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Reducing Gun Violence in America

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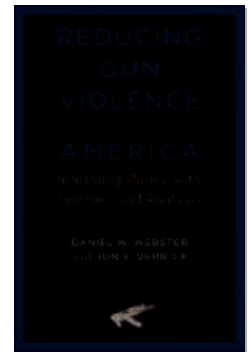
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Public Opinion on Proposals to Strengthen U.S. Gun Laws

Findings from a 2013 Survey

Emma E. McGinty, Daniel W. Webster, Jon S. Vernick,
and Colleen L. Barry

In the aftermath of the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, policy proposals to reduce gun violence are being actively considered and debated at the national, state, and local levels. Within weeks of the mass shooting in Newtown, public opinion data emerged indicating some shift in views among Americans toward greater support for strengthening gun laws. For example, a Gallup survey conducted December 19 through December 22, 2012, found that 58% of Americans supported stricter gun laws, compared with only 43% in support of stricter gun laws in an October 2011 poll.¹

By and large, these opinion data focused on general attitudes about gun policy rather than public support for specific policy proposals to reduce gun

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violence. For example, a national survey conducted December 17 through December 19, 2012, by the Pew Center for the People and the Press examined trends in public views about whether it was more important to control gun ownership or to protect gun rights, but examined public support for only four specific policies: bans of handguns, semi-automatic guns, high-capacity ammunition magazines, and exploding bullets, respectively.² The December 19–22, 2012, Gallup survey assessed support for four policies: requiring background checks at gun shows and banning handguns, semi-automatic guns, and high-capacity ammunition magazines.³ Another survey by YouGov conducted December 21 and 22, 2012, examined public attitudes about the National Rifle Association (NRA) but did not examine specific gun policies beyond support for armed guards in schools.⁴

Following the Sandy Hook shooting, experts are recommending and policymakers are considering a much wider range of gun policy options than those assessed in recent public opinion polls. In addition, most recent polls did not examine how public opinion varied by gun ownership or by political party affiliation, and none oversampled gun owners to obtain more precise estimates of policy attitudes among this group. Prior evidence has shown that attitudes about gun policies vary significantly by gun ownership and by partisanship.^{5,6}

It has been nearly 15 years since research studies have examined attitudes among the American public about a broad set of public policies aimed at curbing gun violence.^{7,8,9} Given the fast-moving pace of deliberations over gun policy, it is critical to understand how the American public views specific proposals to strengthen gun laws and how policy support varies across important subgroups. To fill these gaps, we fielded the Johns Hopkins National Survey of Public Opinion on Gun Proposals in 2013 from January 2 to 14, 2013. This survey examined support for 33 different policies to reduce gun violence in America. These measures were chosen in conjunction with the policy options analyzed by gun violence experts at the 2013 Johns Hopkins Summit on Reducing Gun Violence in America and reported on in this volume.

Data and Methods

We used the survey research firm GfK Knowledge Networks (GfK KN) to conduct this study. GfK KN has recruited a probability-based online panel of 50,000 adult members older than 18, including persons living in cell phone

only households, using equal probability sampling with a sample frame of residential addresses covering 97% of U.S. households. The survey was pilot-tested between December 28 and 31, 2012. In order to avoid priming, the specific nature of the survey was not described to respondents. They were asked to answer “some questions about public affairs,” and there was no mention of the Sandy Hook school shooting. Policy item order was randomized. The survey completion rate was 69%.¹⁰ To compare rates stratified by gun ownership, we oversampled gun owners and non-gun owners living in households with guns. We tested differences in proportions by group using the Pearson’s chi square test. To make estimates representative of the U.S. population, all analyses used survey weights adjusting the sample for known selection deviations and survey nonresponse. This study was approved as exempt by the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health Institutional Review Board (#4850).

Results

Consistent with recent data reported elsewhere,^{11,3} we found that 33% of Americans reported having guns in their home or garage. Twenty-two percent of Americans identified the guns as personally belonging to them (referred to henceforth as gun owners), and 11% identified as non-gun owners living in a household with a gun. Among gun owners, 71% reported owning a handgun, 62% owned a shotgun, and 61% owned a rifle. The remaining 67% of Americans identified as non-gun owners living in non-gun households (referred to henceforth as non-gun owners).

