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**Violence Policy Center**

# **The Long-Term Decline of Gun Ownership in America: 1973 to 2018**

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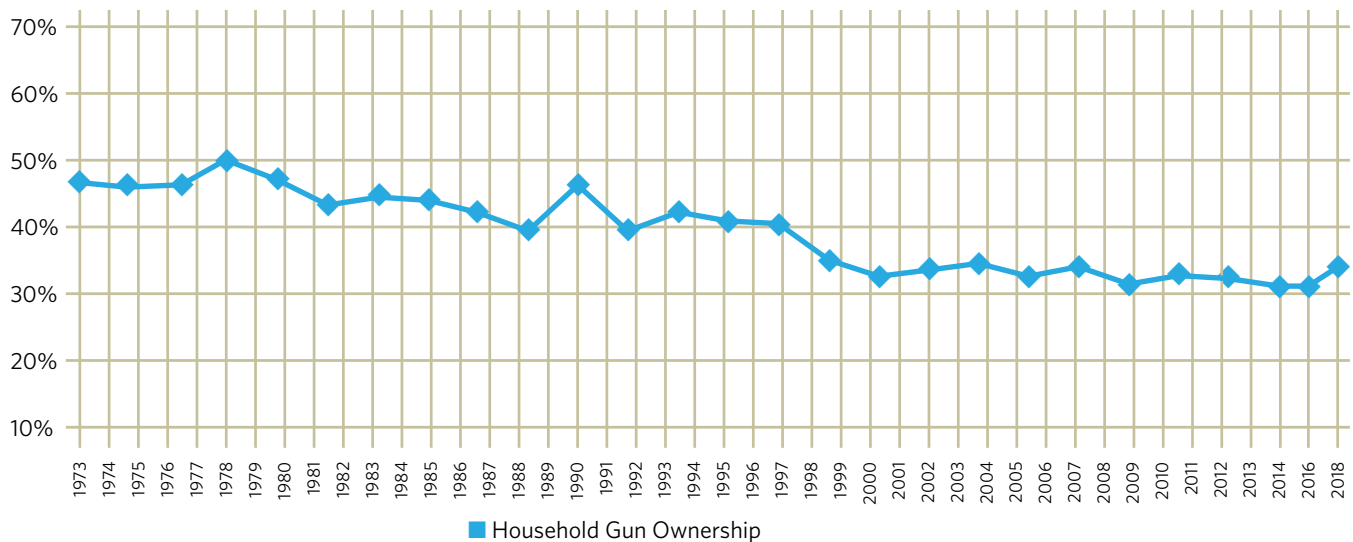
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# THE LONG-TERM DECLINE OF GUN OWNERSHIP IN AMERICA: 1973 TO 2018

Since the mid-1970s, gun ownership in America has declined steadily and now remains relatively stagnant.

This is the unavoidable conclusion from comprehensive, national data spanning 45 years contained in the General Social Survey (GSS) conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago.<sup>1</sup>

## GRAPHIC ONE: THE CONTINUING DECLINE IN HOUSEHOLD GUN OWNERSHIP



1 Gun ownership data contained in this report was calculated by The Crime Lab at the University of Chicago utilizing data from the General Social Survey (GSS) conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago. The Crime Lab (<https://urbanlabs.uchicago.edu/labs/crime>) “partners with civic and community leaders to design, test, and scale promising programs and policies to reduce crime and violence.” NORC at the University of Chicago (<http://www.norc.org/Pages/default.aspx>) “is an objective non-partisan research institution that delivers reliable data and rigorous analysis to guide critical programmatic, business, and policy decisions.” According to NORC, “The GSS gathers data on contemporary American society in order to monitor and explain trends and constants in attitudes, behaviors, and attributes. Hundreds of trends have been tracked since 1972. In addition, since the GSS adopted questions from earlier surveys, trends can be followed for up to 80 years. The GSS contains a standard core of demographic, behavioral, and attitudinal questions, plus topics of special interest. Among the topics covered are civil liberties, crime and violence, intergroup tolerance, morality, national spending priorities, psychological well-being, social mobility, and stress and traumatic events. Altogether the GSS is the single best source for sociological and attitudinal trend data covering the United States. It allows researchers to examine the structure and functioning of society in general as well as the role played by relevant subgroups and to compare the United States to other nations. The GSS aims to make high-quality data easily accessible to scholars, students, policy makers, and others, with minimal cost and waiting” (<http://gss.norc.org/About-The-GSS>).

