

Guns in The Bahamas: (2) About the weapon

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Abstract

This paper examines the types of guns owned and used by 238 residents of The Bahamas. Most of these weapons were licensed shotguns (76.5%), however few (25.1%) were used primarily for hunting. When considering the licensing, use and storage of weapons, the majority of the guns (82.8%) were kept in breach of their permits. Given the increasing level of crime in The Bahamas and calls for society to have weapons for personal protection, these findings highlight the need for public debate on the conflict between the law and society.

It is virtually impossible for Bahamians to legally come into possession of a firearm, according to Desmond Bannister, Minister of State For Legal Affairs, who says firearms legislation in this country is among the toughest in the region. Epstein (2007, para 1)

Introduction

Guns are weapons designed to harm both human and non-human animals. By their very design they are dangerous. The danger which firearms pose to society in The Bahamas has been illustrated by Hanna (2005) who has shown that firearms (hand guns) are the homicide weapon of choice in Bahamian society (52.5% of homicides) as the homicide rate has been steadily climbing (Plumridge & Fielding, 2009) and has now become one of the highest per capita rates in the region (Harrendorf, Heiskanen, & Malby, 2010). Hanna also indicates that while handguns were the most common firearm used to kill people, shotguns were also used in 15% of homicides involving guns. The United Nations Statistics Division reported the intentional murder rate as 13.7 per 100,000 in 2004, which placed The Bahamas 22nd in a list of 133 territories (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2010). Consequently, examination of the use and

prevalence of guns is vital in order for society to be protected from their misuse. As reported by Hutcheson, Brennen, Bethel, & Carroll, (2011) the estimated number of guns per 100 in The Bahamas (8.8% per 1000) is above that in Columbia (7.2%) (Small Arms Survey, 2007), a country infamous for its violence (Holmes et al, 2010). Hutcheson, Brennen, Bethel, & Carroll, (2011) also indicate that the figures for The Bahamas may be higher than the 5.3% reported by Alpers and Wilson in 2010.

The danger which guns pose is well recognized. In The Statute Laws of The Bahamas, The Firearms Act, Chapter 213, is devoted to laws regarding firearms in The Bahamas (Bahamas Government, 2007). As well as requiring that firearms are licensed, anyone who “is of intemperate habits or unsound mind, or is otherwise unfitted to be entrusted with such a firearm” (para. 10.7a) or under 18 years of age is prohibited from owning a firearm (para. 29(1)), amongst other restrictions. The law recognizes that while members of society may own firearms for recreational use, the law also recognizes that firearms are dangerous and so attempts to ensure that their use is restricted in order to protect society from the terror which can result when firearms are used illegally (for example, Urbina, 2006). Thus, given their increasing usage and the violence associated with guns, it is clear that society should have an understanding of how owners of firearms keep their weapons and for which purposes they are used.

Weapons are possessed within a legal framework. In The Bahamas, firearms must be licensed according to Chapter 213 as mentioned above. In brief, this requires the owner of the firearm to apply for a license and in so doing, state the purpose for which the applicant wishes to use the firearm. The police perform selected checks on the applicant to ensure that the character of the applicant conforms to that in Chapter 213. This essentially requires the person not be a criminal

and be of sound mind. The applicant is not subject to formal psychological testing. The law also states that firearms must be kept unloaded and in a locked safe when not in use.

There are two stores in The Bahamas which sell firearms (one in New Providence and one in Abaco) listed in the Bahamas Local web site

http://www.bahamaslocal.com/category/949/10/default/1/Guns_and_Gunsmiths.html). One is clearly associated with outdoor activities, while the other sells a range of products designed to protect property. It is of interest to note the different associations of these two shops, one hunting and the other protection.