Table 19.1 indicates that a majority of Americans supported banning the sale of military-style semi-automatic assault weapons, banning large-capacity ammunition magazines, and a range of measures to strengthen background checks and improve oversight of gun dealers. In the case of assault weapon and ammunition policies, public views differed substantially by gun ownership. Although 69% of the public overall supported banning assault weapon sales, a much higher proportion of non-gun owners (77%) and non-gun owners living in households with guns (68%) than gun-owners (46%) or self-reported NRA members (15%) supported this policy. Sixty-eight percent of the general public supported banning the sale of large-capacity ammunition magazines that allow some guns to shoot more than 10 bullets before reloading, and this policy was supported by most non-gun owners (76%), most non-gun owners living in households with guns (69%), a near majority of gun-owners

Table 19.1 Percentage of people who favor gun policies, overall and by gun ownership

Item	Overall (N = 2,703)	Non-gun owners ^a (n = 913)	Non-gun owner, gun in household (n = 843)	Gun owners (n = 947)	NRA members (n = 169)
Assault weapon and ammunition policies					
Banning the sale of military-style, semi-automatic assault weapons that are capable of shooting more than 10 rounds of ammunition without reloading?	69.0	77.4	67.7**	45.7***	14.9***
Banning the sale of large-capacity ammunition clips or magazines that allow some guns to shoot more than 10 bullets before reloading?	68.4	75.5	69.2*	47.8***	19.2***
Banning the sale of large-capacity ammunition clips or magazines that allow some guns to shoot more than 20 bullets before reloading?	68.8	75.6	69.9	49.4***	19.9***
Banning the possession of military-style, semi-automatic assault weapons that are capable of shooting more than 10 rounds of ammunition without reloading if the government is required to pay gun owners the fair market value of their weapons?	56.0	63.3	52.6**	36.9***	17.0***
Banning the possession of large-capacity ammunition clips or magazines that allow some guns to shoot more than 10 bullets before reloading if the government is required to pay gun owners the fair market value of their ammunition clips?	55.0	61.9	51.6**	37.0***	22.9***

Prohibited person policies								
Prohibiting a person convicted of two or more crimes involving alcohol or drugs within a three-year period from having a gun for 10 years?	74.8	76.1	74.8	70.5*	64.2			
Prohibiting a person convicted of violating a domestic violence restraining order from having a gun for 10 years?	80.8	82.9	79.1	75.6**	61.5**			
Prohibiting a person convicted of a serious crime as a juvenile from having a gun for 10 years?	83.1	84.4	81.3	80.0	70.0			
Prohibiting a person under the age of 21 from having a handgun?	69.5	76.4	63.6***	52.3***	42.3***			
Prohibiting a person on the terror watch list from having a gun?	86.0	87.5	85.6	82.2*	75.5			
Prohibiting people who have been convicted of each of these crimes from having a gun for 10 years:								
Public display of a gun in a threatening manner excluding self-defense	71.1	69.8	78.7**	71.3	58.5			
Domestic violence	73.7	72.4	80.4**	73.7	61.4			
Assault and battery that does not result in serious injury or involve a lethal weapon	53.0	54.6	53.4	48.5*	33.1			
Drunk and disorderly conduct	37.5	39.7	36.6	32.1*	29.1*			
Carrying a concealed gun without a permit	57.8	60.3	61.3	49.0***	43.3**			
Indecent exposure	25.9	28.1	23.7	21.2*	27.1*			
Background check policies								
Requiring a background check system for all gun sales to make sure a purchaser is not legally prohibited from having a gun?	88.8	89.9	91.5	84.3**	73.7*			

(Continued)

Table 19.1 (Continued)

Item	Overall (<i>N</i> = 2,703)	Non-gun owners ^a (<i>n</i> = 913)	Non-gun owner, gun in household (<i>n</i> = 843)	Gun owners (<i>n</i> = 947)	NRA members (<i>n</i> = 169)
Increasing federal funding to states to improve reporting of people prohibited by law from having a gun to the background check system?	66.4	67.8	65.5	63.4	60.9
Allowing law enforcement up to five business days, if needed, to complete a background check for gun buyers? ^b	76.3	79.8	79.2	67.0***	47.1***
Policies affecting gun dealers					
Allowing the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives to temporarily take away a gun dealer's license if an audit reveals record-keeping violations and the dealer cannot account for 20 or more of the guns?	84.6	86.4	84.1	78.9**	64.0**
Allowing cities to sue licensed gun dealers when there is strong evidence that the gun dealer's careless sales practices allowed many criminals to obtain guns?	73.2	77.0	72.2	62.9***	43.5***
Allowing the information about which gun dealers sell the most guns used in crimes to be available to the police and the public so that those gun dealers can be prioritized for greater oversight?	68.8	74.1	64.3**	56.5***	41.2***
Requiring a mandatory minimum sentence of two years in prison for a person convicted of knowingly selling a gun to someone who cannot legally have one?	76.0	77.7	76.3	70.7**	69.8**

