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Guns, Race, and Stats: The Three Deadliest Weapons in America

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8–10 minutes

For nearly three years, headlines have warned that, as *The Hill* put it, “[Gun Ownership Among Black Americans Is Soaring](#),” up 58.2 percent. At least 20 of America’s [most popular news outlets](#), including [eight of its ten most trusted](#), have reported this statistic. Appearing in outlets like [The Wall Street Journal](#) as far back as August 2020, this so-called “research” has continued to be cited by outlets like [Bloomberg](#) as recently as October 2023. And all of these articles conclude that, in the words of *Time* magazine, “[Racial Tensions in the U.S. Are Helping to Fuel a Rise in Black Gun Ownership](#).”

As it turns out, the [dozens of articles](#) implying that “[Black Americans Flock to Gun Stores and Clubs](#)” can be traced back to [a gun lobbying group’s](#) demonstrably meaningless promotional materials. In other words, the widely reported “58 percent” statistic is a sham—but its impact is real. The false narrative it props up will lead to more gun purchases by anti-Black racists, more accidental and self-inflicted gun deaths in Black communities, and more unjustified fears of Black Americans.

All of the articles I found either imply or conclude that Black people in particular began buying far more guns than usual in the wake of George

Floyd's murder. They all also suggest that scientific evidence supports this story. I was skeptical of both claims, so as an [anti-racist data scientist](#), I decided to investigate their statistical basis. What I found was disconcerting.

In July 2020, the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF) [released](#) an [infographic](#) based on a survey it conducted on some of its members. (It didn't release any data or survey text from the study, just the infographic.) The NSSF is a [trade association](#) that, according to [its most recent public tax records](#), spends about ten times as much as [the NRA](#) on gun lobbying efforts. Its tax registration as a [business league](#) means that, according to the IRS, "[its purpose must be to promote this common business interest](#)": to sell guns.

This statistical fable, run under tabloid-style headlines, sends several clear and dangerous messages.

This may explain why the NSSF didn't ask thousands of Americans whether they owned a gun, as reputable research organizations sometimes do. Using this approach, Pew Research found no change in Black gun ownership rates from [2017](#) (24 percent) to [2021](#) (24 percent). Similarly, [peer-reviewed research](#) published by members of the Harvard Injury Control Research Center found no change in gun ownership among Black Americans across 2019 (21 percent), 2020 (21 percent), and 2021 (21 percent).

But instead of taking the approach used by Pew and Harvard, the NSSF simply asked about 100 of its own member gun dealers to estimate how their overall customer base may have changed. And even those retrospective guesses—which do not, on their own, tell us anything about gun ownership—were reported deceptively.

For each race, the NSSF estimated the average change in customers

only from retailers who recalled an increase in customers of that particular race. So if a dealer didn't think they'd had more Black customers—and even if they reported having fewer Black customers—their response wasn't counted. Retailers who reported no increase in Black customers were simply ignored, since their guesses would have pulled the so-called “average increase” below 58.2 percent.

The NSSF hasn't disclosed exactly how many responses they ignored for each race, but the infographic implies that it varied from 0 percent to 81.7 percent. We can infer this because instead of reporting how many people took the survey, the infographic summarizes the number of responses that were counted for each of four racial categories:

“*n*=19-104.” Had all responses been counted, the true average of retailer guesses may have been as low as 9.9 percent for Black customers. By comparison, the infographic claims a 51.9 percent increase in white customers—though none of [the news write-ups seem](#) to mention this. And this isn't the only kind of [selective reporting](#) I found.

The survey only asked retailers about “[the first six months of 2020](#).” Since George Floyd's murder and the protests that followed didn't begin until almost June, those six months were nearly over by the time these events occurred. When the NSSF [initially released](#) the infographic in July 2020, it claimed that gun industry customers “have long had diverse demographic backgrounds.” But what news outlet will pick up a story that says nothing has changed? So in August 2020, the NSSF issued a second press release that attributed the survey results to “[looting, riots and destruction](#).” Following its release, at least five news outlets—including [MSNBC](#) and [The Wall Street Journal](#)—reported the infographic's most influential statistic. And many, many publications publicized this faulty story line.

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clear and dangerous messages. NPR's late-September 2020 report was titled "[Some Black Americans Buying Guns: 'I'd Rather Go to Trial Than Go to the Cemetery.'](#)" *The Washington Post* titled a July 2021 story "['Fear on Top of Fear': Why Anti-Gun Americans Joined the Wave of New Gun Owners](#)," and followed up with a February 2023 video, "[Why Black Gun Ownership Is on the Rise](#)."

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Past the headlines, the news reports stay on message. In "[The Growing Ranks of Black Gun Owners](#)," *The Philadelphia Inquirer* winks and assures us that Black gun owners *aren't* "thugs and criminals" or the "Black militant stereotype." Similarly, [CNN instructs us](#) *not* to picture Black gun owners as "'gangsters' with 'grilled out teeth' and tattoos." *The Hill* is more direct, cautioning us that Black gun advocates are "strapped," and [NBC informs us](#) that they are "prepared to fight."

The desired takeaway seems clear: Everyone should buy more guns. If you are a racist afraid of Black people, buy a gun. If you are a Black person afraid of racists, buy a gun. And if you harbor racialized fears, you should hold on to those fears, because they're backed up by quantitative research—and you really *should* buy a gun.

Selling guns to anti-Black racists and stoking anti-Black racial anxieties will disproportionately harm the Black community. But if these stories also scare or peer-pressure more Black Americans into buying guns, as the NSSF surely hopes, the consequences are likely to be even worse.

[According to the CDC](#), there are about 25 percent more gun suicides each year than gun homicides. When a gun owner does shoot someone other than themselves, [the person they shoot is usually Black](#). About half of all gun deaths [occur in the home](#). People who have a gun at home are

[far more likely to be the victim of a gun homicide](#) than those who don't. When the person who gets shot is a woman, [the shooter is an intimate partner 45 percent of the time](#). And about [half of all gun deaths](#) involve shootings by a friend or acquaintance.

In other words, guns in *any* community tend to disproportionately kill members of that community. And for Black Americans, owning a gun may come with one additional risk.

In reporting this story, outlets like MSNBC sometimes mention the murder of Philando Castile as a reason that “[more Black people are turning to their Second Amendment right](#).” But that’s dangerous for Black Americans, who can be killed for exercising those rights. Castile was a Black driver stopped by a police officer who said he looked like a robbery suspect “[just because of the wide set nose](#).”

After handing over his license and registration, Castile was shot to death by the officer after calmly stating, “Sir, I have to tell you, I do have a firearm on me.” As Castile lay dying, [squad car audio](#) captured some of his last words: “I wasn’t reaching.”

The same cannot be said for these news stories.

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