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**Violence Policy Center**

# **A Shrinking Minority**

## **The Continuing Decline of Gun Ownership in America**

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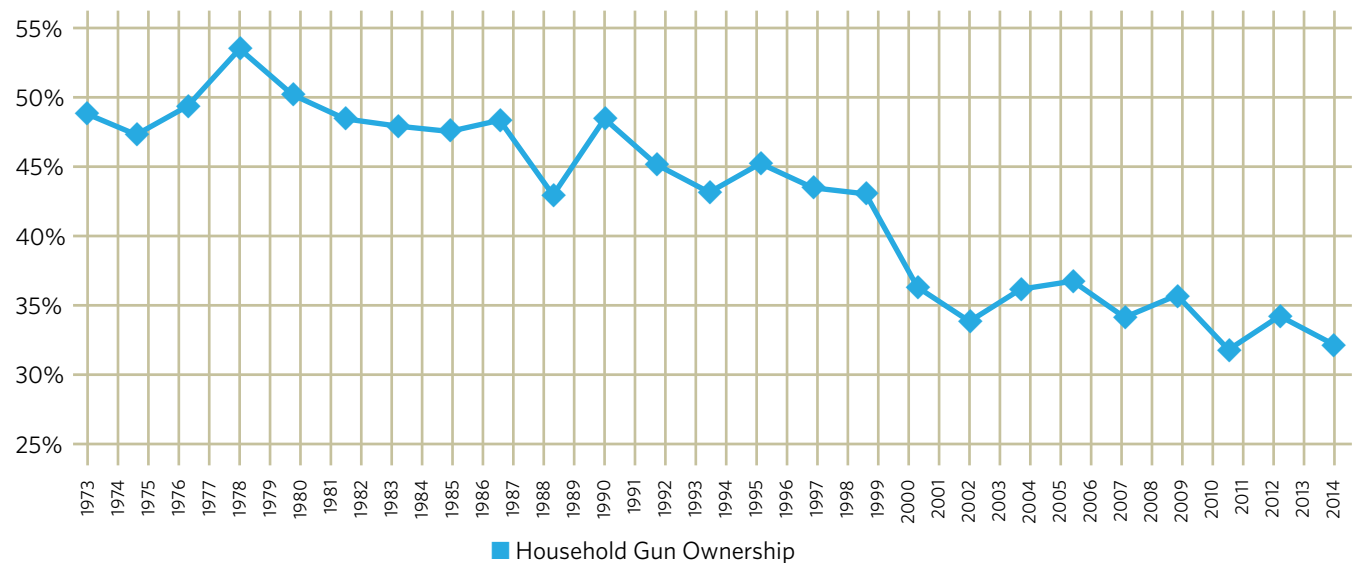
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# A SHRINKING MINORITY

## THE CONTINUING DECLINE OF GUN OWNERSHIP IN AMERICA

Gun ownership in America is declining. This is the unavoidable conclusion from comprehensive, national data spanning more than 40 years contained in the General Social Survey (GSS) conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago.<sup>1</sup>

### GRAPHIC ONE: THE CONTINUING DECLINE IN HOUSEHOLD GUN OWNERSHIP



The GSS started in 1972 and completed its most recent round in 2014. According to NORC, “Except for the U.S. Census, the GSS is the most frequently analyzed source of information in the social sciences.”<sup>2</sup>

1 General Social Survey (GSS) gun ownership data contained in this report is drawn from the NORC publication *General Social Survey: Trends in Gun Ownership in the United States, 1972-2014*, Tom W. Smith, Jaesok Son, NORC at the University of Chicago, March 2015.

2 “The General Social Survey (GSS) is one of NORC’s flagship surveys and our longest running project...For the last third of a century the GSS has been monitoring social change and the growing complexity of American society. The GSS is the largest project funded by the Sociology Program of the National Science Foundation. Except for the U.S. Census, the GSS is the most frequently analyzed source of information in the social sciences.” See <http://www3.norc.org/GSS+Website/About+GSS/>, downloaded April 7, 2015.

## HOUSEHOLD GUN OWNERSHIP

Since the early 1970s 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 for the years 1973 to 2014<sup>3</sup> presents information on overall household gun ownership, the decline in hunting, and demographic data on household gun ownership.

