

Do Americans want to buy 'smart' guns?

January 30 2017, by Lacey Wallace

Recently [legislators](#) and special interest groups have pushed for greater availability of "smart" guns as a [safety and crime-reduction](#) tool. Then-President Barack Obama [called for more research](#) into "smart" gun technology in January 2016, and that April issued a [memorandum](#) calling for government-led research into smart guns as well as potential use by some federal agencies.

"Smart gun" refers to firearms that include some sort of safety device designed to make sure that the gun can be fired only by an authorized user. These safety devices include fingerprint recognition, wearable "tags" that a gun can recognize and other similar features. Smart guns are not yet widely available on the market.

They are not a new concept. In the 1970s, Magna-Trigger marketed a magnetic [add-on feature](#) for revolvers. This prevented the gun from firing unless the user was wearing a specially designed magnetic ring. Due to controversy and politics, however, smart guns have been very slow to come to market. Smart gun manufacturers and gun retailers have faced [boycotts](#) and protests in years past.

But would Americans actually buy smart guns?

My own research focuses heavily on gun purchasing and teen gun carrying. Previous research on Americans' willingness to purchase smart guns has found mixed results. So I set out to try to better understand how Americans feel about smart guns and why they might feel that way.

Past research doesn't tell much

There isn't very much research about attitudes toward smart guns, and the limited research that does exist has drawn different conclusions.

For instance, one [study](#) in 2015 by Julia Wolfson at Johns Hopkins and colleagues at Harvard and Northeastern University asked respondents about their willingness to purchase a "childproof" gun. Results showed that most Americans were willing to buy this type of gun, with high interest from people self-identifying as liberals, people who do not currently own guns and those with children in the home.

Another [study](#) by the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF) in 2013 asked respondents a similar question, but found that Americans were largely against purchasing smart firearms.

So why did these studies find such different results?

Past research has struggled with a number of problems. I examined existing studies as part of my own research, and found that none specifically ask whether a person would choose a smart gun or a traditional firearm if both were available. Instead, most just ask whether individuals feel favorable toward smart guns or willing to purchase them. With such a controversial issue, there is the risk that certain groups will use question wording or sampling strategy to sway results.

I also found that the existing studies define the term smart gun very differently. Some use the term "childproof" while others do not. This was a key difference between the Wolfson and NSSF studies.

The difference in terminology makes it difficult to compare results across studies, and it may explain why results are so different. Last, existing studies often look only at a few characteristics of respondents.

This makes it unclear how different subgroups of Americans might feel.

What do people really think about smart guns?

In February 2016, I conducted a [nationwide web survey](#) of 261 gun owners and 263 nonowners. My sample was located by Qualtrics, a survey and market research company.

Although my survey was not nationally representative, my sample was very similar to the U.S. population on characteristics like age, political leaning and income.

In my survey, I asked: If you were purchasing a firearm, and this [smart gun] technology were available, which type of firearm would you purchase? Respondents could choose from four answers: a smart gun; a traditional firearm; say they were unsure; or say they would never consider purchasing a firearm. To be consistent with the [Wolfson study](#), I chose to give respondents a smart gun definition without the term "childproof."

I found that current gun owners were significantly less likely to favor smart guns over other firearms than nonowners. About 46 percent of gun owners preferred a smart gun compared to 62 percent of nonowners. Males and individuals with pro-gun attitudes were less likely to prefer smart guns to traditional firearms. Overall, males were less than half as likely as females to prefer a smart gun, and male gun owners were about a third as likely as female gun owners to prefer smart guns.

Pro-gun individuals agreed with statements like "My community would be safer if more people owned guns" or "People who own guns are more patriotic than people who do not own guns."

But not all gun owners had the same views. Gun owners who also have a

history of victimization, have moderate political views or live in the Northeast were all more likely to prefer smart guns.

Education or income level, race, marital status, presence of children in the home and willingness to discuss smart guns with a doctor had no significant association with willingness to buy a smart gun over a traditional firearm.

Nonowners were much more likely to support smart guns than gun owners. However, they were also more likely to have no preference for gun type or to say they would never consider purchasing a gun.

What does this mean?

Overall, I found that gun owners and people who were more "pro-gun" were less likely to choose a smart gun over a traditional firearm. This is important because estimates suggest that a small number of Americans own most of the guns in the U.S. A 2015 unpublished survey from Harvard and Northeastern University estimated that just [3 percent of Americans owned half of the nation's guns](#). Other estimates suggest that gun owners today own [more guns per household](#) than they did in years past. So those likely to go out and purchase a firearm – current gun owners – may not be willing to choose a smart gun.

There is no national database of all gun owners. This means we can only estimate how many people actually own guns, and what kinds, so most estimates are based on surveys or criminal background checks. And in my own study, respondents said they felt uncomfortable sharing information about whether they owned a gun with strangers and people they did not know very well. For this reason, it is possible that individuals underreport owning a gun or how many guns they own. Without a national list of all gun owners to double-check, we rely on additional research with other samples, like federal background checks,

to make sure the patterns we see are consistent.

We need more studies with larger, nationally representative samples and more detailed questions about smart guns. However, my study sheds light on how subgroups of Americans feel about the issue. Not all gun owners or nonowners feel the same way about smart guns. Support is not evenly divided by political party. American attitudes toward smart guns are complex and do not necessarily follow the patterns we might expect.

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