

Guns in The Bahamas: (3) The person who controls a gun

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Abstract

Gun ownership has become of increasing concern as the number of people murdered in The Bahamas with guns has increased in recent years. This paper reports the findings of an Internet study that looked at selected characteristics of 267 people who controlled a gun. Most of these people were males (96%). About 3% of the gun owners had used their weapons to threaten household members. Gambling and alcohol abuse were the two most common deviant behaviours of gun owners. Those who controlled handguns were more likely to participate in deviant behaviours than other types of gun owner. These findings point to the need to monitor those who possess handguns.

Introduction

Firearms are the leading cause of homicide in The Bahamas (Hanna, 2005) and both legally and illegally owned are used to harm people (Carroll, Brennen & Hutcheson, 2011). While there is information about those who had control of a gun and used the firearm to kill someone (Hanna, 2005), little appears to be known about the person in the wider Bahamian population who controls a gun. Advocates of gun ownership in the USA and elsewhere claim “is it the person who kills, not the gun” but this is an issue which continues to incite debate and comment, for example: Osio (2011). Such claims make it imperative that we know something about the people who control guns in The Bahamas as well as the purpose to which they put the guns. This last

issue has been addressed by Brennen, Hutcheson and Carroll (2011), and the object of this paper is to look at the person who controls a firearm.

Carroll, Brennen and Hutcheson (2011) have demonstrated that most guns in their study were kept in breach of their permit and so are illegal, even though they are licensed. This automatically raises a concern about the person who controls the firearm as these controllers are potential criminals, if they the police were to formally found to them in breach of their permit. The majority of guns are licensed for the purpose of hunting (Carroll, Brennen & Hutcheson, 2011) but in the US it has been noted that hunters appear to be more violent than people who do not hunt (Flynn, 2002) so this raises the question as why police are willing to arm people who are potentially the more violent in society.

Issues such as these make the study of the persons who are armed a matter of public interest so that policies can be put in place to protect society.

Methodology

The results in this paper come from the survey reported on by Hutcheson, Brennen, Bethel and Carroll (2011) which explains the methodology in detail. Briefly, they devised a survey form which looked at three components of gun ownership:

- (1) Characteristics of the home, economical and behavioural, within the home,
- (2) Characteristics of the person who controls the gun (when more than one gun was in the home, the respondent was asked to given information about just one person who controlled a gun) and
- (3) Information about the gun itself (when more than one gun was in the home, the respondent

was asked to give information about just one gun which was controlled by the person identified in (2)). An outline of the areas covered in the questionnaire is given in Table 1.

Table 1: Outline of the survey form used.

Demographics of the respondent:	Age, sex, citizenship, usual place of residence
About the household:	Income, occurrence of domestic violence, sexual abuse, hilling of companionable animals, hitting of children as a means of discipline, household is considered “loving”.
Guns in the home:	Number, type. On one selected gun (which we term the “reported” firearm): source, license status, availability of gun to be used.
Demographics of the person who controls a gun	Sex, age, upbringing, primary purpose of the firearm (including information on hunting habits), characteristics of the person who controls the gun (criminal activities, behaviours towards other members of the household), employment status.

The survey was posted on Survey Monkey™. In the Spring 2010 students from several Social Science classes contacted people by email to solicit participation in the study. These contacts were also asked to forward the survey link to their friends, thereby using a primary purpose of the firearm technique. Students were given credit for participation in the solicitation of respondents.

The limitations of this approach are explained by Hutcheson, Brennen, Bethel and Carroll (2011). As the method is non-probabilistic, sampling method prevents claims that the respondents were “representative” of the wider Bahamas, but this does not invalidate associations within the respondent group. The data gathered allow a first attempt at describing people who control firearms who are not being detained by law enforcement agencies. In this respect it is to be expected that the findings would contrast with those of Hanna (2005) who describes the perpetrators of homicides in The Bahamas.

Results

The profile is based upon the responses of 267 participants who indicated that there was at least one firearm in the home and another 28 who thought that was at least one firearm in home, (295 in total).

In the case of homes with multiple firearms, respondents were asked to select one gun and answer the questions as they related to the person who controlled that particular firearm.

About the home in which the person who controls the firearm lives

The median household income based on 259 responses was \$49,376; 5.0% had a household income of less than \$10,000 and 13.1% had a household income of over \$100,000.

Of 291 replies, 84.9% thought that they lived in a “loving” household, but 32.2% (of 286 replies) indicated that domestic violence was present in the home. Sexual abuse definitely occurred in 8.6% (of 291 homes), and had probably occurred in further 3.1%. Cats and dogs were kept in 163 homes with guns, and the animals were hit in 37.4% of these homes and in an additional 1.2% the animals had been injured through intentional physical harm.

The majority, 96.1% (n=283), of those who controlled a firearm were male.