Typically firearms are licensed for hunting, thus the most common gun licenses are issued are for shotguns and rifles. According to reports in the media, in 2010, the Commissioner of Police had stated that there were 15,545 licensed shotguns and 1,565 rifles (para. 2) and that there was a “noticeable increase” in numbers since the previous year (para. 1). No figure was given for the number of hand guns (Rolle, 2010). The cost of a shotgun license is \$50 per year, and that for a rifle, \$100 (Bahamas Government, 2006). Licenses must be renewed annually. Although hand guns are not outlawed, these require the owner to have a special license which must be approved by the Commissioner of Police, and so it is unusual for residents to obtain permission to own a handgun. It should be noted that the cost of a license for a hand gun is not given on the Bahamas government webpage (http://forms.bahamas.gov.bs/dp_form.asp?fid=303), which suggests that applications for hand gun licenses are not encouraged. Consequently, the discussion of licensed firearms in The Bahamas would be expected to focus on firearms used for hunting.

The purpose of this paper is to describe how guns are kept and used in The Bahamas and to consider the implications of gun ownership for the safety and wellbeing of society.

Methodology

The data reported in this paper arise from the study on guns reported by Hutcheson, Brennen, Bethel, & Carroll, (2011). A survey was posted on Survey Monkey™. The survey included questions on gun ownership as it related to (a) the person who controlled the firearm, (b) characteristics and behaviours of those within the household and (c) the types of firearms kept and their use. During the Spring 2010 semester, College of the Bahamas students from several Social Science classes, contacted people by email to solicit participation in the study. Students were given credit for participation in the solicitation of respondents.

The research project was carried out with the consent of the Office of Research, International relations and Graduate Programmes of The College of The Bahamas.

A total of 1,813 replies were received. Some of these were sparsely completed and others appeared to be duplicates (possibly because the participants may have thought that their first submission failed). As the purpose of the study was to examine gun ownership in The Bahamas by Bahamians, only responses from Bahamians living in The Bahamas were retained in the analysis. Consequently after cleaning the data, we report on 1,281 responses.

This paper reports on only those questions from the larger survey which describes the gun and its use. Future papers will consider the characteristics of the home in which guns are found and describe the characteristics of the person who controls the firearm. It should be noted that in households where there were multiple guns, respondents were asked to select just one firearm and report on just that one. Therefore it is important to recognise that there may be a bias

towards reporting on a licensed, rather than unlicensed, weapon in these cases. In the case of illegal weapons, respondents may have failed to answer questions rather than give responses which might highlight the illegal nature of the gun ownership. Participants were free not to answer all questions and so not all survey forms were complete.

Given that the majority of guns reported on were hunting weapons, the results sections will highlight these weapons in particular.

Results

The respondents provided information on 238 firearms whose type was stated. Of these, one was described as a police firearm, and so was classified as a hand gun. The type of firearm was reported as unknown by 25 people and an additional 32 people did not respond to the question with regard to type. Of the 238 firearms which could be classified: 76.5% were shotguns, 13.0% were handguns and 10.5% were rifles.

Only eight (3.4% of 236) firearms were controlled by females. Of these eight weapons, five were handguns and no woman controlled a rifle.

The median age of persons who controlled handguns was slightly lower at 40.7 years, compared to those who controlled rifles (45 years) and shotguns (44.8 years). Only one person under 18 controlled a firearm and that was a handgun. The median household income was highest in those homes which reported possessing a rifle (\$60,000), and least in homes which reported possessing a shotgun (\$48,781), and in homes with handguns the median income was \$52,000.

Most firearms were bought. The majority of respondents did not know the provenance of the firearm about which they reported. However, in the case of those who did know, 75% or more of shotguns and rifles were bought, which contrasted with the diverse sources of hand guns,

Table 1.

Table 1: Source of firearm by type of firearm

	Type of firearm		
	Rifle	Handgun	Shotgun
Bought	87.5%	16.7%	75.0%
Not sure	0.0%	16.7%	6.3%
Gift	0.0%	16.7%	4.2%
Inherited	12.5%	16.7%	4.2%
Special issue	0.0%	16.7%	4.2%
Job/security	0.0%	0.0%	4.2%
Bought overseas	0.0%	0.0%	2.1%
Borrowed from a friend	0.0%	16.7%	0.0%
Not sure	0.0%	16.7%	6.3%
N	8	6	48

The majority of respondents indicated that the firearms were licensed (92.8% of 236), but 3.4% had never been licensed. Handguns were least likely to be licensed, and also be most likely never to have been licensed firearms ($\chi^2 (6, N = 236) = 45.4, p < .001$), Table 2.

