11.6	129
High school	44.8	23.4	154
Some college +	34.7	14.7	190
Income			
Less than \$5,000	9.8	6.1	82
\$5,000-10,000	23.7	14.4	97
\$10,000-15,000	50.9	20.4	108
\$15,000-20,000	53.4	24.1	58
Over \$20,000	49.4	21.4	89
Relative Financial Situation ^a			
Below Average	20.0	11.8	85
Average	34.8	14.9	276
Above Average	54.2	26.2	107
Religion			
Protestant	49.1	23.9	218
Non-Protestant	25.1	10.6	255

^a The question reads: "Compared with American families in general, would you say your family income is—far below average, below average, etc."

probably owned more for "protection" than sport, and thus cannot be lightly dismissed. Despite the general tendencies revealed in earlier tables, nearly a third of all residents in cities of 250,000 and larger own at least one gun, and about 15% own a pistol (Table 2). Who are the urban gun owners?

In the cities of a quarter-million or more, and in the surrounding suburbs, weapons ownership remains essentially a high status and Protestant phenomenon (see Table 5). This relationship is especially strong when all weapons are considered equally; for pistol ownership, the patterns are more occluded. As before, there is some slight curvilinearity shown for education, with the high school graduates more likely to

possess either type of weapon. Likewise, there is a slight and insignificant drop-off in weapons ownership (both types) at the very top of the income range. But in general, weapons ownership again tends to increase with all measures of social status. Among urban and suburban whites, the most affluent are nearly 40 points more likely to own any kind of gun and some 15 points more likely to own a pistol than are the least affluent. Following the earlier patterns, the Protestants are some 24 points more likely to possess any kind of weapon and 13 points more likely to own a handgun than the non-Protestants. One final pattern worth note is that the heaviest concentration of weaponry in the urban context comes among persons who rate their family income

as "above average." Slightly more than half the group owns a weapon, and more than a quarter own a pistol. In the cities and suburbs, then, no less than in the nation at large, weapons ownership is distinctively characteristic of the white, Protestant, upper-middle class.

What accounts for the ownership of weapons in the cities and suburbs? A common assumption would be that urban weaponry reflects fear of blacks, fear of crime, and the related worries associated with modern urban life. The 1973 NORC survey contains several questions that allow us to explore the "fear and paranoia" hypothesis in more detail. One of these, for example, asks whether "the courts around here deal too harshly or not harshly enough with criminals." Another question asks whether "too much, too little, or about the right amount" is spent on welfare. Then there is a question asking whether the respondent had ever been "punched or beaten by another person," and a follow-up: "Have you ever been threatened with a gun, or shot at?" An especially interesting item asks whether there is "any area right around here where you would be afraid to walk alone at night?" Then two items on direct experiences with crime: first, whether in the last year the respondent's house was broken into; and second, whether in the last year the respondent had experienced a stick-up, mugging, or threat. One final item relevant to these questions: "Are there any Negroes living in the neighborhood now?" Although not perfectly suited to a test of the hypothesis, these items do give a serviceable approximation to the "urban malaise" syndrome so prominent in recent speculation on the quality of urban life. Their correlation with weapons ownership for

whites in the cities and suburbs is shown in Table 6.

Overall, the data present a mixed picture. First, most of the tendencies shown in the table are weak—much weaker than might have been expected, given the alarmist themes predominating in the "urban malaise" literature. On the other hand, some of the results do appear consistent with that literature. The heaviest concentration of weaponry, for example, comes among those who feel too much is spent on welfare, that the courts are not harsh enough on criminals, and who have been punched or beaten, or threatened with a gun, at some point in their lives. Among the latter group, weapons ownership is especially pronounced: more than half the group owns at least one weapon, and nearly a third own a pistol.

The remaining four items, however, shown an *opposite* pattern to that predicted by the "fear and paranoia" hypothesis. Respondents who report some fear at venturing out at night are slightly *less* likely to own a gun than those reporting no fears. Likewise, those who have been burglarized or threatened by force in the last year are *less* likely to possess a weapon than those who have not. Finally, persons living in integrated urban and suburban neighborhoods are *less* likely to own a gun than those whose neighborhoods are all white.