About the childhood of the home of the person who controls the gun

Only 14.3% of those who controlled firearms had not been subjected to corporal punishment as a child, and 2.2% had been abused (Table 2).

Table 2: Use of violence to train the person who controls the gun in his/her childhood.

As a child was the person hit as a form or discipline?	Percentage
No	14.3%
Yes, only when naughty	34.4%
Yes, sometimes	27.5%
Yes often	7.7%
Yes, and abused	2.2%
Do not know	13.9%
N	273

Most of those who controlled a firearm were brought up in homes with a father as only 34.9% were brought up in homes where his/her father was usually absent. Criminality was perpetuated by household members from 3.7% homes when this person was growing up and 24.7% of these persons as children lived in the households which had a firearm.

About the person who controls the gun

The majority of persons who controlled the gun had a post-high school education (Table 3).

Their median age was 44.4 years, however, it should be noted that 1.8% of the sample were 20 or under and 6.7% aged over 60. Most of those who controlled a firearm had a steady full-time job (90.7% of 269 responses). Of 247 responses, 74.9% of those who controlled of a firearm did not need it for their legitimate job. Of those who did need the firearm for their job (62), 91.2% were law enforcement officers and the remainder were farmers.

Table 3: Highest level of education of the person who controls a firearm

Highest level of education of the person who controls a firearm	Percentage
Primary school	0.7%
Junior school	1.5%
High school	21.8%
Post-high school/technical	22.2%
Some college/university	20.0%
College/university degree	20.0%
Post-university/college degree/professional qualification	11.6%
Do not know	2.2%
N	275

Gambling and misuse of alcohol were the two most common of the deviant behaviours included in the study (Table 4). A small percentage of those who controlled guns were criminals and/or under investigation by the police.

Table 4: Activities of persons who control a firearm

	Yes	N
Participates in gambling?	14.4%	270
Drinks alcohol in excess?	8.9%	269
Physically harms any member of the household?	5.9%	271
Uses illegal drugs?	5.5%	273
Used gun to threaten a member of the household?	3.1%	257
Has a criminal record?	3.0%	269
Has been charged but is out on bail	1.9%	270
Use the gun to commit crimes?	1.8%	271
Participates in illegal drug trafficking?	1.8%	271
Belong to a gang?	1.5%	271
Sexually abuses any member of the household?	1.5%	270
Has been charged but is in custody?	1.1%	271

Many of the handguns were stated to be used for the employment of the person who controlled the firearm (Table 5).

Table 5: Need of a firearm for legitimate job.

Firearm needed as part of the person's employment	Type of firearm			Total
	Rifle	Handgun	Shotgun	
No	70.8%	50.0%	79.8%	74.9%
Yes, is a law enforcement officer	29.2%	46.4%	17.8%	22.8%
Yes, is a farmer	0.0%	3.6%	2.5%	2.3%
N	24	28	163	215

Hand guns are typically illegal, so Table 6 examines behaviour by the type of firearm the person controlled, and for clarity, we concentrate of those firearms which were not needed as part of a person's legitimate job (i.e.: those answering "no" to the question in Table 5), and compare handguns to other firearms. All but one of the undesirable behaviours included in Table 6 were more often associated with those who controlled a hand gun than other types of weapon. In addition, domestic violence was more common (57.1% of 14 homes) when the firearm was a handgun than another type of firearm (28.3% of 145 homes), OR (homes with a handgun vs. homes without a handgun) = 3.38 95% CL[1.11-10.35].

Table 6: Behaviour of the person who controlled a firearm by type of weapon (includes only those weapons not required for the persons legitimate job).

	Type of firearm		OR	95% CL	
	Handgun	Other firearms	Handvother guns	LL	UL
Person who controls this weapon:					
Is a member of a gang	0.0%	0.0%	-	-	-
Uses illegal drugs	50.0%	1.4%	72.50	12.66	415.10
Has been charged but is out on bail	23.1%	0.7%	43.80	4.17	460.24
Participates in illegal drug trafficking	23.1%	0.0%	15.70	8.62	28.60
Has a criminal record	28.6%	0.0%	15.50	8.51	28.23
Has been charged but is in custody	15.4%	0.0%	14.36	8.12	25.40
Physically harms any member of the household	28.6%	2.8%	14.10	3.06	64.93
Sexually abuses anyone in the household	14.3%	0.0%	13.16	7.64	22.68
Used the gun to threaten a household member	15.4%	1.4%	12.55	1.61	97.83
Gun used to commit a crime	7.1%	0.0%	12.23	7.27	20.59
Drinks alcohol in access	35.7%	5.6%	9.44	2.56	34.84
Participates in gambling	30.8%	12.3%	3.16	0.88	11.33

Discussion

Investigation of firearm ownership and use is a sensitive issue, particularly as most handguns are outlawed. Consequently, those who have handguns may wish not to either participate in the study or respond truthfully. In addition, there may be a genuine confusion in the minds of respondents as to the legitimacy of the gun in relation to the job of the person who controls the

gun. This limitation is seen when examining Tables 4 and 6, where owners who were members of a gang also had a gun for their legitimate job. This seems unlikely and would suggest that some of the guns, which were claimed as being held “legitimately”, may well not have been so. Further, given the way in which the sample was obtained, respondents were not necessarily the controllers of guns and so their responses would be limited as to how well they knew the behaviours and habits of the person who controlled the gun. Further, the non-random method of the survey means that the results may not be generalizable to the wider population of gun owners in The Bahamas. Notwithstanding these limitations, the data start to shed light on an important group of society, about which little is currently known.