Other gun policies

Requiring a person to obtain a license from a local law enforcement agency before buying a gun to verify their identity and ensure that they are not legally prohibited from having a gun?	77.3	83.5	76.4**	59.4***	37.6***
Providing government funding for research to develop and test "smart guns" designed to fire only when held by the owner of the gun or other authorized user?	44.2	47.4	43.4	35.3***	23.0***
Requiring by law that people lock up the guns in their home when not in use to prevent handling by children or teenagers without adult supervision?	67.2	75.3	62.6***	44.4***	32.2***

Note: We asked respondents whether they favored or opposed each policy using a 5-point Likert scale (strongly favor, somewhat favor, neither favor nor oppose, somewhat oppose, strongly oppose). We coded strongly favor and somewhat favor responses as being in support of a given policy.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

^aResponses among non-gun owners with a gun in their household, gun owners, and NRA members were compared with responses among non-gun owners (no gun in household) using chi-square tests.

^bQuestion informed respondents that under current federal law, most background checks for gun buyers are completed in just a few minutes. But if law enforcement needs additional time to determine if a gun buyer is not legally allowed to have a gun, they may only take up to a maximum of three business days to complete the check.

(48%), but by few NRA members (19%). Support levels did not differ meaningfully for a policy banning the sale of large-capacity ammunition magazines that allow some guns to shoot more than 20 bullets. As expected, support was lower for policies banning the possession (as opposed to the sale) of assault weapons and large-capacity ammunition magazines even if the government was required to pay gun owners their fair market value.

For many policies, differences in policy support between gun and non-gun owners were smaller in magnitude than might have been expected. Majorities of gun owners supported all policies bolstering background checks and strengthening oversight of gun dealers and almost all policies prohibiting gun ownership by certain types of persons deemed to be dangerous. A majority of NRA members supported many of these categories of policies, as well. For example, 84% of gun owners and 74% of NRA members supported requiring a background check system for all gun sales; 71% of gun owners and 64% of NRA members supported prohibiting a person convicted of two or more crimes involving alcohol or drugs from having a gun for 10 years; and 71% of gun owners and 70% of NRA members supported requiring a mandatory minimum sentence of two years in prison for a person convicted of selling a gun to someone who cannot legally have a gun. These measures were supported by large majorities of non-gun owners, as well.

We found larger differences in support between non-gun owners and gun owners for policies prohibiting handguns for those under age 21 (76% versus 52%) and requiring gun owners to lock guns when not in use to prevent handling by children or teens without adult supervision (75% versus 44%). Support for government funding to develop and test smart guns designed to fire only when held by the owner or authorized user also differed between non-gun owners and gun owners (47% versus 35%). Support among non-gun owners and gun owners was similar on those policies attracting overall low levels of support, such as prohibiting individuals with misdemeanor convictions for drunk and disorderly conduct (40% versus 32%) or indecent exposure (28% versus 21%) from having guns.

For many policies, the views of non-gun owners living in households with guns were aligned more closely with other non-gun owners than they were with gun owners. For instance, 76% of non-gun owners living in households with guns supported requiring a person to obtain a license from a local law enforcement agency before buying a gun (versus 84% of other non-gun owners and 59% of gun owners). Seventy-nine percent of non-gun owners living

in households with guns supported allowing law enforcement up to five business days to complete a background check for gun buyers (versus 80% of other non-gun owners and 67% of gun owners).

As Table 19.2 indicates, policies specifically targeting gun access by persons with mental illness received widespread public support. Most of these policies were supported by a large majority of non-gun owners and gun owners. Eighty-five percent of the general public supported requiring states to report to the background check system individuals who are prohibited from having guns due to either involuntary commitment or having been declared mentally incompetent by a court. While these mental health-related prohibitions have been in place since before the implementation of the background check system in 1998, many states do not report mental health records due to concerns about confidentiality and lack of data systems to track mental health records at the state level.¹² Seventy-five percent of the public supported requiring health care providers to report people who threaten to harm themselves or others to the background check system for a period of six months, and 79% supported requiring the military to report persons rejected from service for mental health or substance abuse reasons to the background check system to prevent them from having a gun. Public support was lower for a policy allowing police officers to search for and remove guns without a warrant from persons they believe to be dangerous due to mental illness or a tendency toward violence (53%), and only 32% of the public supported restoring the right to have a gun to people with mental illness who are determined no longer to be dangerous.

