

# Gun sales spiked in 2020 amid pandemic, social justice protests

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Amid the protests and turbulence of 2020, Americans set a new record for gun purchases, with the FBI tallying a new high of 21 million background checks over the year. That was an increase of 26% over the 2016 record of 15.7 million.

Researchers from four major U.S. universities, including Northwestern

University, surveyed approximately 25,000 people between Dec. 16, 2020, and Jan. 11, 2021, and found nearly 9,000 Americans said they bought guns in 2020. The researchers then asked about why they bought them. Gun sales were especially high in March when the pandemic and lockdowns became widespread and in June at the peak of the Black Lives Matter protests.

"These events generated feelings of uncertainty and threat, and Americans apparently felt some security in buying guns," said IPR political scientist James Druckman, the Payson S. Wild Professor of Political Science and Institute for Policy Research associate director.

Druckman is part of a university research consortium of scholars from Northwestern, Harvard, Northeastern and Rutgers that is tracking Americans' attitudes on COVID-19.

Other key findings include:

- People who attended protests against police violence or rallies in support of President Trump were much more likely to buy guns than everyone else.
- As in past years, crime remained the biggest reason for gun buying, but nearly a third of respondents cited COVID-19, lockdowns, the election or protection against the government.
- Republicans were more than twice as likely as Democrats to buy a gun.
- Existing gun-owners who became ill with COVID-19 were more likely to buy additional guns than non-infected gun-owners.
- Whites bought more guns overall, but Blacks were more likely to become new gun-owners.

Protesters were approximately between two and four times more likely to buy a gun than those who did not protest. For those who attended a

protest against [police violence](#) or racism, 13% bought a gun. The percentage increased to 23% for those attending a rally to support former President Trump or to [protest](#) election fairness or COVID-19 restrictions.

However, 5% of all American adults protested which cannot account for all of the increase. Additional drivers of gun buying, according to Druckman, were likely the pandemic itself and fears due to the protests.

Respondents could select up to eight reasons to explain why they made gun purchases in 2020. The most common were reasons regularly cited in past years: to protect them from crime (70%), go target shooting (35%) or hunt (25%).

But specific 2020 events also drove gun purchases, with 16% citing COVID-19 lockdowns, 15% saying they wanted protection from the government and 14% pointing to the 2020 presidential election. In examining some of these reasons, the researchers found interesting takeaways, such as among the 16% who selected COVID-19 lockdowns, more than half of them (56%) had attended a Trump rally.

## **First-time and existing gun owners**

While the majority of gun purchases were made by existing gun owners, 24% of purchases were made by first-time gun owners. Examining demographic differences between those who bought a gun for the first time and those who were already gun owners, revealed key differences.

"The new gun buyers were those who were particularly worried about national events and thus in many ways did not fit common demographics of gun owners," Druckman said.

- Respondents who reported extreme stress were nearly three times

as likely to become a gun owner than those who reported no stress.

- Americans who made more than \$200,000 per year were twice as likely to become a first-time gun owner than those making less than \$15,000.
- While 66% of gun owners overall are white, new gun owners were 1.7 times more likely to be Black.
- More than a third (36%) of existing gun owners who got COVID-19 bought more guns, compared with only 2% of those who got COVID-19 and did not own a gun previously.
- Republicans (14%) were more likely than Democrats (6%) to buy a gun.
- Younger Americans, 18-44 years old, (21%) bought more guns than older Americans aged 45 and older (13%).

Provided by Northwestern University

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