

# After Newtown — Public Opinion on Gun Policy and Mental Illness

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The horrific loss of life at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, in December 2012 has prompted a national conversation about guns and mental illness in the United States. This tragedy occurred less than 6 months after 70 people were shot in a movie theater in Colorado and after highly publicized mass shootings in Arizona and at Virginia Tech. These four events share two common characteristics: all four shooters were apparently mentally ill, and all four used guns with large-capacity magazines, allowing them to fire multiple rounds of ammunition without reloading. As policymakers consider options to reduce gun violence, they should understand public attitudes about various violence-prevention proposals, including policies affecting persons with mental illness; past research findings on Americans' attitudes about policies for curbing gun violence<sup>1-3</sup> need to be updated. In the aftermath of Sandy Hook, it's also important to understand how Americans view mental illness.

To examine these issues, we conducted two national public opinion surveys between January 2 and January 14, 2013, with the survey research firm GfK Knowledge Networks, using equal-probability sampling from a sample frame of residential addresses covering 97% of U.S. households. The surveys were pilot-tested December 28 through December 31, 2012. The order of the survey

items was randomized. We fielded the gun-policy survey (n=2703) and the mental illness survey (n=1530) using different respondents to avoid priming effects. Survey completion rates were 69% and 70%, respectively. For the gun-policy survey, to report national rates of policy support and compare rates stratified according to respondents' gun-ownership status, we oversampled both gun-owners and non-owners living in households with guns. We reported the gun-policy results at the Summit on Reducing Gun Violence in America at Johns Hopkins University on January 15, 2013.

Some 33% of respondents reported having a gun in their home or garage, an estimate that's consistent with recent data from the General Social Survey and other surveys,<sup>4,5</sup> though somewhat lower than a few 2013 polls have reported. Twenty-two percent of respondents identified the guns as personally belonging to them ("gun-owners"), and 11% identified themselves as non-gun-owners living in a household with a gun. Among gun-owners, 71% reported owning a handgun, 62% reported owning a shotgun, and 61% reported owning a rifle. The remaining 67% of respondents identified themselves as non-gun-owners living in households without guns ("non-gun-owners").

Majorities of the respondents supported all but 4 of 31 gun policies (see Table 1). Public support was particularly high for measures prohibiting certain persons from having guns, enhancing

background checks, and instituting greater oversight of gun dealers. Even policies banning the sale of military-style semiautomatic weapons and large-capacity ammunition magazines were supported by more than 65% of the general public.

We found smaller differences than we anticipated between gun-owners and non-gun-owners. All policies bolstering background checks and oversight of gun dealers were supported by majorities of gun-owners, as were most policies prohibiting certain persons from having guns. A majority of members of the National Rifle Association (NRA) supported many of these policies as well. For instance, 84% of gun-owners and 74% of NRA members (vs. 90% of non-gun-owners) supported requiring a universal background-check system for all gun sales; 76% of gun-owners and 62% of NRA members (vs. 83% of non-gun-owners) supported prohibiting gun ownership for 10 years after a person has been convicted of violating a domestic-violence restraining order; and 71% of gun-owners and 70% of NRA members (vs. 78% of non-gun-owners) supported requiring a mandatory minimum sentence of 2 years in prison for a person convicted of selling a gun to someone who cannot legally have a gun.

We found larger differences in support between non-gun-owners and gun-owners for policies banning the sale of semiautomatic assault weapons (77% vs. 46%),

Table 1. Public Support for Gun Policies in 2013, Overall and by Gun-Ownership Status (N = 2703).\*

Item	Overall (N = 2703)	Non- Gun-Owners (N = 913)	Non-Gun-Owner, Gun in Household (N = 843)	Gun-Owners (N = 947)	NRA Members (N = 169)
<i>percent in favor</i>					
<b>Assault-weapon and ammunition policies</b>					
Banning the sale of military-style, semiautomatic 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, semiautomatic 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§
<b>Prohibited-person policies</b>					
Prohibiting a person convicted of two or more crimes involving alcohol or drugs within a 3-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†
<b>Background-check policies</b>					
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†
Increased 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 5 business days, if needed, to complete a background check for gun buyers¶	76.3	79.8	79.2	67.0§	47.1§
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 6 months	74.5	75.4	76.1	72.0	66.0

Table 1. (Continued.)