Table 2: Type of firearm by license status.

Is this firearm licensed?	Type of firearm		
	Rifle	Handgun	Shotgun
Yes	92.0%	66.7%	97.2%
No, never	8.0%	20.0%	0.0%
Not now, was once	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%
Do not know	0.0%	13.3%	2.2%
N	25	30	181

It appears that the majority of firearms are kept in breach of licenses. Even if the firearm is licensed, if its primary purpose is not for hunting, as in the case of shotguns and rifles, then the firearm is being kept in breach of its permit (Table 3).

Table 3: Primary purpose of firearm by license status.

	Firearm currently licensed:				Total
	Yes	No, never	Not now, was once	Do not know	
Hunting	23.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	23.3%
Protect a workplace	12.1%	0.0%	0.0%	0.4%	12.5%
Protect the home	51.4%	1.6%	0.4%	4.3%	57.6%
For protection on the street	2.3%	1.6%	0.0%	2.7%	6.6%
N	229	8	1	19	257

The importance of keeping a firearm for protection was made clear in the open ended question concerning the need for a firearm for the “legitimate job” of the person who controlled the weapon (Table: 4).

Table 4: Reasons given by respondents for a person to keep a firearm for their legitimate job, by type of firearm, number of replies.

Does the person need the firearm for his/her legitimate job?	Type of firearm		
	Rifle	Handgun	Shotgun
A Judge	0	0	1
also owns a bar	0	0	1
He has one for his job and two for personal benefits also.	1	0	0
He is now retired, but was a law enforcement officer and owned a security firm when he purchased the gun.	0	0	1
he is self employed	0	0	1
his store	0	0	1
hunting	0	0	1
keep niggaz away	0	1	0
Keep the shop	1	0	0
owns a business	0	0	1
Please note that primary owner is retired.	0	0	1

Does the person need the firearm for his/her legitimate job? protection self employed Sometimes it is used for security at work work as security but not with a security firm Yes She owns a business with large cash in flow yes, business owner Yes, he is a businessman yes, he is a truck driver(sometimes work at night) yes, owns a business Yes, refrigeration shop Yes, s/he is a liquor store employee	Type of firearm		
	Rifle	Handgun	Shotgun
	0	0	1
	0	0	1
	0	0	1
	0	0	1
	0	0	1
	0	0	1
	0	1	0
	0	0	1
	0	0	1
	0	1	0
	0	0	1

Actual responses given

Firearms were kept in a diverse selection of places around the home, in the car and hidden outside the home. Bedrooms and closets were popular places for storing firearms (Table 5).

These places are consistent with easy access in case of the need to protect the home.

Table 5: Place where respondents indicated that the firearm is usually kept.

	Type of firearm		
	Rifle	Handgun	Shotgun
Safe/gun safe	41.7%	29.6%	59.6%
Closet	29.2%	11.1%	9.4%
Gun case	4.2%	3.7%	3.5%
Hidden	0.0%	11.1%	3.5%
Under the bed	8.3%	3.7%	2.9%
Parents bedroom	0.0%	3.7%	1.8%
bedroom	0.0%	0.0%	1.2%
Home	0.0%	0.0%	1.2%
In a safe place	0.0%	0.0%	1.2%
In the bed of my parents	0.0%	0.0%	1.2%
Room	0.0%	3.7%	1.2%
Attic	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%
Behind the dresser	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%
Foyer	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%
Gun safe and sometimes in our car	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%
In a case over head in the man	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%