Given the relative weakness of these relationships and the small number of cases in some of the more interesting cells, one cannot come to any firm conclusion. Nonetheless, the data suggest that the *anticipation* and *expectation* of crime and similar urban degradations is a more important determinant of weapons ownership than actual experiences with crime. Those who

TABLE 6
FEAR AND PARANOIA IN THE CITIES AND SUBURBS, WHITES ONLY

	Proportion Owning Any Weapon	Proportion Owning A Handgun	N
How much is being spent on welfare?			
Too little	20.8	9.1	77
About right	34.4	13.6	125
Too much	42.7	21.0	253
Are the courts . . .			
Too harsh	13.3	6.7	15
About right	30.5	8.5	59
Not harsh enough	41.4	20.2	336
Have you ever been punched or beaten?			
Yes	45.0	21.2	151
No	31.9	12.6	323
Have you ever been threatened with a gun?			
Yes	55.2	29.9	67
No	32.9	14.5	407
Is there any place around here where you'd be afraid?			
Yes	32.8	16.6	229
No	40.2	17.2	239
Have you been burglarized in the last year?			
Yes	25.0	14.6	48
No	37.3	16.9	426
Have you been threatened by force in the last year?			
Yes	10.0	0.0	10
No	36.7	17.1	463
Are there any Negroes living in this neighborhood now?			
Yes	32.9	16.2	234
No	40.3	18.1	216

seem "nervous" and "anxious" about urban decay, who are hostile to welfare and punitive in their orientation to criminals, who do not actually live among blacks but perhaps fear that they someday might—these groups are heavier possessors of firearms. Those who are literally "at the front" of urban crime, who live in integrated neighborhoods, who are afraid to walk alone, who have actually experienced burglaries and muggings—these groups are disproportionate *non*-possessors.

For the former group (probably of higher status than the latter), owning a gun might appear an appealing hedge against a fearful expectation for the future. The latter group, on the other hand, after direct experiences with crime, more easily see the futility of owning a gun as a "solution." Despite any contrary opinion abroad in the affluent suburbs or districts within the city, it is simply not feasible to pursue one's daily business with the Smith and Wesson tucked securely into one's

purse or belt. Likewise, owning a gun only offers thieves one more item to steal. An alternative explanation, though not one we find likely, might reverse the direction of causality and argue that gun owners are less likely to get burglarized or mugged, or are less fearful of going out at night, precisely *because* they possess the means of self-protection. This hypothesis, however, grants to the privately-owned weapon more protective efficacy than seems warranted.

Clearly, the complexities of weapons ownership in urban areas are not adequately captured in the available data. One knows only through remote inferences why these weapons are owned, whether they are meant for "protection" or recreation or perhaps merely for display. The victimization questions included in the survey also tap only two of the many elements of urban crime. In the case of weapons ownership, the qualifying phrase of those questions, "in the last year," is unnecessarily restrictive; a more thorough account would explore victimization over a longer period and also expectations for the future as well as the experiences of friends and neighbors. More detailed questions on attitudes about crime, criminals, and violence should also be explored.¹¹ At present,

¹¹ Limited information along these lines is contained in the NORC survey. One question, for example, asks whether respondents favor the death penalty for persons convicted of murder. Of those who did, 49.7 percent possessed a weapon ($N = 893$), whereas among those who did not, 43.3 percent possessed a weapon ($N = 515$). The difference, obviously, is insignificant. A later question in the survey asked whether we are spending too little, too much, or about the right amount on "halting the rising crime rate." Interestingly, the heaviest concentration of guns comes among those few respondents ($N = 69$) who thought *too much* money was being spent on this

very little information of this sort is available.

GUNS, GUN OWNERS, AND GUN CONTROL

One of the ironies of American politics is that there is no national gun control legislation despite the support by sizable majorities of stricter gun controls. Erskine has reviewed the poll evidence on gun control from 1938 to the present and reports, "the vast majority of Americans have favored some kind of action for the control of civilian firearms at least as long as modern polling has been in existence" (1972:455). One question included in the NORC survey analyzed here confirms this judgment: 74.8 percent of the total sample said they would favor "a law which would require a person to obtain a police permit before he or she could buy a gun."

Commentators on the gun control issue often attribute the absence of federal legislation to the so-called gun lobby—a well-heeled and highly sophisticated lobbying operation backed by the weapons manufacturers and spear-headed by the National Rifle Association. Following the dictates of pluralist theory, it is also often assumed that this lobby speaks for its underlying constituency, the gun owners themselves: The lobby is only the organizational extension of its constituency's mandate.

Evidence so far considered casts some initial doubt on this scenario. If half the population owns a weapon, as the data suggest, and if, simultaneously,

problem. Of the group, 56.5 percent owned a weapon, and 27.1 percent owned a pistol. A similar pattern was found for those who thought too much was being spent to "solve the problems of the big cities." Of the group ($N = 181$), 58 percent owned a weapon, 26.5 percent a pistol.

