

Majority of Americans support dozens of policies to strengthen US gun laws

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The majority of Americans support a broad array of policies to reduce gun violence, according to a new national public opinion survey conducted by researchers at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. These policies include: requiring universal background checks for all gun sales (supported by 89 percent); banning the sale of military-style semiautomatic assault weapons (69 percent); banning the sale of large-capacity ammunition magazines (68 percent); and prohibiting high-risk individuals from having guns, including those convicted of a serious crime as a juvenile (83 percent) and those convicted of violating a domestic-violence restraining order (81 percent). Americans also support a range of measures to strengthen oversight of gun dealers and various policies restricting gun access by persons with mental illness.

The national survey, which over-sampled gun owners and non-gun owners living in homes with guns to allow for more precise estimates of opinions among these groups, was fielded in January, 2013, several weeks following the mass school shooting in Newtown, Connecticut. The majority of Americans support all but 4 of the 31 gun policies asked about in the survey. For many policies, there was little difference in support between gun owners and non-gun-owners.

"This research indicates high support among Americans, including gun owners in many cases, for a wide range of policies aimed at reducing gun violence," said lead study author Colleen Barry, PhD, MPP, an associate professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

"These data indicate broad consensus among the American public in support of a comprehensive approach to reducing the staggering toll of gun violence in the United States."

At the same time, the researchers fielded a second national survey to assess Americans' attitudes about [mental illness](#). This survey reveals ambivalent attitudes among the American public about mental illness. Sixty-one percent of respondents favor greater spending on mental health screening and treatment as a strategy for reducing gun violence, and 58 percent said discrimination against people with mental illness is a serious problem. Yet, almost half of respondents thought people with serious mental illness are more dangerous than others, and two-thirds expressed unwillingness to have a person with a serious mental illness as a neighbor.

"In light of our findings about Americans' attitudes toward persons with mental illness, it is worth thinking carefully about how to implement effective gun-violence-prevention measures without exacerbating stigma or discouraging people from seeking treatment," added Barry.

The results of both surveys are summarized in "After Newtown – Public Opinion on Gun Policy and Mental Illness," published online on January 28th in *The New England Journal of Medicine*.

Gun violence claims 31,000 U.S. lives each year in the U.S., and the rate of firearms homicides in America is 20 times higher than it is in other economically advanced nations.

Johns Hopkins researchers conducted this study using the survey research firm GfK Knowledge Networks. There were 2,703 respondents in the gun policy survey and 1,530 respondents in the mental illness survey.

"Not only are gun owners and non-gun-owners very much aligned in their support for proposals to strengthen U.S. gun laws," said co-author Daniel Webster, ScD, MPH, director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research, "but the majority of NRA members are also in favor of many of these policies."

The survey found that 74 percent of NRA members support requiring universal background checks for all [gun sales](#); 64 percent of NRA members support prohibiting people who have been convicted of two or more crimes involving alcohol or drugs within a 3-year period from having a gun, and 70 percent of NRA members want a mandatory minimum sentence of 2 years in prison for a person convicted of knowingly selling a gun to someone who is not legally allowed to own one.

"These data indicate that the majority of Americans are in favor of policy changes that would ultimately increase safety," said Jon Vernick, JD, MPH, co-director of the Johns Hopkins Center for [Gun Policy](#) and Research and a co-author of the study. "This consensus should propel forward comprehensive legislation aimed at saving lives."

The publication of these surveys in *The New England Journal of Medicine* follows the Summit on Reducing [Gun Violence](#) in America: Informing Policy with Evidence and Analysis convened at Johns Hopkins University earlier this month. Ten days following the Summit, the Johns Hopkins University Press published Reducing [Gun](#) Violence in America: Informing Policy with Evidence and Analysis, a book that summarizes the research, analysis, and recommendations from the two-day meeting.

Provided by Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health

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