	Type of firearm		
	Rifle	Hand gun	Shot gun
hole			
In a locked cabinet	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%
In the shop and in the car	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%
Lock up	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%
Locked cabinet	0.0%	3.7%	0.6%
Parents' closet	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%
Special place in my Dad's room	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%
Under the bed or in the closet	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%
Various locations	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%
Vehicle	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%
Will not tell	0.0%	3.7%	0.6%
Buried in the yard	0.0%	3.7%	0.0%
Drawer	0.0%	3.7%	0.0%
In a private special place in the home.	4.2%	0.0%	0.0%
In the ceiling	4.2%	0.0%	0.0%
In the den	0.0%	3.7%	0.0%
In the space ship*	4.2%	0.0%	0.0%
Loaded next to the bed	4.2%	0.0%	0.0%
Only one person knows	0.0%	3.7%	0.0%
Under the mattress	0.0%	3.7%	0.0%
Do not know	0.0%	7.4%	4.7%
N	24	27	171

*This was the exact response given, we do not know what it means

Almost 30% of the firearms were kept loaded, and 18.1% were not sure if the firearm was kept loaded, thus the percentage could be as high as 47.5% (Table 6).

Table 6: Loaded status by type of firearm.

The firearm is usually kept loaded	Type of firearm			Total
	Rifle	Hand gun	Shot gun	
Yes	40.0%	38.7%	26.4%	29.4%
No	48.0%	38.7%	55.5%	52.5%
Do not know	12.0%	22.6%	18.1%	18.1%
N	25	31	182	238

Most guns were inaccessible to other members of the household, but 15.5% of the guns were always accessible to other household members (Table 7).

Table 7: Accessibility of firearm by type of firearm.

The firearm accessible to other members of the household	Type of firearm			Total
	Rifle	Hand gun	Shot gun	
Yes, always	32.0%	16.1%	13.2%	15.5%
Yes, sometimes	20.0%	19.4%	17.0%	17.6%
No	48.0%	64.5%	69.8%	66.8%
N	25	31	182	238

The data above indicate that many guns were not kept in a safe, or even under lock and key or unloaded when not in use. When consideration was made as to whether or not the weapon was (a) licensed, (b) kept under lock and key and (c) kept unloaded and (d) kept primarily for hunting, the majority of rifles and shotguns (over 80%) were also being kept illegally (Table 8). Overall, of the 238 weapons reported, 82.8% were kept illegally.

Table 8: Guns classified by legal status of the gun

Status	Rifle	Hand gun	Shot gun
Kept illegally	68.0%	96.8%	82.4%
Kept legally	32.0%	3.2%	15.4%
Not clear	0.0%	0.0%	2.2%
N	25	31	182

Only hand guns were unambiguously reported as being used in criminal activities and only rifles were definitely not used in criminal acts (Table 9). This contrasted with the use of all types of guns to threaten members of the household (Table 10).

Table 9: Use of firearms in criminal activities

		Type of firearm			Total
		Rifle	Hand gun	Shot gun	
As far as you are aware has the firearm ever been used in a criminal act?	Yes	0.0%	6.5%	0.0%	0.9%
	No	100.0%	80.6%	98.9%	96.6%
	Do not know		12.9%	1.1%	2.6%
N		25	31	179	235

Table 10: Use of firearms to threaten household members

		Type of firearm			Total
		Rifle	Hand gun	Shot gun	
Has this firearm ever been used to threaten any member of the household?	Yes	8.3%	10.0%	1.2%	3.1%
	No	91.7%	90.0%	98.8%	96.9%
N		24	30	170	224

Hunting

Below we focus on firearms used (or which should be used) for hunting as this is the most common type of licensed firearm.

The majority of rifles and shot guns were not used for hunting (Table 11) and not surprisingly, no hand guns were used for hunting. When the firearm was used for hunting, New Providence was the most popular place for this past time (Table 11). Only one shotgun was used on the

firing range on Gladstone Road. The most likely victims of hunters were birds, followed by wild pigs (Table 12).

When people hunted, rifle owners went hunting a median of twice a year and shotgun owners a median of three times a year.

Table 11: Location at which hunting occurred by type of firearm.

