

**ARMED AND DANGEROUS STATISTICS:
MEDIA COVERAGE OF TRENDS IN GUN
OWNERSHIP BY WOMEN**

By Tom W. Smith

In recent years the mass media have persisted with the story that gun ownership by women has been increasing notably.¹ By implication and sometimes direct statement, the increase is usually associated with the purchase of handguns for self-defense. Unfortunately, instead of capturing an important emerging trend, the media may have captured and then further misinterpreted a wayward statistic.

Changes in Gun Ownership by Women

While the precise claims vary, the standard "fact" presented in the media is that gun ownership among women increased 53% between 1983 and 1986, to 12 million women owning guns (Time, 4/11/89; Time, 2/6/89; Newsweek, 2/27/89; Glamour, 4/1989; New York Times, 4/2/89; Mademoiselle, 5/1989; Quigley, 1989). This jump has been described as "soaring" and as marking a "gender revolution" (Newsweek, 2/27/89; Time, 4/11/88).

These stories were based on a series of polls conducted by Gallup for Smith and Wesson between 1983 and 1988.² We attempted to obtain the Smith and Wesson data to check the claims, but the company was unwilling to share them. Neither would it send copies of press releases and other information on the surveys that it had made available to the media.³ We therefore turned to the best publicly available data on the issue of women and guns, the General Social Surveys (GSSs) conducted by NORC, University of Chicago.⁴ The GSS has asked seven times (from 1980 to 1989) a series of questions on gun ownership:

Do you happen to have in your home (IF HOUSE: or garage) any guns or revolvers?

[IF YES]

A. Is it a pistol, shotgun, rifle, or what? B. Do any of these guns personally belong to you?

From these questions estimates of the percent of men and women personally owning both guns in general and handguns in particular can be calculated.⁵ Table 1 shows that there have been no significant changes in the level of gun ownership or handgun ownership for either men or women over the past decade.

Changes in "Potential Buyers"

A second claim has been that "the number of women who were considering buying a weapon quadrupled

to nearly 2 million" (Time, 4/11/89; see also Time, 2/6/89). This has been used to bolster the claim that a large increase in ownership has occurred and as evidence that the trend may be continuing. As Time added, "Many of those plans undoubtedly turned into purchases, though no updated figures are available (2/6/89)." Like the claims on gun ownership, the figures on potential gun purchases are derived from the Gallup surveys done for Smith and Wesson. These data have not been made available by Smith and Wesson for analysis, but one relevant press release has been located. Issued around February, 1989, it stated: "According to Gallup, 15.6 million women are potential buyers in 1989—an increase of nearly 100% since 1983."⁶ This appears to be based on the 1988 survey. It refers to 15.6 million "potential buyers" in 1989 compared to only 2 million cited by Time, but mentions only a "nearly 100%" increase since 1983 compared to the quadrupling for 1983-1986 mentioned in Time. The two sets of figures probably differ not only because they cover different years, but also because they refer to different definitions of "potential buyers."

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Trends in Gun Ownership by Gender, 1980-1989

	% Personally Owning a Gun						
	1980	1982	1984	1985	1987	1988	1989
Men	52	49	47	51	47	45	50
Women	11	15	12	12	14	11	11
	% Personally Owning a Handgun						
Men	27	24	25	28	29	25	31
Women	7	9	6	7	9	9	7

Source: General Social Surveys, NORC, University of Chicago

Number of cases (men/women): 1980 (622/710), 1982 (612/711), 1984 (592/764), 1985 (678/740), 1987 (629/706), 1988 (392/502), 1989 (447/586)

In fact, Gallup and Smith and Wesson themselves disagree on the correct number of "women who are potential buyers in 1989." Gallup notes, "the findings as reported are not potential buyers in 1989. The 15.6 [million] figure corresponds to survey findings that women say there is at least some chance they will ever buy a gun. In truth, only 900,000 women could be considered potential purchasers and even this would be in terms of the next three years (McNee, 3/21/89)."

Handguns: A Picture is Worth...