## HOUSEHOLD GUN OWNERSHIP

Since 1973, the General Social Survey has asked the question: “Do you happen to have in your home (if house: or garage) any guns or revolvers?” The GSS data available from that year to 2018<sup>2</sup> includes information on overall household gun ownership as well as participation in hunting.

### OVERALL HOUSEHOLD GUN OWNERSHIP

- From 1977 to 2018, the percentage of American households that reported having any guns in the home dropped by 32 percent.
- During this period household gun ownership hit its peak in 1977, when more than half (50.4 percent) of American households reported having any guns. By 2018, 34.3 of American households reported having any guns in the home, a drop of 16 percentage points.
- In 2018, just over a third of American households reported having a gun in the home.
- In 2014, household gun ownership hit its lowest level ever recorded by the GSS (30.8 percent). And while this percentage increased slightly in both 2016 (31.0 percent) and 2018 (34.3 percent), it is not statistically significant.

### GRAPHIC TWO: HOUSEHOLD GUN OWNERSHIP IN THE UNITED STATES, 1973 TO 2018

Year	Percent of Adults in Households with Guns	Year	Percent of Adults in Households with Guns	Year	Percent of Adults in Households with Guns	Year	Percent of Adults in Households with Guns
1973	47.0	1985	44.2	1994	40.6	2008	34.0
1974	46.2	1987	42.2	1996	40.1	2010	31.4
1976	46.5	1988	39.9	1998	34.7	2012	33.0
1977	50.4	1989	46.0	2000	32.4	2014	30.8
1980	47.3	1990	42.2	2002	33.6	2016	31.0
1982	43.6	1991	39.6	2004	34.5	2018	34.3
1984	44.9	1993	42.0	2006	32.9		