	Type of firearm			Total
	Rifle	Hand gun	Shot gun	
Not response, no hunting, no longer hunting	64.0%	100.0%	77.4%	78.9%
Abaco	4.0%		0.5%	0.8%
“All over”			0.5%	0.4%
Andros	12.0%		4.4%	4.6%
Do not know			1.0%	0.8%
Eleuthera	4.0%		0.5%	0.8%
Exuma			1.1%	0.8%
Exuma and Ragged Island			0.5%	0.4%
Family Island (unstated)			0.5%	0.4%
Grand Bahama			0.5%	0.4%
Grand Bahama, Abaco			0.5%	0.4%
“Has not had an opportunity to yet”			0.5%	0.4%
Long Island			1.1%	0.8%
Nassau and some Family islands			0.5%	0.4%
Nassau or Andros			0.5%	0.4%
New Providence	16.0%		7.1%	7.1%
North Eleuthera Current			0.5%	0.4%
“Out in the cays”			0.5%	0.4%
Ragged Island			0.5%	0.4%
Rose Island			0.5%	0.4%
N	25	32	182	238

Table 12: Object of hunting by type of firearm

	Type of firearm		Total
	Rifle	Shotgun	
Birds	85.7%	75.0%	76.6%
Birds & pigs	0.0%	12.5%	10.6%

Wild pigs	14.3%	5.0%	6.4%
Wild life, birds, etc.	0.0%	2.5%	2.1%
Not sure	0.0%	2.5%	2.1%
Nothing	0.0%	2.5%	2.1%
N	7	40	47

Hunting occurs in a number of locations across the country (Table 9). The most common location for hunting was New Providence (8% of 238). This island is the most populous in the country and so may be the least appropriate for hunting with guns as it would be easy for members of the general public to be put at risk.

Not all the respondents hunted on the island on which they usually lived (Table 13). This probably means that guns and ammunition are transported by sea or air, as well on land on these hunting expeditions. The majority of hunters in New Providence travel to other islands to hunt, which is different from hunters on other islands.

Table 13: Location of hunting by usual place of residence of the hunter (52 responses)

Location of hunting	Usual place of residence		
	New Providence	Grand Bahama	Family Island
New Providence	34.6%	0.0%	0.0%
Grand Bahama	1.0%	1.9%	0.0%
Family Island	41.3%	0.0%	19.2%
All over	1.9%	0.0%	0.0%

(Where respondents indicated that they hunted in multiple locations, their count value was divided by the number of locations).

Discussion

The respondents provided information on 238 firearms. In response to the question: “What type of firearm is it?” the survey included an additional 57 responses of which the person either did

not know the type of firearm owned, or did not answer the question. The large number of non-responses to this question should be noted when interpreting the results. If all these firearms were illegal or hand guns, they would have important consequences on some of the inferences we can draw. The problem of non-response when asking respondents to provide, what they may feel to be incriminating data, is to be expected, however, we would hope that despite this limitation, the important findings of this study remain valid.

Hand guns

Granting of special licenses for hand guns is rare, and so for the study to obtain information on any hand guns within the home is important, and the fact that slightly more hand guns than rifles, were reported on, is also of interest. We note that 13.0% of the guns in our sample were hand guns as opposed to 10.5% which were rifles and 76.5% which were shotguns. If the figure of 10.5% corresponds to the number of rifles (1,565), and the 76.5% corresponds to the number of shotguns, then we can estimate the handgun population to be between 2,000 and 3,000, taking into account that not all rifles and shotguns are licensed.

As would be expected, none of the hand guns were used for hunting, and so points to the fact that these guns are exclusively used to protect the owner, his or her family and possessions, and/or may even be used in criminal activities.

Purpose of owning a gun

In theory, the police grant licenses for residents to hunt. Given the size of the country, and the uneven population distribution across the islands, hunting opportunities are limited. This is

indicated by the fact that while New Providence is the most common place for hunting, hunters travel overseas to other islands to hunt. This movement of guns and ammunition from one island to another may also be a cause for concern unless they are transported in ways which are consistent with stringent safety regulations. The study shows that when guns are used for hunting that they are probably going to be taken from one island to another. This movement of guns and ammunition is not without risk. The consequences in failing to transport guns with care has been illustrated in the death of a person while travelling on a boat on a pigeon shoot (Mandies 'in shooting accident', 2010, p 1).