In addition to the explicit claims that gun ownership and potential purchases by women have been rapidly increasing, the media have fostered the impression that the jump has been in *handgun* purchases for self-protection. Sometimes this is stated directly as when Mademoiselle (May, 1989) and the Cox News Service (Rowell, 1989) cite the Smith and Wesson figures as referring to handguns alone (see note 2). More often the impression is created by pictures, anecdotes, and other statements in the text that emphasize handguns and ignore other firearms. In her book, Quigley (1989) cites the Smith and Wesson figure that "12 million American women own guns" on its cover along side a picture of a woman with a *handgun*. Similarly on the inside dust cover the 12 million figure along with a statement that "one out of eight [women] has a gun," are cited in a photo caption that talks about the woman having her gun "in her purse, her holster, her car, or her night table." Only the car is a possible location for other than a handgun. Throughout the book only a few references are explicitly made to rifles (e.g. pp. 141-144).

Likewise, the Glamour excerpts from the Quigley book are highlighted by a full-page picture of a woman with a handgun. The New York Times (2/24/86), Newsweek (2/27/89), and Time (4/11/88) have all featured pictures of handguns. No article on women and guns has featured a picture of a hunting rifle or some other long gun. Overall, it's hard to follow press coverage and not get the impression that women own handguns, not long guns, and that the reported increase in gun ownership has been among handguns.

GSS data challenges these impressions. First, as with all guns, there was no increase in the percent of women owning handguns from 1980 to 1989 (See table). Second, handgun ownership is not common among women — with the proportion staying in the 6%-9% range owning handguns through all of the surveys.⁷ Third, long guns are somewhat more common than handguns. Among women personally owning a gun, having only a handgun is reported by 27%, having only a long gun by 34%, having both a handgun and a long gun by 37%, and having neither by 2%. (The latter usually have mentioned a pellet/air gun or an antique gun.) Thus, even among women personally owning guns, the emphasis on handguns is misplaced.

The Case of the Unmarried Women

Another impression left by the media coverage is that it's women without husbands for protection who are purchasing the handguns. Personal anecdotes for eight women are cited. Four are identified as divorced and none as definitely married. For example, "the 40-year old divorced mother bought a handgun" (New York Times, 4/2/89), "Lorene Wozniak... is divorced....She is one of many women who live on their own... and have chosen to protect

themselves by owning a gun.... Carol Tonn, a 41-year-old benefits manager...bought a .22 caliber pistol soon after she was divorced..." (New York Times, 2/24/86).

But once again the GSS figures question the emphasis. Across all years, married women are more likely to own a gun than women not currently married (never married, separated, divorced, or widowed). 14% of married women personally own a gun, while only 11% of the unmarried do. Similarly, 9% of married women have a pistol, while a slightly lower 7% of unmarried women have one.⁸ Likewise of women living without any other adults in the household, 12% personally own some type of gun and 8% own a pistol compared to 13% owning a gun and 8% owning a pistol among women living in two-adult households.

A Good Story?

It's not surprising that this story of women arming themselves caught on. First, "woman buys pistol" has a "man bites dog" quality to it. As Time (2/6/89) noted, "Strikingly, it is often Jane rather than John Q. Public who is the first-time gun buyer these days. Guns have long been viewed as a symbol of male sexual power..." Second, colorful, even lurid, accounts of women armed with guns disposing of would-be rapists gave the story punch and sizzle. In addition, certain other developments appeared to back up the story. For example, the National Rifle Association was trying to enlist more women members and claiming success (New York Times 2/24/86 and 4/2/89). And, the gun industry, especially Smith and Wesson, was trying to market more guns to women and coming out with special "feminine" lines (New York Times 2/24/86, 4/2/89; Glamour, 9/1986; Time, 4/11/88; Newsweek, 2/27/89; Wall Street Journal, 2/13/89). Perhaps most importantly, Smith and Wesson was sharing with the media statistics from its Gallup surveys claiming huge increases in gun ownership and potential purchases.

The media accepted these statistics as accurate and built their stories around them. But neither the alleged increase in gun ownership by women, nor the emphasis on handguns and unmarried women, is supported by the best publicly available information. The latter indicates that neither gun ownership nor handgun ownership among women has increased since 1980, that men are still 3 to 4 times more likely to own a gun or a handgun than women, and that married women are more likely to own a gun than unmarried women.

ENDNOTES

1. In addition to the media uses cited below, NORC was contacted at least seven times by the media during the last three years about women owning guns: New York Times, 1986 and 1989; Cleveland Plain Dealer, 1987; Time, 1988; Los Angeles Times, 1988; a Los Angeles television station, 1988; and Glamour, 1989.