TABLE 7
ATTITUDES TOWARD GUN CONTROL BY WEAPONS OWNERSHIP

Attitude to Gun Control	Total Sample			
	Owens a Pistol	Any Weapon	Owens None	Total
Favors controls	58.7	63.7	84.8	74.8
Opposes controls	41.3	36.3	15.2	25.2
Percent	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	293	691	770	1470
Cities and Suburbs (Whites Only)				
Favors controls	58.2	63.0	89.9	80.1
Opposes controls	41.8	37.0	10.1	19.9
Percent	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	79	165	296	462

three-quarters of the population also favor stricter gun controls, one necessary implication is that at least half of *the gun-owners themselves* must favor gun controls. Direct evidence bearing on the point is shown in Table 7.

The first point to note, as might have been expected, is that support for gun control is higher among non-owners than owners, both in the nation at large and among urban and suburban whites. Among non-owners, in fact, support for stricter controls is nearly unanimous: in the cities, about 90 percent of the non-owners favor the stricter control. The direction of association revealed in the table, however, masks what seems a far more salient aspect of the data, that large majorities of gun owners themselves also favor stricter gun controls. Among gun owners, this pro-control majority hovers at about three-fifths—slightly lower for possessors of pistols, and slightly higher for the others. Thus, while most of the people who are opposed to gun controls own guns, it is also true that most of the people who own guns are *not* opposed to gun

controls.¹² This finding suggests that most gun owners are probably responsible citizens, and not inclined to fight for the unrestricted right to "keep and bear arms." A second implication is that the activities of the gun lobby probably do not represent majority opinion within its ostensible constituency.¹³

Sizable zero-order correlations exist between attitudes toward gun control and many of the background variables discussed earlier.¹⁴ One question that

¹² Thus, weapons ownership among persons opposed to gun control runs to 68.2 percent ($N = 368$). And of the group, about a third (33.0 percent) own a pistol. The comparable figures for those in favor of gun controls are 40.3 percent and 15.7 percent ($N = 1093$).

¹³ In this respect, the gun lobby may constitute another instance of what Hamilton has called "malfunctioning pluralism" (1975:Ch. 7), which occurs when there is some clear disjuncture between the policy preferences of the "clientele" and the organizations which "represent" that clientele. Insofar as the NRA claims to speak for *the* gunowner, it apparently speaks with a somewhat distorted voice. It is quite possible, however, that the *actual membership* of the NRA is well-represented by that organization.

¹⁴ Significant zero-order r 's are shown for

TABLE 8
ATTITUDE TOWARD GUN CONTROL, REGRESSED ON EDUCATION, OCCUPATION,
INCOME, REGION, CITY SIZE, RELIGION, PARTY IDENTIFICATION,
AND WEAPONS OWNERSHIP (WHITES ONLY)

Independent Variable	Unstandardized Coefficient	Standard Error	F-ratio
Constant	1.201	.150	64.31 ^b
Education	-.002	.006	.10
Occupation	.001	.001	.60
Income	.001	.006	.02
Region	-.018	.034	.27
City Size	-.013	.011	1.43
Religion			
Protestant	.029	.103	.08
Catholic	-.074	.103	.51
Jew	-.141	.131	1.15
None	-.036	.116	.10
Party identification			
Democrat	.017	.077	.49
Independent	.007	.078	.01
Republican	.010	.080	.01
Owens Any Weapon	.174	.031	30.80 ^b
Owens a Pistol	.082	.042	3.76 ^a

^a Significant at .05.

^b Significant at .001.

$R^2 = .116$.

arises, then, is whether the gun ownership effect is the mere spurious reflection of the association between gun ownership and those background variables. Accordingly, Table 8 reports a multiple regression analysis with attitude towards gun control as the dependent variable and education, occupation, income, region, city size, religion, party identification, and weapons ownership as the independent variables.¹⁵ The most striking aspect of

the results is that weapons ownership is the *only* significant higher-order predictor of attitudes towards gun control. The differential tendency to own a gun, in short, almost perfectly interprets the zero-order effects mentioned in footnote 14. Net of all other variables reported in the analysis, those owning any weapon are about 17 points more likely to oppose gun controls, and pistol owners are about eight points more likely still.

More detailed cross-tabular analysis

Jews ($r = .096$), region ($r = -.109$), city size ($r = -.138$), Catholics ($r = -.146$), and Protestants ($r = .195$), as well as with the gun ownership variables (for all weapons, $r = .300$, and for pistols only, $r = .201$).

