

Study: Veterans often favor more restrictive gun control legislation than civilians

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Opinion remains divided regarding how guns should factor into American society, especially those weapons designed for military warfare.

But what do actual soldiers think about this subject?

The surprising answers are explored in a new article titled "How Do Veterans View Gun Policies? Evidence from the Guns in American Life Survey." It appears in *Social Science Quarterly*.

"Many observers might expect veterans to be less supportive of [gun control](#) than other Americans since they are relatively conservative in terms of political identity," said Margaret Kelley, professor of American studies at the University of Kansas.

"On average, vets—primarily those who have experienced combat—tend to be more receptive to some forms of gun control, such as restrictions on civilian access to military-style semiautomatic rifles and so-called 'high-capacity' magazines. They are also open to an extended waiting period of up to 14 days for the purchase of new handguns," she said.

Co-written with Christopher Ellison and Pablo Gonzalez of the University of Texas at San Antonio and David Leal of the University of Texas, the article utilizes data gathered from Kelley and Ellison's Guns in American Life Survey of 2018. This Qualtrics-run survey featuring input from more than 3,000 respondents explores numerous considerations that shape experiences and attitudes concerning firearms.

"The survey had lots of questions about gun experiences and lifestyles, [social attitudes](#) and firearm policy preferences, and it took about 30 minutes to complete online," said Kelley, who noted the assessment is unique due to the amount of female gun owners involved.

Her article discusses how [guns](#) are fundamentally "demystified" for those in the military, which may account for their being perceived more as a tool than as an object of empowerment.

"Demystified means, among other things, setting aside the politics of guns and allowing someone to focus on gaining practical knowledge and becoming a competent user," she said.

"Soldiers learn at least the basics about firearms when they enlist, even if their service does not require regular use or combat. Veterans leave service with vastly different experiences, but this minimum training is ensured. While it is recommended by firearms instructors that gun owners practice and seek out training on an ongoing basis, civilians are not required by law to do so," she said.

Kelley found several factors accounting for why veterans were more prone to embrace certain rifle/magazine bans and extended waiting periods.

"While they support these limits, [combat veterans](#) also tend to be more supportive of expanded gun-carrying rights for civilians, including what is called 'constitutional carry'—or permit-less—that we have in Kansas and a growing number of other states," she said.

Although the reasons for this seeming paradox are unclear, Kelley speculated that significant numbers of veterans may see public safety benefits to restricting widespread civilian access to powerful, highly destructive weapons, at least without proper vetting.

"At the same time, it is likely that they have learned, witnessed and practiced the safe and responsible carrying of firearms," she said. "They have also put their lives on the line to defend America and our Constitution, including the Second Amendment. They may be reluctant to surrender those rights upon returning to civilian life."

Now in her seventh year at KU, Kelley is not a military veteran—but her father was.

"My dad was drafted into the Army and stationed in Germany for two years, followed by six years in the reserves. As kids, we used to sleep in his Army-issued pup tent in the backyard until it finally fell apart. It wasn't until after he died that I learned he earned sharpshooter qualification in the Army," she said.

The professor is tapping her Guns in American Life Survey research for a larger book project specifically focusing on the average woman firearm user in middle America.

So why do Americans love guns so much?

"I think we have to ask, 'Why do some Americans love guns so much?'" she said.

"Some Americans love guns, and some hate them. Some connect them to [individual freedom](#), and others are more interested in the sport of guns. Others believe we should get rid of all guns. Concerns about self-defense can be universal, meaning that anyone can have that need, and increasing numbers of people are acquiring guns for that reason," Kelley said.

"There are just so many narratives. From some of my research, I would say that for most owners, guns are just one part of life, not a core identity, and not something they love but something they value."

More information: Christopher G. Ellison et al, How do veterans view gun policies? Evidence from the Guns in American Life Survey, *Social Science Quarterly* (2022). [DOI: 10.1111/ssqu.13145](https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.13145)

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