

Why do Americans own handguns? Fear of crime and a broader sense of danger

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The motivation to own a handgun for self-protection is not just about fear of crime, according to the model proposed by Wolfgang Stroebe and Pontus Leander (University of Groningen, The Netherlands), and

Arie W. Kruglanski (University of Maryland), it is also about a more general sense of threat emanating from "the belief that the world is an unpredictable and dangerous place and that society is at the brink of collapse." These dual layers of threat also predict beliefs that people have the right to shoot and kill in self-defense and that people should have broad 2nd Amendment rights.

The study, "Is It a Dangerous World Out There?: The Motivational Bases of American Gun Ownership" appears in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

In terms of human behavior, "it is not just concrete, specific threats that change our behavior, but also vague, general ideas about threat," write Stroebe and colleagues. "Even if we cannot pinpoint exactly why we feel threatened, the fact that we are threatened at all can lead us to want to own handguns for self-protection and advocate for more expansive rights to carry and use them." The authors developed a new theory based on psychological principles, to better understand how these behaviors and beliefs influence American gun owners.

The researchers' first three studies explored their model for understanding gun ownership beliefs. The authors conducted surveys of 839 men in the U.S, 404 gun owners and 435 nonowners.

In their first study, they used survey data to compare gun owners with nonowners to tap possible differences in their gun-related beliefs. In their following two studies, the researchers focused exclusively on the gun owner survey to test the predictions derived from their two-component theory.

In support of their theory they found that fear of crime alone did not explain the need for personal protection, "Different forces are making people feel threatened in different ways, and yet these different types of

threat both correlate with increased handgun ownership and stronger beliefs that people have a right to kill in self-defense," according to Stroebe. Whereas fear of crime was mainly influenced by past crime victimization, the more general sense of threat about the world being a dangerous place, was "instead more strongly influenced by a person's (conservative) political beliefs than by past experience with crime victimization."

The researchers conducted their first three surveys in May and June 2016, before the Orlando Nightclub shootings. They conducted an additional survey a week after the event, replicating their earlier studies with a new group of male gun owners, to see if the mass shooting influenced their beliefs.

"We expected the Orlando mass shooting to move the needle on the [belief](#) systems of gun owners, so we were surprised that there was practically no effect," says Stroebe.

The authors note that the threat and belief system they tested mainly applies to handgun owners and not owners who only have long guns.

Based on their research, "Long guns such as bolt-action rifles, semi-automatic rifles and shotguns, are linked to hunting and not really linked to a sense of [threat](#)," says Stroebe, "Although the gun owners in our sample owned an average of 4 guns each, we saw no evidence that any of our findings apply to owners of long guns only - that is, those who do not own a handgun."

The framework presumably only applies to the United States. "Guns have been part of US history since the American frontier and the right to own a gun is enshrined in the Constitution, which may change the way Americans think about guns relative to people who live in other countries and cultures," says Stroebe.

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