2 Data contained in chart represent years for which the question was asked during the period cited.

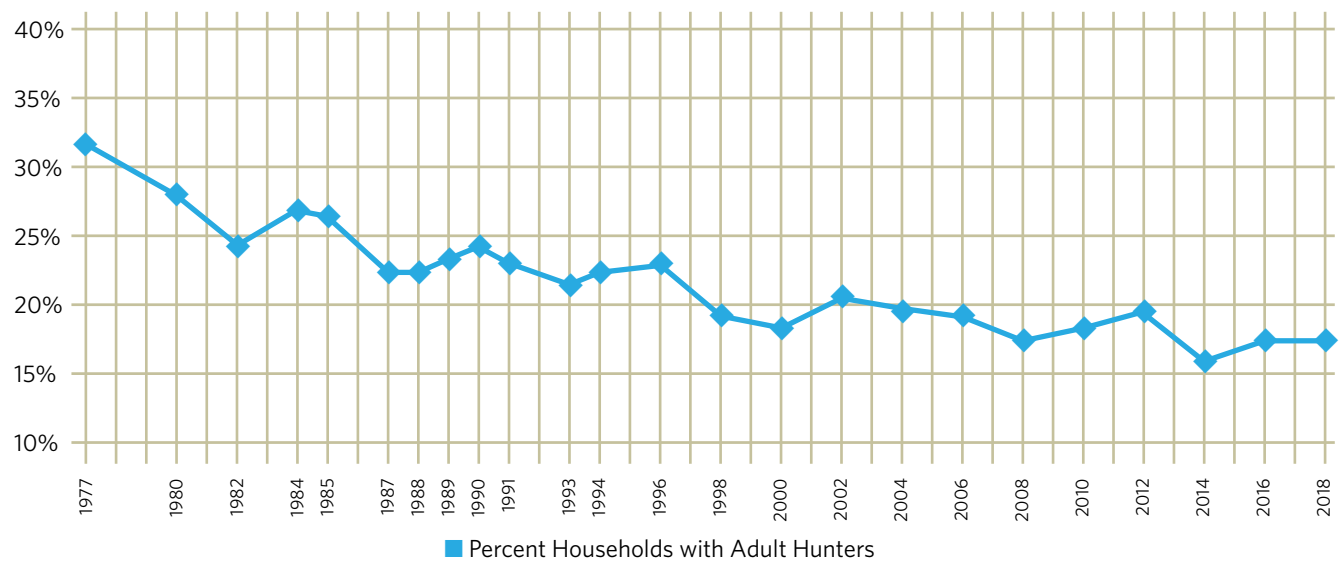
## DECLINE IN HUNTING

One of the primary reasons for the decline in household firearms ownership has been the decrease in the popularity of hunting. In 1977, 31.6 percent of adults lived in a household where the respondent, a spouse, or both were hunters (see Graphic Three). By 2018 this number had dropped by nearly half, to 17.0 percent.<sup>3</sup>

**GRAPHIC THREE: THE DECLINE IN HUNTING, 1977 TO 2018**

Year	Percent Households with Adult Hunters	Year	Percent Households with Adult Hunters	Year	Percent Households with Adult Hunters	Year	Percent Households with Adult Hunters
1977	31.6	1988	22.1	1996	23.1	2008	17.6
1980	28.3	1989	23.3	1998	19.2	2010	18.2
1982	24.7	1990	24.2	2000	18.6	2012	19.7
1984	26.5	1991	22.9	2002	20.2	2014	15.3
1985	26.1	1993	20.9	2004	19.4	2016	17.1
1987	22.2	1994	22.0	2006	17.2	2018	17.0

**GRAPHIC FOUR: THE DECLINE IN HUNTING, 1977 TO 2018**



<sup>3</sup> Respondents are asked, "Do you (or does your [husband/wife]) go hunting?"

## PERSONAL GUN OWNERSHIP

Since 1980, General Social Survey respondents who state that they have a gun in their home have then been asked, “Do any of these guns personally belong to you?” The GSS data for the years 1980 to 2018<sup>4</sup> offer information on overall personal gun ownership as well as male and female gun ownership.

### GRAPHIC FIVE: PERSONAL GUN OWNERSHIP, 1980 TO 2018

Year	Percent Overall Personal Ownership	Year	Percent Overall Personal Ownership	Year	Percent Overall Personal Ownership
1980	28.1	1991	27.0	2006	21.6
1982	27.4	1993	29.3	2008	23.5
1984	25.3	1994	28.2	2010	20.6
1985	30.5	1996	27.1	2012	21.8
1987	26.0	1998	22.4	2014	22.4
1988	24.9	2000	22.3	2016	20.5
1989	27.1	2002	26.3	2018	21.9
1990	28.5	2004	25.2		

### OVERALL PERSONAL GUN OWNERSHIP

- From 1985 to 2018, the percentage of Americans who reported personally owning a gun dropped more than 28 percent.
- During this period, personal gun ownership hit its peak in 1985, when 30.5 percent of Americans reported personally owning a gun. By 2018, this number had dropped nearly nine percentage points to 21.9 percent.
- In 2018, slightly more than one out of five Americans reported personally owning a gun.

<sup>4</sup> Data contained in chart represent years for which the question was asked during the period cited.

