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Violence Policy Center

Gun Ownership in America: 1973 to 2021

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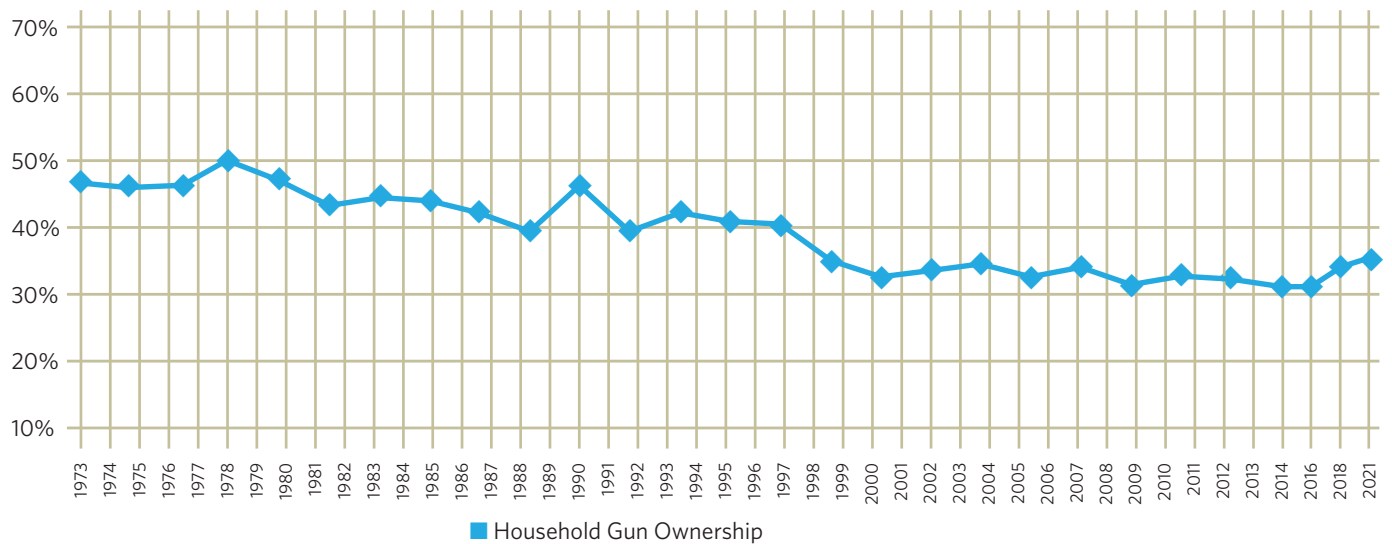
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GUN OWNERSHIP IN AMERICA: 1973 TO 2021

Comprehensive, national data spanning 49 years contained in the General Social Survey (GSS) conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago reveals that after years of decline through the 1980s and 1990s, and a relatively stable rate during the 2000s, our nation may be seeing a slight increase in gun ownership starting in 2018.¹

GRAPHIC ONE: THE LONG-TERM DECLINE IN HOUSEHOLD GUN OWNERSHIP



¹ Gun ownership data contained in this report was calculated by The Crime Lab at the University of Chicago utilizing data from the General Social Survey (GSS) conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago. The Crime Lab (<https://urbanlabs.uchicago.edu/labs/crime>) partners “with cities and communities to use data and rigorous research to design, test and scale programs and policies that enhance public safety, improve educational outcomes, and advance justice.” According to its website (<https://www.norc.org/About/Pages/our-history.aspx>), “For more than eight decades, NORC at the University of Chicago has delivered reliable data and rigorous analysis to guide critical decisions on some of the most important issues society has faced...The heart of NORC’s work lies in revealing the attitudes, opinions, and behaviors that shape the way different populations across the United States and around the globe make decisions while at the same time investigating the social, economic, educational, and health factors that influence the trajectories of their lives.” According to NORC (<https://gss.norc.org/about-the-gss>), “The General Social Survey (GSS) is a nationally representative survey of adults in the United States conducted since 1972. The GSS collects data on contemporary American society in order to monitor and explain trends in opinions, attitudes and behaviors. The GSS has adapted questions from earlier surveys, thereby allowing researchers to conduct comparisons for up to 80 years. The GSS contains a standard core of demographic, behavioral, and attitudinal questions, plus topics of special interest. Among the topics covered are civil liberties, crime and violence, intergroup tolerance, morality, national spending priorities, psychological well-being, social mobility, and stress and traumatic events. Altogether, the GSS is the single best source for sociological and attitudinal trend data covering the United States.”

HOUSEHOLD GUN OWNERSHIP

Since 1973, the General Social Survey has asked the question: “Do you happen to have in your home (if house: or garage) any guns or revolvers?” The GSS data available from that year to 2021² includes information on overall household gun ownership as well as participation in hunting.