In addition to supporting policies to limit gun access among persons with mental illness, the majority of the public supported increasing government spending on mental health screening and treatment as a strategy to reduce gun violence (60%). However, far fewer supported increasing government spending on drug and alcohol abuse screening and treatment as a violence reduction strategy (44%).

Table 19.3 indicates that, in most cases, Republicans were less likely than Independents and Democrats to support gun violence prevention policies. However, support for most policies prohibiting certain persons from having guns, bolstering background checks, and strengthening oversight of gun dealers was high regardless of political party identification. For example, 77% of Republicans, 79% of Independents, and 85% of Democrats supported prohibiting a person convicted of violating a domestic violence restraining order

Table 19.2 Percentage who favor gun policies affecting persons with mental illness, overall and by gun ownership

Item	Overall (N = 2,703)	Non-gun owners ^a (n = 913)	Non-gun owner, gun in household (n = 843)	Gun owners (n = 947)	NRA members (n = 169)
Background check policies					
Requiring states to report a person to the background check system who is prohibited from buying a gun due either to involuntary commitment to a hospital for psychiatric treatment or to being declared mentally incompetent by a court of law?	85.4	85.3	86.5	85.6	80.7
Requiring health care providers to report people who threaten to harm themselves or others to the background check system to prevent them from having a gun for six months?	74.5	75.4	76.1	72.0	66.0
Requiring the military to report a person who has been rejected from service due to mental illness or drug or alcohol abuse to the background check system to prevent them from having a gun?	78.9	79.6	79.7	76.2	67.5

Other gun policies					
Allowing police officers to search for and remove guns from a person, without a warrant, if they believe the person is dangerous due to a mental illness, emotional instability, or a tendency to be violent?	52.5	55.3	53.4	43.6***	31.1**
Allowing people who have lost the right to have a gun due to mental illness to have that right restored if they are determined not to be dangerous?	31.6	31.6	28.9	34.0	41.6
Government spending					
Increasing government spending on mental health screening and treatment as a strategy to reduce gun violence?	60.4	61.8	60.6	55.1*	57.2
Increasing government spending on drug and alcohol abuse screening and treatment as a strategy to reduce gun violence?	43.5	46.6	44.2	35.0***	36.6***

Note: We asked respondents whether they favored or opposed each policy using a 5-point Likert scale (strongly favor; somewhat favor; neither favor nor oppose; somewhat oppose; strongly oppose). We coded strongly favor and somewhat favor responses as being in support of a given policy.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

^aResponses among non-gun owners with a gun in their household, gun owners, and NRA members were compared with responses among non-gun owners (no gun in household) using chi-square tests.

Table 19.3 Percentage who favor gun policies by political party affiliation

Item	Democrats ^a (n = 788)	Independents (n = 1,121)	Republicans (n = 794)
Assault weapon and ammunition policies			
Banning the sale of military-style, semi-automatic assault weapons that are capable of shooting more than 10 rounds of ammunition without reloading?	86.6	63.9***	51.6***
Banning the sale of large-capacity ammunition clips or magazines that allow some guns to shoot more than 10 bullets before reloading?	83.2	65.6***	51.0***
Banning the sale of large-capacity ammunition clips or magazines that allow some guns to shoot more than 20 bullets before reloading?	82.8	66.7***	51.9***
Banning the possession of military-style, semi-automatic assault weapons that are capable of shooting more than 10 rounds of ammunition without reloading if the government is required to pay gun owners the fair market value of their weapons?	72.1	51.3***	40.2***
Banning the possession of large capacity ammunition clips or magazines that allow some guns to shoot more than 10 bullets before reloading if the government is required to pay gun owners the fair market value of their ammunition clips?	68.6	52.4***	38.9***
Prohibited person policies			
Prohibiting a person convicted of two or more crimes involving alcohol or drugs within a three-year period from having a gun for 10 years?	79.4	72.2*	75.2*
Prohibiting a person convicted of violating a domestic violence restraining order from having a gun for 10 years?	85.1	79.2*	77.3*
Prohibiting a person convicted of a serious crime as a juvenile from having a gun for 10 years?	88.5	79.2**	82.0*
Prohibiting a person under the age of 21 from having a handgun?	83.6	66.1***	54.5***
Prohibiting a person on the terror watch list from having a gun?	88.3	84.0	86.3