Item	Overall (N=2703)	Non-Gun-Owners (N=913)	Non-Gun-Owner, Gun in Household (N=843) <i>percent in favor</i>	Gun-Owners (N=947)	NRA Members (N=169)
<b>Background-check policies (continued)</b>					
Requiring states to report a person to the background-check system who is prohibited from buying a gun either because of involuntary commitment to a hospital for psychiatric treatment or because of being declared mentally incompetent by a court of law	85.4	85.3	86.5	85.6	80.7
Requiring the military to report a person who has been rejected from service because of 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
<b>Policies affecting gun dealers</b>					
Allowing the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms 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 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 2 years in prison for a person convicted of knowingly selling a gun to someone who cannot legally have a gun	76.0	77.7	76.3	70.7‡	69.8‡
<b>Other gun policies</b>					
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	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 a person lock up the guns in the 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§
Allowing police officers to search for and remove guns from a person, without a warrant, if they believe the person is dangerous because of 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 because of 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

\* Responses among non-gun-owners with a gun in their household, gun-owners, and National Rifle Association (NRA) members were compared with responses among non-gun-owners (no gun in household) using chi-square tests; P values are for this comparison. We asked respondents whether they favored or opposed each policy using a five-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<0.05.

‡ P<0.01.

§ P<0.001.

¶ The question 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 whether a gun buyer is not legally allowed to have a gun, they may take only a maximum of 3 business days to complete the check.

Table 2. Public Attitudes about Mental Illness, Overall and among People with and without Experience with Mental Illness (N = 1530).\*

Item	Overall (N = 1530)	No Experience with Mental Illness (N = 752)	Experience with Mental Illness (N = 765)
<b>Perceived dangerousness and social distance</b>			
Do you agree or disagree that people with serious mental illness are, by far, more dangerous than the general population? (% agree)	45.6	46.3	44.8
Do you agree or disagree that locating a group home or apartment for people with mental illness in a residential neighborhood endangers local residents? (% agree)	31.8	33.5	30.1
Would you be willing or unwilling to have a person with serious mental illness start working closely with you on a job? (% willing)	28.6	22.0	35.2‡
Would you be willing or unwilling to have a person with serious mental illness as a neighbor? (% willing)	33.1	26.3	39.9‡
<b>Insurance and treatment</b>			
Do you favor or oppose requiring insurance companies to offer benefits for mental health and drug and alcohol abuse services that are equivalent to benefits for other medical services? (% favor)	69.4	62.0	76.9‡
Would you like to see more or less government spending on mental health treatment? (% more)	58.6	49.0	68.6‡
Would you like to see more or less government spending on drug and alcohol abuse treatment? (% more)	38.5	32.2	45.4‡
Do you favor or oppose increasing government spending on mental health screening and treatment as a strategy to reduce gun violence? (% favor)	60.6	54.4	66.8‡
Do you favor or oppose increasing government spending on drug and alcohol abuse screening and treatment as a strategy to reduce gun violence? (% favor)	45.7	41.7	49.5†
<b>Perceived discrimination and belief in recovery</b>			
Do you agree or disagree that discrimination against people with mental illness is a serious problem? (% agree)	58.2	49.9	66.4‡
Do you agree or disagree that most people with serious mental illness can, with treatment, get well and return to productive lives? (% agree)	55.9	48.9	63.2‡