2. The only article not directly citing the Smith and Wesson figures for the increase in gun ownership is the New York Times, 4/2/89 which does cite these studies on the number of potential buyers and may be relying indirectly on the Smith and Wesson numbers.

The different accounts disagree on numerous small and some major points. Among the variant claims (all based on the Gallup surveys conducted for Smith and Wesson) are that (1) "gun ownership is soaring, nearly doubling to 12.1 million between 1982 and 1987" (Newsweek, 2/27/89); (2) "more than 12 million American women own handguns . . . another 15 million said they were likely to buy them" (The Trentonian, 8/20/89), "more than 12 million women are known to own handguns" (Mademoiselle, 5/1989), and "an estimated 12 million women bought sidearms during 1986" (American Rifleman, March, 1989); (3) "Over the last few years, sales of guns to women have increased by 50% . . ." (Mademoiselle, 5/1989), "the number of women purchasing firearms increased 53% between 1983 and 1986" (Time, 2/6/89), and "an estimated 12 million women bought sidearms during 1986" (American Rifleman, 1989). It appears that these claims have respectively confused (1) a 53% increase with "nearly doubling," (2) guns with handguns, and (3) purchases with currently owned guns.

While it's clear that the media reports are internally inconsistent, it is uncertain which reports reflect what the original Smith and Wesson data reported. We believe from information from Gallup that the Smith and Wesson figures refer to changes in the number of adult women owning handguns.

3. We made three phone calls and sent one letter to Smith and Wesson requesting these materials. We made six attempts to obtain from the media and other sources the original Smith and Wesson documents that they relied on. We were able to come with up one press release that related only to potential buyers, see below. Gallup was able to share the wording of the Smith and Wesson questions cited below.

4. While the Gallup surveys conducted for Smith and Wesson and the GSS apparently disagree on the trends, we can not fully assess the disparity from the released data. One possible reason is the large differences in question wording. The main Gallup item asked:

Which of the following pieces of sporting equipment do you yourself own? (READ LIST — START AT X POINT) Tennis racket/Downhill skis/Cross-country skis/Bicycle/Shotgun or rifle/Handgun/Bow and arrows/Fishing tackle/Golf clubs/Bowling ball/None.

The GSSs are full-probability samples of the adult household population in the United States. The interviews are conducted in person. The surveys are available from the Roper Center, University of Connecticut and the Interuniversity Consortium for Political and Social Research, University of Michigan. Details on the

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surveys are given in Davis and Smith, 1989.

5. Slightly different estimates of the level of gun ownership result from different handling of refusals and other item non-response. We have followed a procedure of excluding item non-response, which produces a middle estimate between the extremes. None of the alternative methods for calculating ownership rates indicate any significant changes in ownership levels over time.

6. The 15.6 million figure, but not the change over time is mentioned in the *New York Times*, 4/2/89. The *Trentonian* (8/20/89) said "another 15 million said they were likely to buy them [handguns]." The *American Rifleman* (March, 1989) has other figures from the Smith and Wesson commissioned surveys: "While 19% of women were interested in owning a gun, only 9% had already acquired one."

7. For the reason explained below, this is a maximum estimate of handgun ownership. The follow-up question on personal ownership does not identify which guns are personally owned by the respondent. If both a long gun (rifle or shotgun) and a handgun are present in the household, we know that one or more of the guns personally belongs to the respondent, but can not tell which gun does. For women across all years, at least 4% personally owned a handgun (i.e. they said they personally owned a gun and only a pistol was owned) and a maximum of 8% owned a handgun (i.e. they said they personally owned a gun and both a pistol and a long gun were owned). In the table we have used the maximum assumption that all women reporting owning a gun in a household with a pistol owned a pistol.

8. Among unmarried women, widows are most likely to own a gun or a pistol followed by the divorced, separated, and never married. This suggests that among unmarried women many guns were inherited from deceased husbands.

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GENERATIONS

Age	Rock Music		
	Fan Now	Used to be Fan	Never Fan
18-29	58%	18%	24%
30-49	40	31	29
50+	6	8	86

Source: Survey by the Gallup Organization, June 15-18, 1989.

Question: "Thinking now about rock music or rock 'n roll...which of the following categories best applies to you?"