OVERALL HOUSEHOLD GUN OWNERSHIP

- From 1973 to 2021, the percentage of American households that reported having any guns in the home dropped by 28 percent.
- During this period the percentage of adults living in households with guns hit its peak in 1980, when more than half (53.7 percent) of Americans reported living in households with guns. By 2021, 35.2 percent of Americans reported living in households with guns, a drop of 18.5 percentage points.
- In 2021, just over a third of Americans reported living in households with guns.
- In 2012, the percentage of adults living in households with guns hit its lowest level ever recorded by the GSS (32.1 percent). And while this percentage increased slightly since 2012, the percentage of American adults that reported living in households with guns in 2021 (35.2 percent) is 34 percent lower than its peak in 1980 (53.7 percent).

GRAPHIC TWO: HOUSEHOLD GUN OWNERSHIP IN THE UNITED STATES, 1973 TO 2021

Year	Percent of Adults in Households with Guns	Year	Percent of Adults in Households with Guns	Year	Percent of Adults in Households with Guns	Year	Percent of Adults in Households with Guns
1973	48.7	1987	47.9	1996	43.8	2010	35.9
1976	47.6	1988	44.3	1998	43.3	2012	32.1
1977	49.5	1989	43.1	2000	36.5	2014	34.4
1980	53.7	1990	48.7	2002	34.2	2016	32.4
1982	50.3	1991	45.4	2004	36.4	2018	32.4
1984	47.1	1993	43.4	2006	37.0	2021	35.2
1985	48.1	1994	45.4	2008	34.4		

² Data contained in chart represent years for which the question was asked during the period cited. Changes in opinions, attitudes, and behaviors observed in 2021 relative to historical trends may be due to actual change in concept over time and/or may have resulted from methodological changes made to the survey methodology during the COVID-19 global pandemic.

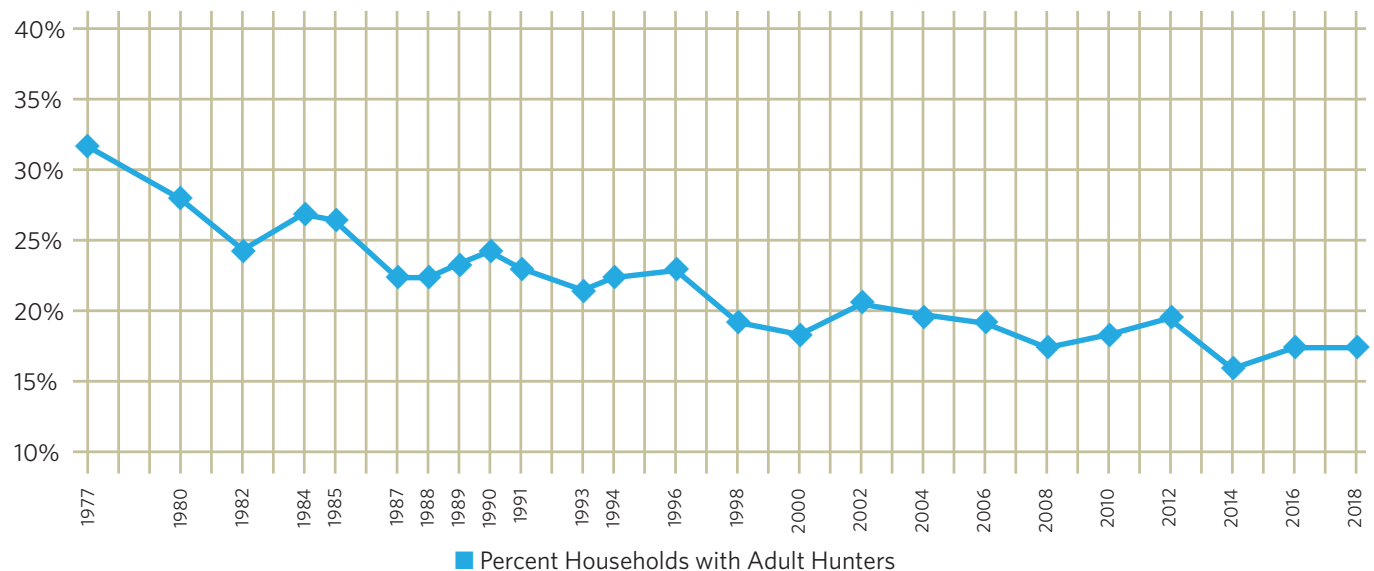
DECLINE IN HUNTING

One of the primary reasons for the decline in household firearms ownership has been the decrease in the popularity of hunting. In 1977, 31.6 percent of adults lived in a household where the respondent, a spouse, or both were hunters (see Graphic Three). By 2021 this number had dropped by more than half, to 14.1 percent.³

