An estimated 7.5 million U.S. adults became new gun owners over a recent 28-month span, sharply increasing the prospects for home accidents or people taking their own lives, according to research by Matt Miller, a professor of health sciences and epidemiology at Northeastern.

The study was conducted between January 2019 and May 2021, a time frame that straddles the COVID-19 pandemic. It found that 5.4 million of the new gun owners had been living in homes without guns. Miller says those newly introduced weapons exposed the gun owner as well as more than 11 million people—including five million children—to the dangers associated with living in homes with guns.

Miller’s research in 2020 showed that handgun owners are almost four times more likely to die by suicide than those who don't have guns.

"In going from zero guns to one gun, the risk of dying a violent death increases dramatically—not just for the gun owner, but also for the other people in the household as well," says Miller, who published the study with Deborah Azrael of the Harvard Injury Control Research Center.

"Most of the people who buy guns do so because they think having a gun is going to make their home safer," Miller says. "The reality is it makes everyone in their home, on average, much, much less safe."

Overall, 3 percent of U.S. adults became new gun owners during the span of the survey.

Miller embarked upon the study in response to media coverage that suggested firearm sales had jumped during the pandemic, based on a surge in the FBI background checks that are used for gun purchases and hunting licenses, among other things, on a state-by-state basis.

Because there is no national registration for gun ownership in the U.S., Miller conducted a survey with the research firm Ipsos. Respondents were invited to participate in a survey about items they may have purchased over the prior two years. The ensuing survey focused on firearms while excluding less dangerous weapons, such as BB guns, air guns, and paintball guns.

"We wanted to understand how the surge in background checks translated into a change in personal gun ownership and second-hand exposure to household guns," Miller says. "Properly characterizing the extent to which people were newly exposed to firearms in their home provides context for understanding the likely public-health consequences of this surge in gun ownership."

The pandemic surge comes on the heels of long-trending growth in gun ownership that dates back to 2005. Half of the new gun owners during the pandemic were women, and almost half of the new owners were people of color. This did not represent a large shift from pre-pandemic demographics of new gun owners in 2019, though it did amount to a shift from patterns observed in 2015.

"What changed between 2019 and 2021 was the volume of people who bought guns, not the proportion of purchasers who were new to gun ownership or the proportion who were female and..."
non-white," says Miller.

"New gun owners in 2019 resembled new gun owners in 2020, suggesting that demographic shifts in new gun ownership preceded the COVID-19 pandemic," the study states. "By 2019, new gun owners were already considerably less likely to be white and male, and were younger than other gun owners. They were also less likely to be white and male compared to new gun owners in 2015."

In addition to the pandemic, other events that may have affected the number of people who bought guns include the murder by a Minneapolis police officer of George Floyd in May 2020, and the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. Miller's study didn't assess the influences that were driving increased gun sales.

If the rate of gun ownership continues to grow, Miller believes it will lead to detectable increases in the number of suicides, though that may take some time. But Miller adds that the following is not in dispute: For the 16 million people newly exposed to household firearms since 2019, including five million children, the risk that they will die a violent death increased substantially the day guns were brought into their household.


Provided by Northeastern University

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