\* For 13 respondents, there were no data on experience with mental illness. Respondents were defined as having experience with mental illness if they reported that they, an immediate family member, or another relative or close friend had been hospitalized, in counseling, or received prescription medication to treat a mental health or drug or alcohol abuse problem. We compared the responses in the two subgroups using chi-square tests. Each item used a five-point Likert scale. For agree–disagree items, the options were strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, and strongly disagree, and we coded strongly agree and somewhat agree responses as being in agreement with a given statement. For willing–unwilling items, the options were definitely willing, probably willing, neither willing nor unwilling, probably unwilling, and definitely unwilling, and we coded definitely willing and probably willing as being willing for a given statement. For favor–oppose items, the options were strongly favor, somewhat favor, neither favor nor oppose, somewhat oppose, and strongly oppose, and we coded strongly favor and somewhat favor responses as being in support of a given policy. For more–less items, the options were spend much more, spend more, spend the same as now, spend less, and spend much less, and we coded spend much more and spend more responses as supporting more spending.

† P < 0.05.

‡ P < 0.001.

banning the sale of large-capacity ammunition magazines holding more than 10 bullets (76% vs. 48%), prohibiting handgun ownership for people younger than 21 years of age (76% vs. 52%), and requiring gun-owners to lock guns when they're not in use to prevent handling by children or teenagers without adult supervi-

sion (75% vs. 44%). Non-gun-owners and gun-owners held similar views on the policies that attracted the lowest levels of support, such as prohibiting gun ownership by persons with misdemeanor convictions for indecent exposure (28% vs. 21%) or drunk and disorderly conduct (40% vs. 32%).

In many cases, the views of non-gun-owners living in households with guns were aligned more closely with those of other non-gun-owners than with those of personal gun-owners. For instance, 76% of non-gun-owners living in households with guns supported requiring a person to obtain a license for a gun (vs. 84%

of other non-gun-owners and 59% of gun-owners).

Most policies regarding persons with mental illness were popular with both non-gun-owners and gun-owners. Eighty-five percent of respondents supported requiring states to report to the national background-check system persons who are prohibited from having guns because they have either been involuntarily committed to a hospital for psychiatric treatment or been declared mentally incompetent by a court. Although this requirement has been in place since before the background-check system was implemented in 1998, many states do not report mental health records. Of the policies regarding persons with mental illness included in the survey, the one that had the least public support was allowing people who have lost the right to have a gun because of mental illness to have that right restored if they are determined not to be dangerous.

Overall, respondents expressed ambivalence about mental illness (see Table 2). Almost half of respondents believed that people with serious mental illness are more dangerous than members of the general population, but less than a third believed that locating a group residence for people with mental illness in a residential neighborhood would endan-

ger area residents. Most said they were unwilling to have a person with a serious mental illness as a coworker or a neighbor. However, 69% favored requiring insurance companies to offer benefits for mental health and drug and alcohol abuse services that are equivalent to benefits for other medical services. Such equity was the core idea behind a federal parity law that took effect in 2010.

Fifty-nine percent of respondents supported increased government spending on mental health care, and 61% favored greater spending on such care as a strategy for reducing gun violence. (Support was substantially lower for spending on treatment for drug and alcohol abuse.) Finally, 58% viewed discrimination against people with mental illness as a serious problem, while 56% believed that, with treatment, these people could get well and return to productive lives. In most cases, respondents who had direct experience with mental illness personally or through a close relationship had more positive views about mental illness than those without direct experience.

Findings from these surveys indicate high support among Americans — including gun-owners, in many cases — for a range of policies aimed at reducing gun violence. Gun policies with the highest support included those related

to persons with mental illness. The majority of Americans apparently also support increasing government spending on mental health treatment as a strategy for reducing gun violence. Given the data on public attitudes about persons with mental illness, it is worth thinking carefully about how to implement effective gun-violence-prevention measures without exacerbating stigma or discouraging people from seeking treatment.

Disclosure forms provided by the authors are available with the full text of this article at NEJM.org.

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