However, most guns were kept for protection. This presumes a belief that gun ownership is a defense against an assault. Although in the United States, Branas, Richmond, Culhane, Have and Wiebe (2009) found no evidence to support this position, the local perception is that gun ownership is an effective means of protection. This technically results in a disconnection between the purpose for which guns are licensed by the police and their actual use. The disconnection between what the law permits and the actual purpose of owning a firearm is receiving more attention in the press as business owners seek easier access to hand guns (Nicolls, 2009) in order to protect themselves, their families and possessions. Of note, debate does not include any reference to the evidence, such as Branas et al. (2009), which would not support the case of liberalizing gun ownership. While most guns are licensed for hunting purposes, few of them are used for hunting, and those which are used, are used infrequently. However, it is clear from the figures presented by Hanna (2005), that handguns, rifles and shotguns have all been used to kill people in robberies (Turnquest, 2011).

Society and the authorities have an ambivalent attitude towards gun ownership, the permit and the gun's use. This is illustrated in the newspaper report in which a shot gun was used to harm an intruder:

Armed with a licensed shotgun, Mr Todd ordered the robber to "freeze" as he tried in vain to "buzz" the door open. Then, according to a member of staff, the robber reached for his gun forcing Mr Todd to fire his first shot, hitting him in the face and sending the man to the ground. He then had to open fire again when the robber attempted to retrieve his gun.

The suspect was handcuffed, questioned by the police and then rushed to hospital. Money was left scattered across the floor.

An employee said: "Honestly, I was just hoping he was dead because this is not the first time we were robbed. This was the first one for the year. My thoughts were just, I hope he was dead", (Nicolls, 2010, p. 1).

The report suggests that because the shotgun was licensed, its use to protect property was acceptable, and also demonstrates the belief that guns are an effective means of protection from potential criminals. It is obvious that the employee was disappointed that the intruder was not actually killed by the shotgun, and there was no mention in the report of police charging Mr. Todd for using his shotgun for a purpose other than hunting. The use of a hunting weapon to protect businesses was considered by some of our respondents as needing the weapon for the owner's "legitimate" job, even though the expectation would be that the purpose for which the license was issued was for hunting. This confusion in the mind of the general public concerning what is the permitted use of a licensed firearm suggests that there is a need for a discussion on the purpose of having gun licenses or whether there should be gun licenses available for additional purposes. The fees for gun licensure are not large (in Barbados the fee is BD\$500.00; Ernst & Young, 2009) and therefore are unlikely to make the licensing a useful generator of

revenue. From the email responses to Nicolls' article, it appears that the debate regarding gun licensure for reasons other than hunting, i.e., protection, would be divisive and this may explain why lawmakers have been unwilling to engage in this debate.

Keeping the gun

While many guns in this study were licensed, it is apparent that most were not kept in the manner required. This would suggest that either such guns should be confiscated or premises need to be inspected to ensure that the weapons are safely kept. A report of a hunter being accidentally killed illustrates this ("Man dies 'in shooting accident'", 2010, p 1). Keeping weapons under beds etc, and loaded, indicates that owners are seeking to have easy access to the weapon, which would be consistent with protecting property. However, such easy access is of concern when these same weapons are used to threaten household members. Given that homes with which weapons are kept are at higher risk of being places undesirable activities occur (Brennen et al, 2010), easy access to weapons may indeed be a danger to the occupants of the household. Media reports of guns being used in domestic arguments supports this concern (Turnquest, 2010).

Summary

This paper highlights some of the inconsistencies between gun ownership and the law. On one hand the licenses are issued for firearm owners to hunt, but clearly society wants weapons to protect property and person. Provided the firearm is licensed, its use or storage appears to be of secondary consideration. Clearly, society needs to resolve some fundamental questions which include:

(a) Does the country wish the citizenry to be armed?

(b) If so, what are the terms and conditions which should apply to the ownership of firearms?

(c) Is there a need to more fully enforce on the restrictions of gun ownership?

It is apparent that the present situation is contradictory. Many people are keeping weapons in breach of the law because the crime rate has become such that non-criminal citizens feel they must own a gun for their and their family's own protection, thus the debate ensues regarding whether there should be legalization of guns ownership for self-protection.

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