

Firearm-related threats increase likelihood of gun owners to support more regulation

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Most people probably assume that American attitudes toward gun regulation are fixed. But a new study reveals how such attitudes are malleable, even among gun owners themselves.

The article "Gun Ownership, Threat, and Gun Attitudes in an Experiment" argues that although exposure to danger can increase the

desire to be armed, gun owners primed with a gun-related threat soften their views on regulation relative to non-gun owners. It appears in a special issue of *Sociological Perspectives* on guns in America.

"In general, most gun owners own guns for protection. Mostly this is based on a fear of crime, but owning a gun reduces that fear," said Don Haider-Markel, a professor of political science at the University of Kansas.

His study focuses on an experiment conducted with several thousand participants in which half of the respondents were exposed to an image of a dark-skinned man pointing a gun.

"We infer that some gun owners exposed to the image perceived it as a threat and were therefore somewhat more likely to support increased gun regulation relative to gun owners in the [control group](#)," said Haider-Markel of the study he co-wrote with Abigail Vegter, who earned her doctorate at KU and is currently an assistant professor of political science at Berry College.

"Non-gun owners did not increase or decrease their support for gun regulation, regardless of what experimental group they were in," he said.

The professors contend that those who own guns often want to emulate virtues such as courage, bravery and honor. Gun groups such as "Fearless Firearms" and "For the Brave" reinforce this idea. Scholarship has shown that individuals may purchase a gun as a means of mitigating anxiety over threats and experience lower levels of victimization fear once acquiring the weapon. Yet when faced with the possibility of a direct threat—such as a pistol being aimed directly at them—individuals may reconsider their general support for gun rights.

This study is more relevant than ever, as gun-buying during 2020–2021

was the largest on record. Many of these were reportedly first-time buyers. While such [ownership](#) in surveys is often underreported, current estimates hover around 35% of households possessing a firearm.

But another aspect of Haider-Markel's study hinges on the actual picture shown to respondents.

"The image of a dark-skinned man pointing a gun may have invoked racial considerations among some exposed gun owners," he said. "In other words, seeing an image of a dark-skinned man pointing a gun may have primed race among some [gun owners](#), which led them to be more supportive of gun [regulation](#)."

He said that many early gun regulations in the 1960s came about because of Black Panthers marching in public with firearms (such as California). Gun owners tend to score higher on racial resentment levels and are less supportive of gun ownership for non-whites, according to past studies.

However, this particular experiment does not specifically confirm this implication—especially considering the image shown to respondents was racially ambiguous—and he hopes to further explore racial impacts in a future study.

Now in his 25th year at KU, Haider-Markel has done extensive studies in criminal justice, policing and LGBTQ rights. His past research into gun-related topics includes "Intersectionality in Action: Gun Ownership and Women's Political Participation," "Emerging Political Identities? Gun Ownership and Voting in Presidential Elections," "Gun Ownership and Self-Serving Attributions for Mass Shooting Tragedies" and "Gun Ownership Used to Be Bipartisan. Not Anymore."

"Our attitudes about guns and gun regulations are not fixed in concrete," Haider-Markel said of the key takeaway this research offers. "There are

conditions under which people can shift their attitudes, which is encouraging for deliberative democracy."

More information: Abigail Vegter et al, Gun Ownership, Threat, and Gun Attitudes in an Experiment, *Sociological Perspectives* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/07311214211021126](https://doi.org/10.1177/07311214211021126)

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