## MALE GUN OWNERSHIP

### GRAPHIC SIX: MALE GUN OWNERSHIP, 1980 TO 2018

Year	Percent Male Personal Ownership	Year	Percent Male Personal Ownership	Year	Percent Male Personal Ownership
1980	50.3	1991	47.3	2006	34.8
1982	44.9	1993	48.3	2008	38.4
1984	45.0	1994	46.1	2010	32.9
1985	51.5	1996	44.0	2012	35.7
1987	44.1	1998	37.6	2014	35.1
1988	43.8	2000	37.5	2016	32.6
1989	48.8	2002	37.5	2018	35.8
1990	52.1	2004	40.8		

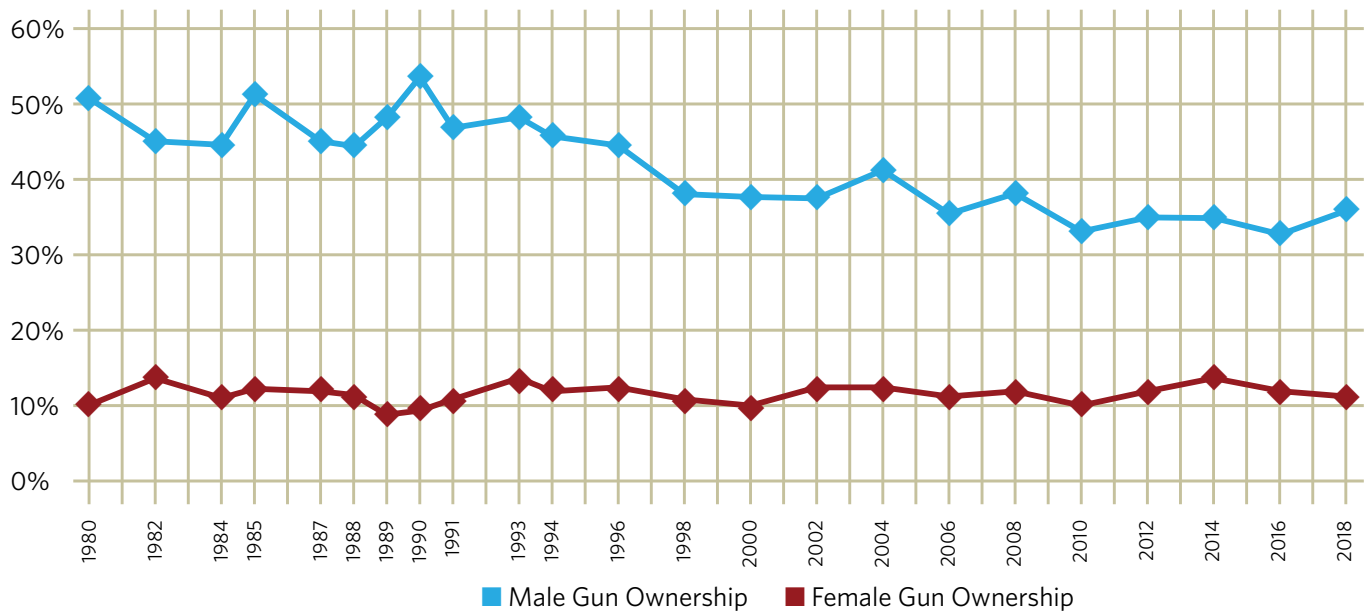
- From 1980 to 2018, the percentage of males who reported personally owning a gun dropped 29 percent.
- During this period, male gun ownership hit its peak in 1990, when 52.1 percent of males reported personally owning a gun. By 2018, this number had dropped 16 percentage points to 35.8 percent.

## FEMALE GUN OWNERSHIP

### GRAPHIC SEVEN: FEMALE GUN OWNERSHIP, 1980 TO 2018

Year	Percent Female Personal Ownership	Year	Percent Female Personal Ownership	Year	Percent Female Personal Ownership
1980	10.1	1991	10.0	2006	10.6
1982	13.7	1993	13.5	2008	10.8
1984	10.7	1994	12.5	2010	9.8
1985	11.8	1996	12.5	2012	10.3
1987	11.8	1998	10.6	2014	11.7
1988	11.0	2000	9.3	2016	10.8
1989	9.2	2002	11.8	2018	10.5
1990	9.3	2004	11.6		