GRAPHIC THREE: THE DECLINE IN HUNTING, 1977 TO 2021

Year	Percent Households with Adult Hunters	Year	Percent Households with Adult Hunters	Year	Percent Households with Adult Hunters	Year	Percent Households with Adult Hunters
1977	31.6	1989	23.3	2000	18.6	2014	15.3
1980	28.3	1990	24.2	2002	20.2	2016	17.1
1982	24.7	1991	22.9	2004	19.4	2018	17.0
1984	26.5	1993	20.9	2006	17.2	2021	14.1
1985	26.1	1994	22.0	2008	17.6		
1987	22.2	1996	23.1	2010	18.2		
1988	22.1	1998	19.2	2012	19.7		

GRAPHIC FOUR: THE DECLINE IN HUNTING, 1977 TO 2021



³ Respondents are asked, "Do you (or does your [husband/wife]) go hunting?"

PERSONAL GUN OWNERSHIP

Since 1980, General Social Survey respondents who state that they have a gun in their home have then been asked, “Do any of these guns personally belong to you?” The GSS data for the years 1980 to 2021⁴ offer information on overall personal gun ownership as well as male and female gun ownership.

GRAPHIC FIVE: PERSONAL GUN OWNERSHIP, 1980 TO 2021

Year	Percent Overall Personal Ownership	Year	Percent Overall Personal Ownership	Year	Percent Overall Personal Ownership
1980	28.1	1991	27.0	2006	21.6
1982	27.4	1993	29.3	2008	23.5
1984	25.3	1994	28.2	2010	20.6
1985	30.5	1996	27.1	2012	21.8
1987	26.0	1998	22.4	2014	22.4
1988	24.9	2000	22.3	2016	20.5
1989	27.1	2002	26.3	2018	21.9
1990	28.5	2004	25.2	2021	24.5

OVERALL PERSONAL GUN OWNERSHIP

- From 1985 to 2021, the percentage of Americans who reported personally owning a gun dropped 20 percent.
- During this period, personal gun ownership hit its peak in 1985, when 30.5 percent of Americans reported personally owning a gun. By 2021, this number had dropped six percentage points to 24.5 percent.
- In 2021 one out of four Americans reported personally owning a gun.

⁴ Data contained in chart represent years for which the question was asked during the period cited.

MALE GUN OWNERSHIP

GRAPHIC SIX: MALE GUN OWNERSHIP, 1980 TO 2021

Year	Percent Male Personal Ownership	Year	Percent Male Personal Ownership	Year	Percent Male Personal Ownership
1980	50.3	1991	47.3	2006	34.8
1982	44.9	1993	48.3	2008	38.4
1984	45.0	1994	46.1	2010	32.9
1985	51.5	1996	44.0	2012	35.7
1987	44.1	1998	37.6	2014	35.1
1988	43.8	2000	37.5	2016	32.6
1989	48.8	2002	37.5	2018	35.8
1990	52.1	2004	40.8	2021	35.7

- From 1980 to 2021, the percentage of males who reported personally owning a gun dropped 29 percent.
- During this period, male gun ownership hit its peak in 1990, when 52.1 percent of males reported personally owning a gun. By 2021, this number had dropped 16 percentage points to 35.7 percent.