The households in which guns were reported are amongst the more wealthy homes in The Bahamas. In the 2000 census, only 26% of household income had a total income of \$50,000 (Bahamas Department of Statistics, 2002). This may help to explain why the study found that the majority of persons who controlled the gun had a continued their education after leaving high school and why this group had a median of just over 44 years. Over 90% of those who controlled a gun were fully employed. This is consistent with the reported unemployment rate of 14.2% in 2009 (Bahamas Department of Statistics, 2009). The occurrence of domestic violence in these homes was higher than that reported in three of the four studies presented by Carroll, Fielding, Brennen and Hutcheson (2011) but the occurrences of other forms of violence did not appear to be particularly different to those reported in earlier studies such as Plumridge and Fielding (2009). These indicate that those who controlled the gun were typically middle aged employed males with a post-high school education.

The homes in which controllers of firearms were brought up appeared to be broadly similar to homes in the wider population. In the 2000 census, 63.6% of homes were headed by a male (Bahamas Department of Statistics, 2002), the percentage of homes having a gun was similar to that reported in several studies reported by Hutcheson, Brennen, Bethel and Carroll (2011) and the percentage of homes which included a criminal was similar to that reported by Brennen et al. (2010). Consequently, there is no evidence from this study that anything in the childhood of the gun controller may have predisposed him to having a gun in adulthood. However, to examine this further, we would require information from those who do not control guns, and expand the range of possible mediating factors.

The controller of weapons is almost exclusively a male characteristic. While this bias has been reported elsewhere (for example in the USA), the extent of the bias in this sample exceeded that found in a 2005 poll in the USA (Carroll, 2005). This may reflect a tendency upon the part of the survey participant to report merely on the weapons controlled by males. However, this finding could be collaborated to some extent using information held by the Royal Bahamas Police Force on firearm licenses, however, the application does not specially require the sex of the applicant (Box 1).

Box 1: Personal details required when applying for a firearm license.

APPLICATION#	Rule 12 Form xi	
	<p>ROYAL BAHAMAS POLICE FORCE APPLICATION FOR A GUN LICENCE UNDER THE FIREARMS ACT (213)</p>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; width: 100%; height: 100%; display: flex; align-items: center; justify-content: center;"> PLACE PHOTOS HERE </div>
PERSONAL INFORMATION		
SURNAME	FIRST NAME	
MIDDLE NAME	MAIDEN NAME:	
ADDRESS		
P.O. BOX	PHONE (HM)	PHONE(WK)
D.O.B.(mm/dd/yyyy):	AGE (at last birthday)	
PLACE OF BIRTH	NATIONALITY	
PASSPORT#	DRIVER'S LICENCE#	NATIONAL INSURANCE#

People who controlled a weapon participated in all the selected activities which would be a cause for concern (Table 4). As has been stated by Hanna (2005), people on bail have killed people. This study indicates that people on bail continue to have access to firearms which helps to account for the fact that such people are in a position to kill people. These findings suggest that persons on bail, and possibly those with a conviction, should be denied the right to control arms. Although in the Caribbean “drugs and firearms go hand in hand” (Agozino, Bowling, Ward and St Bernard, 2009, p.293) this study indicated that gambling (which is probably participation in what is termed “numbers”) was the most common deviant behaviour included in this study, and

this would be expected as guns and illegal gambling are also associated (for example: Olesker, 1994 and Peppas, 2010). Webster and Vernick (2009) have pointed out that the abuse of alcohol and access to firearms is a cause for concern due to the way people can behave when intoxicated.

However, what may be of greater concern, is that although some person who controlled participated in all the deviant behaviours included in this study, the rate of participation was always higher when the person controlled a handgun. This would suggest that people who control hand guns are likely to be at greater risk of participating in deviant behaviours than those who control rifles or shotguns. These findings reinforce the policy of restricting handguns. The results also mean that people who are charged with unauthorised possession of a handgun should be carefully monitored in order to protect society and households from the undesirable activities in which such people participate. Therefore, this study suggests that the current policy of tagging violent offenders on bail (Bahamas Information Service, 2010) should be expanded to include those who control hand guns, irrespective of other charges which may have been brought against them.

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