Prohibiting people who have been convicted of each of these crimes from having a gun for 10 years:			
Public display of a gun in a threatening manner excluding self-defense	70.7	71.1	71.7
Domestic violence	76.1	73.5	70.2
Assault and battery that does not result in serious injury or involve a lethal weapon	58.2	50.4*	49.9*
Drunk and disorderly conduct	42.3	33.7*	37.4
Carrying a concealed gun without a permit	64.2	56.8*	50.0***
Indecent exposure	28.4	24.7	24.4
Background check policies			
Requiring a background check system for all gun sales to make sure a purchaser is not legally prohibited from having a gun?	92.1	87.5	86.3*
Increasing federal funding to states to improve reporting of people prohibited by law from having a gun to the background check system?	76.2	64.0***	56.1***
Allowing law enforcement up to five business days, if needed, to complete a background check for gun buyers? ^b	87.3	70.8***	71.1***
Policies affecting gun dealers			
Allowing the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives to temporarily take away a gun dealer's license if an audit reveals record-keeping violations and the dealer cannot account for 20 or more of the guns?	88.5	83.3	80.9*
Allowing cities to sue licensed gun dealers when there is strong evidence that the gun dealer's careless sales practices allowed many criminals to obtain guns?	82.2	69.5***	66.5***
Allowing the information about which gun dealers sell the most guns used in crimes to be available to the police and the public so that those gun dealers can be prioritized for greater oversight?	79.5	65.3***	58.8***
Requiring a mandatory minimum sentence of two years in prison for a person convicted of knowingly selling a gun to someone who cannot legally have a gun?	81.1	73.4*	73.0*

(Continued)

Table 19.3 (Continued)

Item	Democrats ^a (<i>n</i> = 788)	Independents (<i>n</i> = 1,121)	Republicans (<i>n</i> = 794)
Other gun policies			
Requiring people to obtain a license from a local law enforcement agency before buying a gun to verify their identity and ensure that they are not legally prohibited from having a gun?	87.8	73.5***	68.7***
Providing government funding for research to develop and test “smart guns” designed to fire only when held by the owner of the gun or other authorized user?	51.4	43.8*	34.1***
Requiring by law that people lock up the guns in their home when not in use to prevent handling by children or teenagers without adult supervision?	80.8	65.3***	49.5***

Note: We asked respondents whether they favored or opposed each policy using a 5-point Likert scale (strongly favor, somewhat favor, neither favor nor oppose, somewhat oppose, strongly oppose). We coded strongly favor and somewhat favor responses as being in support of a given policy. *N* = 2,703.

^a*p* < .05, ***p* < .01, ****p* < .001

^bResponses among Independents and Republicans were compared with responses among Democrats using chi-square tests.

^cQuestion informed respondents that under current federal law, most background checks for gun buyers are completed in just a few minutes. But if law enforcement needs additional time to determine if a gun buyer is not legally allowed to have a gun, they may only take up to a maximum of three business days to complete the check.

from having a gun for two years. Similarly, 82% of Republicans, 79% of Independents, and 89% of Democrats supported prohibiting a person convicted of a serious crime as a juvenile from having a gun for 10 years. A large majority of Republicans (86%) also supported universal background checks for gun sales (versus 88% among Independents and 92% among Democrats) and requiring a mandatory minimum sentence of two years in prison for a person convicted of making an illegal gun sale (73% among Republicans, 73% among Independents, and 81% among Democrats). A wider gradient of support across party affiliation was evident for assault weapon and ammunition policies. Fifty-two percent of Republicans supported banning the sale of assault weapons, compared with 64% of Independents and 87% of Democrats. A similar gradient of support was observed for banning the sale of large-capacity magazines capable of holding 10 or more ammunition rounds (51% among Republicans, 66% among Independents, and 83% among Democrats).

As Table 19.4 indicates, we did not find large differences by political party affiliation in support for policies aimed at restricting access to guns by persons with mental illness. Like Democrats and Independents, Republicans were supportive of bolstering background check policies and resistant to allowing people who had lost their right to have a gun due to mental illness to have that right restored if they were determined not to be dangerous. Republicans and Independents were significantly less willing than Democrats to allow police officers to search for and remove a gun from a person, without a warrant, if they believed the person was dangerous due to mental illness, emotional instability, or a tendency to be violent. A wider gradient of support by party affiliation was also evident for increasing government spending on mental health treatment and on drug and alcohol abuse treatment as a strategy to reduce gun violence. We found that 50% of Republicans, 57% of Independents, and 71% of Democrats were in support of increased spending on mental health screening and treatment as a strategy for reducing gun violence. In contrast, 33% of Republicans, 41% of Independents, and 53% of Democrats supported increased spending on substance abuse treatment to reduce to gun violence.