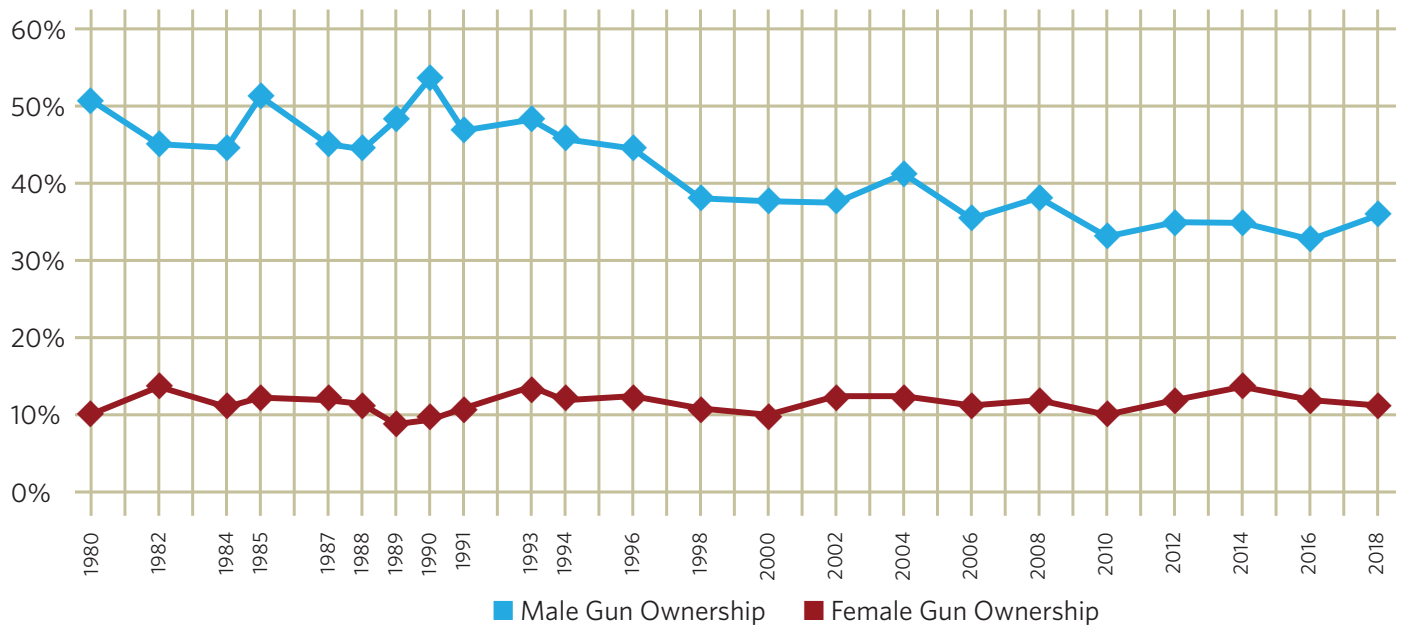
FEMALE GUN OWNERSHIP

GRAPHIC SEVEN: FEMALE GUN OWNERSHIP, 1980 TO 2021

Year	Percent Female Personal Ownership	Year	Percent Female Personal Ownership	Year	Percent Female Personal Ownership
1980	10.1	1991	10.0	2006	10.6
1982	13.7	1993	13.5	2008	10.8
1984	10.7	1994	12.5	2010	9.8
1985	11.8	1996	12.5	2012	10.3
1987	11.8	1998	10.6	2014	11.7
1988	11.0	2000	9.3	2016	10.8
1989	9.2	2002	11.8	2018	10.5
1990	9.3	2004	11.6	2021	14.3

From 1980 through 2018, female gun ownership did not appreciably change, with between nine percent and 14 percent of women personally owning a firearm during those years. Data for 2021 does show a slight increase in female gun ownership from prior surveys, though it remains to be seen if that trend will continue in future years.

GRAPHIC EIGHT: MALE AND FEMALE GUN OWNERSHIP, 1980 TO 2021



BLACK AND HISPANIC GUN OWNERSHIP⁵

GRAPHIC NINE: BLACK GUN OWNERSHIP, 1980 TO 2018

Year	Percent Black Personal Ownership	Year	Percent Black Personal Ownership	Year	Percent Black Personal Ownership
1980	16.4	1991	21.0	2006	16.8
1982	23.4	1993	22.6	2008	13.0
1984	15.5	1994	21.8	2010	10.3
1985	22.2	1996	16.9	2012	14.3
1987	18.5	1998	14.1	2014	12.1
1988	13.4	2000	12.3	2016	13.3
1989	16.3	2002	8.0	2018	16.1
1990	16.5	2004	19.0		

■ In both 1980 and 2018, the percentage of Blacks who reported personally owning a gun was approximately 16 percent. During this period, personal gun ownership for Blacks ranged from a low of 8.0 percent to a high of 23.4 percent. Overall, personal gun ownership by Blacks during the period surveyed has not appreciably changed.

⁵ Black and Hispanic categories are not mutually exclusive. Race variable not available for 2021.

GRAPHIC TEN: HISPANIC GUN OWNERSHIP, 2000 TO 2021

Year	Percent Hispanic Personal Ownership	Year	Percent Hispanic Personal Ownership	Year	Percent Hispanic Personal Ownership
2000	5	2008	6	2016	8
2002	11	2010	5	2018	12
2004	7	2012	13	2021	12
2006	8	2014	13		

- In 2000 (the first year in which Hispanic gun ownership was measured by the GSS), five percent of Hispanics reported personally owning a gun. In 2021, this percentage was reported as 12 percent. As seen in the table above, during the 21-year period during which personal Hispanic gun ownership was measured, the percentage fluctuated between five and 13 percent. This is due in part to the relatively small sample surveyed by the GSS. Overall, personal gun ownership by Hispanics is estimated to be approximately in the 10 percent range and has not appreciably changed during the period surveyed.

REASONS FOR THE LONG-TERM DECLINE IN GUN OWNERSHIP IN THE UNITED STATES

Key factors contributing to the long-term decline in household and personal gun ownership in America include the following.

- The aging of the current gun owning population, primarily white males, and a lack of interest in guns by youth.
- The end of military conscription.
- The decreasing popularity of hunting.
- Land-use issues that limit hunting and other shooting activities.
- Environmental and zoning issues that force shooting ranges to close and limit new range construction.
- The increase in single-parent homes headed by women.



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