### OVERALL HOUSEHOLD GUN OWNERSHIP

- From 1977 to 2014, the percentage of American households that reported having any guns in the home dropped by 40 percent.
- During this period household gun ownership hit its peak in 1977, when more than half (53.7 percent) of American households reported having any guns. By 2014, 32.4 of American households reported having any guns in the home, a drop of more than 20 percentage points.
- In 2014, less than a third of American households reported having a gun in the home.

### GRAPHIC TWO: HOUSEHOLD GUN OWNERSHIP IN THE UNITED STATES, 1973 TO 2014

| 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                                      | 1985 | 47.9                                      | 1994 | 43.8                                      | 2008 | 35.9                                      |
| 1974 | 47.6                                      | 1987 | 48.5                                      | 1996 | 43.3                                      | 2010 | 32.1                                      |
| 1976 | 49.5                                      | 1988 | 43.1                                      | 1998 | 36.5                                      | 2012 | 34.4                                      |
| 1977 | 53.7                                      | 1989 | 48.7                                      | 2000 | 34.2                                      | 2014 | 32.4                                      |
| 1980 | 50.3                                      | 1990 | 45.4                                      | 2002 | 36.4                                      |      |   |
| 1982 | 48.6                                      | 1991 | 43.4                                      | 2004 | 37.0                                      |      |   |
| 1984 | 48.1                                      | 1993 | 45.4                                      | 2006 | 34.4                                      |      |   |

### DEMOGRAPHICS OF HOUSEHOLD GUN OWNERSHIP

For the period 2010 to 2014, 39 percent of white survey respondents reported that they lived in a household with a gun. For that same period, 18.1 percent of black respondents reported that they lived in a household with a gun. Looking at Hispanic ethnicity, 15.2 percent of Hispanic respondents said that they lived in a household with a gun, compared to 36.0 of non-Hispanics. According to NORC, adults living in “households with firearms are concentrated in rural areas and in regions with more residents living in rural areas.”

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

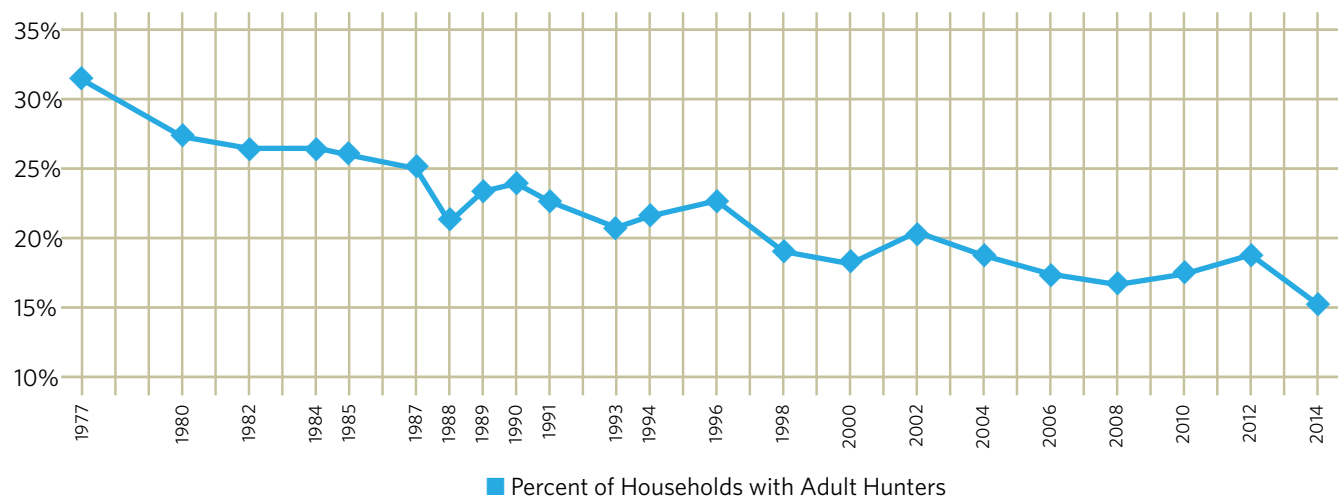
## DECLINE IN HUNTING

One of the “main reasons” cited by NORC for the decline in household firearms ownership is “the decrease in the popularity of hunting.” In 1977, 31.6 percent of adults lived in a household where they, a spouse, or both were hunters (see Graphic III). By 2014 this number had dropped by more than half, to 15.4 percent.<sup>4</sup>