Discussion

Findings from this national survey indicate high support—including among gun owners, in most cases—for a range of policies aimed at reducing gun

Table 19.4 Percentage who favor gun policies affecting persons with mental illness, by political party affiliation

Item	Democrats ^a (n = 788)	Independents (n = 1,121)	Republicans (n = 794)
Background check policies			
Requiring states to report a person to the background check system who is prohibited from buying a gun due either to involuntary commitment to a hospital for psychiatric treatment or to being declared mentally incompetent by a court of law?	87.1	84.5	84.5
Requiring health care providers to report people who threaten to harm themselves or others to the background check system to prevent them from having a gun for six months?	80.0	71.3**	72.1*
Requiring the military to report a person who has been rejected from service due to mental illness or drug or alcohol abuse to the background check system to prevent them from having a gun?	84.7	74.9**	77.5*
Other gun policies			
Allowing police officers to search for and remove guns from a person, without a warrant, if they believe the person is dangerous due to a mental illness, emotional instability, or a tendency to be violent?	60.7	47.9***	48.5**
Allowing people who have lost the right to have a gun due to mental illness to have that right restored if they are determined not to be dangerous?	31.1	30.7	33.8
Government spending			
Increasing government spending on mental health screening and treatment as a strategy to reduce gun violence?	71.1	57.2***	50.0***
Increasing government spending on drug and alcohol abuse screening and treatment as a strategy to reduce gun violence?	53.4	41.1**	32.7***

Note: We asked respondents whether they favored or opposed each policy using a 5-point Likert scale (strongly favor, somewhat favor, neither favor nor oppose, somewhat oppose, strongly oppose). We coded strongly favor and somewhat favor responses as being in support of a given policy.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

^aResponses among Independents and Republicans were compared with responses among Democrats using chi-square tests.

violence. All but 5 of the 33 gun policies assessed were supported by a majority of the American public. The most feasible policies from a political perspective include 19 with support by majorities of the public regardless of gun ownership or political party identification. These policies would require a universal background check system and strengthen how the system operates, help curtail dangerous sales practices by gun dealers, require firearm licensing by law enforcement, and restrict gun access to certain groups that are not currently prohibited under federal law from possessing firearms, including individuals with a range of serious criminal convictions and on the terror watch list. Other policies supported by a majority of Americans and across all partisan affiliations, including bans on the sale of assault weapons and large-capacity magazines, had support among a majority or close to a majority of gun owners but few NRA member gun owners. These findings suggest that policymakers have a large range of options for curbing gun violence to choose from that are supported by the majority of the American public.

Among the most popular policies were those affecting access to guns by persons with mental illness. The majority of Americans also supported increasing government spending on mental health treatment as a strategy to reduce gun violence. Given substantial rates of undertreatment of mental health problems in the United States,¹³ it is worth considering whether gun policies targeting persons with mental illness might negatively affect treatment-seeking behavior. This may be of particular concern if there are efforts to broaden how mental illness is defined for the purpose of screening potentially dangerous individuals from having guns.

As with all research studies, our study findings should be assessed within the context of our methodological approach. While web-based panels provide an attractive alternative to the increasing challenges of national telephone surveys, methodological issues related to their use should be considered with some care. GfK KN uses probability-based recruitment consistent with established standards.¹⁴ We assessed these data by comparing detailed respondent socio-demographic characteristics (both weighted and unweighted) with national rates to confirm their representativeness of the U.S. population (available upon request from authors). In addition, as with all public opinion survey research, differences in question wording can lead to differences in respondent ratings about the same policy across survey instruments; therefore, it is critical to interpret all public opinion studies with a careful eye to the language used to describe policy items.

Conclusion

The tragic mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School appears to have shifted the policy debate about gun violence in America. These 2013 national public opinion data collected three weeks after the Sandy Hook massacre suggest that the American public is supportive of a range of policy options for reducing gun violence. Time will tell how public sentiments about proposals to strengthen U.S. gun laws translate into policy action in Washington, D.C., and in state capitals around the country.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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NOTES

1. Gun Control Support Soars in New Polls. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/12/27/gun-control-support-poll_n_2370265.html
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