## GRAPHIC EIGHT: MALE AND FEMALE GUN OWNERSHIP, 1980 TO 2018



In 2018, 10.5 percent of females reported personally owning a firearm. In its 2015 report *Trends in Gun Ownership in the United States, 1972-2014*, NORC noted, “Personal ownership of firearms has not appreciably change[d] for women from 1980 through 2014. Between 9% and 14% of women personally owned a firearm during those years and there is *no meaningful trend in the level of personal ownership*.”<sup>5</sup> [Emphasis added.] This remains true for the 2018 data.

The 2015 NORC study also noted that men “are much more likely to personally own a firearm than women are, but the gender gap has narrowed *due to a decline in personal firearm ownership among men*,” *not an increase among women*. [Emphasis added.] In 1980, 50.3 percent of men owned a firearm while 10.1 percent of women owned a gun resulting in a gender gap of 40.2 percentage points. By 2018, male gun ownership had dropped more than 14 percentage points from 1980 to 35.8 percent, while female gun ownership in 2018 remained relatively stagnant at 10.5 percent, resulting in a gender gap of 25.3 points.

5 *Trends in Gun Ownership in the United States, 1972-2014*, Tom W. Smith and Jaesok Son, NORC at the University of Chicago, March 2015 ([http://www.norc.org/PDFs/GSS%20Reports/GSS\\_Trends%20in%20Gun%20Ownership\\_US\\_1972-2014.pdf](http://www.norc.org/PDFs/GSS%20Reports/GSS_Trends%20in%20Gun%20Ownership_US_1972-2014.pdf)).



## BLACK AND HISPANIC GUN OWNERSHIP<sup>6</sup>

### GRAPHIC NINE: BLACK GUN OWNERSHIP, 1980 TO 2018

Year	Percent Black Personal Ownership	Year	Percent Black Personal Ownership	Year	Percent Black Personal Ownership
1980	16	1991	21	2006	17
1982	23	1993	23	2008	13
1984	16	1994	22	2010	10
1985	22	1996	17	2012	14
1987	18	1998	14	2014	12
1988	13	2000	12	2016	13
1989	16	2002	8	2018	16
1990	16	2004	19		

- In both 1980 and 2018, the percentage of Blacks who reported personally owning a gun was 16 percent. During this period, personal gun ownership for Blacks ranged from a low of eight percent to a high of 23 percent. Overall, personal gun ownership by Blacks during the period surveyed has not appreciably changed.

### GRAPHIC TEN: HISPANIC GUN OWNERSHIP, 2000 TO 2018

Year	Percent Hispanic Personal Ownership	Year	Percent Hispanic Personal Ownership	Year	Percent Hispanic Personal Ownership
2000	5	2008	6	2016	8
2002	11	2010	5	2018	12
2004	7	2012	13		
2006	8	2014	13		

- In 2000 (the first year in which Hispanic gun ownership was measured by the GSS), five percent of Hispanics reported personally owning a gun. In 2018, this percentage was reported as 12 percent. As seen in the table above, during the 19-year period during which personal Hispanic gun ownership was measured, the percentage fluctuated between five and 13 percent. This is due in part to the relatively small sample surveyed by the GSS. Overall, personal gun ownership by Hispanics is estimated to be approximately in the 10 percent range and has not appreciably changed during the period surveyed.

<sup>6</sup> Black and Hispanic categories are not mutually exclusive.

## REASONS FOR THE DECLINE IN GUN OWNERSHIP IN THE UNITED STATES

Key factors contributing to the continuing decline in household and personal gun ownership in America include the following.

- The aging of the current-gun owning population, primarily white males, and a lack of interest in guns by youth.
- The end of military conscription.
- The decreasing popularity of hunting.
- Land-use issues that limit hunting and other shooting activities.
- Environmental and zoning issues that force shooting ranges to close and limit new range construction.
- The increase in single-parent homes headed by women.



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