**GRAPHIC THREE: THE DECLINE IN HUNTING, 1977 TO 2014**

| 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                                  | 1988 | 22.2                                  | 1996 | 23.1                                  | 2008 | 17.6                                  |
| 1980 | 28.3                                  | 1989 | 23.4                                  | 1998 | 19.3                                  | 2010 | 18.2                                  |
| 1982 | 26.8                                  | 1990 | 24.3                                  | 2000 | 18.7                                  | 2012 | 19.7                                  |
| 1984 | 26.7                                  | 1991 | 23.0                                  | 2002 | 20.2                                  | 2014 | 15.4                                  |
| 1985 | 26.2                                  | 1993 | 21.0                                  | 2004 | 19.4                                  |      |                                       |
| 1987 | 25.5                                  | 1994 | 22.1                                  | 2006 | 17.2                                  |      |                                       |

**GRAPHIC FOUR: THE DECLINE IN HUNTING, 1977 TO 2014**



<sup>4</sup> 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 2014<sup>5</sup> offers information on overall personal gun ownership, the gender gap in gun ownership, and the growing age gap in gun ownership.

### GRAPHIC FIVE: PERSONAL GUN OWNERSHIP, 1980 TO 2014

| Year | Percent Overall Personal Ownership | Year | Percent Overall Personal Ownership | Year | Percent Overall Personal Ownership |
|------|------------------------------------|------|------------------------------------|------|------------------------------------|
| 1980 | 28.1                               | 1990 | 28.5                               | 2002 | 26.3                               |
| 1982 | 28.2                               | 1991 | 27.0                               | 2004 | 25.2                               |
| 1984 | 25.3                               | 1993 | 29.3                               | 2006 | 21.6                               |
| 1985 | 30.5                               | 1994 | 28.2                               | 2008 | 23.5                               |
| 1987 | 28.0                               | 1996 | 27.1                               | 2010 | 20.6                               |
| 1988 | 24.9                               | 1998 | 22.4                               | 2012 | 21.8                               |
| 1989 | 27.1                               | 2000 | 22.3                               | 2014 | 22.4                               |

### OVERALL PERSONAL GUN OWNERSHIP

- From 1985 to 2014, the percentage of Americans who reported personally owning a gun dropped more than 26 percent.
- During this period, personal gun ownership hit its peak in 1985, when 30.5 percent of Americans reported personally owning a gun. By 2014, this number had dropped more than eight percentage points to 22.4 percent.
- In 2014, slightly more than one out of five Americans reported personally owning a gun.

### GENDER GAP IN GUN OWNERSHIP

According to NORC, men “are much more likely to personally own a firearm than women are, but the gender gap has narrowed due to a decline in personal firearm ownership among men,” *not an increase among women*. In 1980, 50.3 percent of men owned a firearm while 10.1 percent of women owned a gun resulting in a gender gap of 40.2 percentage points. By 2014, gun ownership was 35.1 percent for men and 11.7 percent for women, resulting in a gender gap of 23.4 percentage points.

According to NORC, “Personal ownership of firearms has not appreciably change[d] for women from 1980 through 2014. Between nine percent and 14 percent of women personally owned a firearm during those years and *there is no meaningful trend in the level of personal ownership*. [Emphasis added.] In 1980, 10.1 percent personally owned a firearm and in 2014 11.7 percent did.”

<sup>5</sup> Data contained in chart represent years for which the question was asked during the period cited.

## **GROWING AGE GAP IN GUN OWNERSHIP**

According to NORC, “Personal firearms ownership used to vary little across age cohorts.” In 1980, 23.5 percent of those under 35 owned a gun while 27.4 percent of those 65 years of age and older owned a gun, resulting in an age gap of 3.9 percentage points. By 2014, this gap had expanded to 16.4 percentage points, with gun ownership at 14.0 percent among those under 35 and 30.4 percent for those 65 years of age and older.

## **REASONS FOR THE DECLINE**

Key factors contributing to the continuing 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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