¹⁵ Coding of variables for this regression is the same as that for Table 3 (see note 6 above), with the exception that party iden-

tification is included in the present analysis. Party was represented by a series of dummy variables with "other" as the omitted category. For the dependent variable, respondents were given a 1 if they favored gun controls and a 2 if they did not. Missing data ($N = 34$) were omitted from the analysis.

of these data (not shown) revealed several interesting items concerning the anti-gun-control forces. As before, religion and social status, in conjunction with weapons ownership, proved the most significant variables. *Non-Protestants* outside the South tend to favor stricter controls whether they own a weapon or not; more than two-thirds of the pistol owners among the group said they were in favor of stricter controls, and for the gun owners generally, the figure was about three-quarters. Among Protestant gun-owners, the opposition to gun controls is more pronounced, especially at the upper income ranges. In fact, the highest incidence of opposition to gun control outside the South is registered by white Protestant pistol-owners with incomes over \$15,000: 55.3 percent of the group ($N = 38$) opposed the gun control measure.¹⁶ These data suggest that the anti-gun-control constituency, while not large in proportional terms, is nonetheless likely to be quite sophisticated and politically active. This finding might well explain the continued absence of effective gun control legislation in the face of large majority support for such measures.

DISCUSSION

What significance should be attached to the findings reported in this paper? There can be little doubt that the death and violence associated with privately-owned weapons is a social problem of enormous importance. According to the NCCPV, there are approximately 23,000 accidental shootings in the nation yearly and some 8000 annual homicides committed with fire-

arms. As the Commission itself has concluded, "personal injury and death from crime occur more often in the United States than in any other industrial nation in the world" (1970:147). On the other hand, these data also suggest that the vast, overwhelming majority of the 90,000,000 or so privately-owned weapons are *not* involved in accidental shootings or intentional deaths. Most of the gun-owners studied in this paper are probably responsible persons who use their weapons for legitimate recreational activities. In this respect, the data presented here may contribute more to the sociology of leisure than to that of social problems.

The special case of armament in the cities and suburbs, however, must be treated more seriously. In this context, there can be little doubt that weapons ownership is related to growing fears about violence and crime, although the data show the form of this relationship is by no means obvious. More detailed research than is possible with presently available surveys will be necessary before the true significance of weapons in cities can be assessed.

For its implications for social policy, perhaps the most significant finding reported here is the sizable amount of pro-gun-control sentiment registered by the people who own guns. We expect that this potential pro-control constituency has been largely over-looked, if not systematically avoided, by gun control advocates. These data suggest that an organization of "Gun Owners for Gun Control" might well strike a responsive chord among the clear majority of gun owners who say they would favor stricter controls. An organization of this sort would provide a very effective symbolic counterpart to the gun lobby or the NRA.

¹⁶ Actually, opposition to gun control was somewhat higher than this among Protestant pistol-owners in the \$7-10,000 income bracket, but there were too few cases to make much of the finding ($N = 11$).

Finally, the data presented here also raise a question about the alarmism currently directed against the urban, white, ethnic, working- and lower-middle classes. The ethnic workers, in many contemporary accounts, are depicted as a repository of backward and authoritarian sentiments, especially toward any dissident movement challenging their vision of "what is right with America." From these themes, it is an easy inference that the urban workers are systematically arming themselves for the impending "show-down." Data discussed above suggest that nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, of all groups considered in this paper, the white, urban, working-class Catholics are far and away the *least* heavily armed. Given the available evidence, the sources of weapons ownership in the Protestant middle classes can only be surmised. But this, as the more general question of who bears arms and why, represents a potentially fertile area for additional research.

REFERENCES

- Coser, Lewis A.
1966 "Some social functions of violence." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 364(March): 8-18.
- Erskine, Hazel G.
1972 "The polls: Gun control." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36(Fall): 455-469.
- Frantz, Joe B.
1969 "The frontier tradition: An invitation to violence." Pp. 127-154 in H.D. Graham and T.R. Gurr (eds.), *The History of Violence in America*. New York: Praeger.
- Hamill, Pete
1969 "The revolt of the white lower middle class." *The New York Times*, April 14.
- Hamilton, Richard F.
1972 *Class and Politics in the United States*. New York: Wiley.
1975 *Restraining Myths: Critical Studies of US Social Structure and Politics*. New York: Halstead Press.
- Killian, Lewis M.
1970 *White Southerners*. New York: Random House.
- National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence
1970 *To Establish Justice, to Insure Domestic Tranquillity: The Final Report of the Commission*. New York: Praeger.
- Newton, George D. and Franklin Zimrick
1969 *Firearms and Violence in American Life: A Task Force Report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence*. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.
- Ransford, H. Edward
1972 "Blue collar anger: Reactions to student and black protest." *American Sociological Review* 37(June): 333-346.
- Schrag, Peter
1970 *The Decline of the WASP*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Schwartz, David C.
1973 *Political Alienation and Political Behavior*. Chicago: Aldine Publishers.
- Sherrill, Robert
1973 *The Saturday Night Special*. New York: Charterhouse Publishers.

COMMUNICATIONS

Professor Simon (1974) states:

This is the *first study* of racial attitudes among young children in American society that has not reported a significant white racial preference among black,

white, or Oriental subjects (50). (Italics added.)

This assertion is false. The observation that black children do not show a significant white racial preference,