

**RACE AND PISTOL ACCESS: VARIATIONS AMONG POOR MALES****J. Sherwood Williams, John H. McGrath, and Ann Creighton-Zollar  
Virginia Commonwealth University****ABSTRACT**

We examine factors related to pistol access among urban, low income, males. Because of the high usage of pistols in homicides, robbery and assaults within the African American population, one might suspect that this population has greater access to pistols than their white counterpart. By highlighting differences between poor urban African American and white male pistol owners, we hope to better understand racial variation in lethal violence. The data for this study were gathered by the National Opinion Research Center as part of their General Social Surveys. Several surveys conducted between 1973 and 1987 were combined for this analysis. From these surveys 410 low income urban males who had access to a pistol were isolated for analysis. It is from the population this sample represents that the highest percentage of gun related violent crime is concentrated. Our findings show that low income, urban, African American males were more likely to have easier access to pistols than their white counterparts. This relationship persisted in all of the variables examined. African American males who used alcohol were twice as likely as whites to own pistols. Among those who frequently socialized in places where alcohol was served, African American pistol access, in their households, was eight times higher than it was for whites.

**INTRODUCTION**

Although African Americans represent a disproportionate proportion of "actors" in gun related crime statistics, both as victims and offenders, little published research on household firearms access exists about this population. Calls for a more intensive examination of African American gun owners have not drawn much response (Clark 1984; Kleck 1984; Watts, Watts 1981). The most comprehensive examination of this topic concludes that race is not a useful predictor of gun ownership (Wright, Rossi, Daly 1983). There is no denying, however, that firearms contribute to the problems of low income urban African Americans. The most visible firearms related problems are homicide, robbery and assault and how these events affect the economic, social and psychological attributes of victims, offenders, their families and communities (Cook 1983; Seitz 1972; Wright et al 1983).

In this study, we examine life style and attitudinal factors as they relate to low income urban pistol owners. We focus on variations between African American and white males. This segment of the population was selected for study because it accounts for the vast majority of firearms misuse in the United States (U.S. Department of Justice 1990; Wright et al 1983). Although firearms are frequently misused by Mexican Americans and Puerto Rican Americans, they were not included in this study because their representation in the data set used was limited. In other words, there were not enough cases to seriously examine these ethnic groups.

Survey data suggests that firearms are present in only about a third of African American households. By contrast, there are

firearms in nearly half the white households. When ownership is narrowed to only pistols, however, little difference is found between African Americans and whites (Williams, McGrath 1978; Wright, Marston 1975). In 1989, the U. S. Census reported there were 8.6 million African American households in the United States; thus, 2.7 million households have at least one firearm, and 1.7 million households have at least a pistol (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1990). The problem is even greater in the view of Wright et al (1983), who estimated there were from 100 to 140 million privately owned guns in the United States, 30 percent of which were pistols. If these firearms were spread, proportionately, among the races, African American households would possess about 14 million guns, of which some four million would be pistols. The theoretical issue underlying these figures is, of course, the accessibility of firearms. Most of those who have examined the accessibility issue underline the fact that moments of high emotional volatility can go in an unplanned direction if a weapon is within reach. Consider, for instance, the association of murder with knives, which appears to be directly related to family arguments that take place in the kitchen (Berkowitz 1968; Berkowitz, Lepage 1967; Cook 1983; Wright et al 1983).

Although African Americans constitute only 13 percent of the population, they account for approximately 47 percent of the 1988 arrests for violent crimes (Maguire, Pastore, Flanagan 1993). More than 150,000 African Americans were arrested in 1988 for crimes involving firearms. African Americans also are more likely than whites to be victims of violent crimes. In 1988 it was estimated that more

than 250,000 victims of firearms related crimes were African American (McGuire, Flanagan 1991; U.S. Department of Justice 1990). During the 1980's, the homicide rates for African American males between 15 and 24 years of age rose 66 percent. Nearly all (95%) of these homicides were a result of gunshots. The Centers for Disease Control project that about 5 percent of African American males is likely to die as a result of being shot (Dumas 1991; Ingram, Feldman, Fingerhut 1992).

Considering the National Safety Council's data (1979), we estimate that annually an additional 19,000 African Americans suffer directly as a result of firearm-related suicides, accidental deaths and injuries (Sloan, Rivera, Reay, Ferris 1990). The effects of firearms misuse is even greater when we add the crime data involving firearms. Data from 1988 suggest the direct effects of gun violence extend to more than 350,000 African Americans. Since parents, spouses, children, and other relatives are directly affected, it is not unrealistic to estimate that at least two million other African Americans are annually effected by the improper use of firearms (close to 7 percent of the African American population).

We would expect to find a high level of consciousness to the dangers of guns and their misuse in this population. Survey data confirm this expectation. Indeed, African Americans are more fearful of firearm related violence and favor stricter gun laws than do whites (Braungart, Braugart, Hoyer 1980; Maguire et al 1993; Research and Forecasts 1980). Fear of crime affects behavior in a variety of ways. For instance, people avoid areas known for high crime rates. Fearful persons are less likely to go out at night and when they do go out they are more likely to take precautions, such as taking dogs, knives, sprays, whistles and/or guns with them (Gallup 1981).

In contrast to whites, African Americans have been found to be more prone toward personally defending their own person and property and less likely to depend on the police for such protection (Feagin 1970; Greenwood, Wadycki 1973; Wintersmith 1974). Several studies have found that African Americans often have strained relations with the legal system, are more sensitive than whites to being taken advantage of and have a greater tendency to possess guns, which they perceive will help them to cope with such situations (Nappier 1979; Schultz 1962; Seitz

1972; Wolfgang, Ferracutti 1967). This does not appear to be due to being more violent but, rather, to a heightened sense of individualism or lack of trust in the system (a sense that one must "do" for one's self). Fear of victimization and/or a cultivated distrustful view of the public may have two results. First would be a desire to limit the access of firearms. Secondly, in contrast, individuals may want to possess a firearm to protect and control their own environment.

Seitz (1972) suggests that firearms are an integral part of the African American culture. If this is true, it is a relatively recent phenomenon, for before the Civil War, African Americans were prohibited from owning or possessing firearms in the South for fear of slave revolts. Shortly after the civil war it became fashionable for southern African American males, like their white counterparts, to openly carry guns. Guns, it seems, became symbols of power and control (Kennett, Anderson 1975). This activity, however, stopped when states enacted new "Black Codes," prohibiting African Americans from possessing firearms (Kennett, Anderson 1975; Kessler 1984; Trelease 1971). Today, however, guns are the preferred weapons of choice within the African American population (Mann 1990).

Research on firearms ownership suggests a variety of factors may explain variations in African American gun access. Structural variables found positively associated with household gun ownership include, age, gender, region of residence and population size in the community of residence (Newton, Zimring 1969; Wright et al 1983). Two social psychological variables found positively related to firearm ownership are "tolerance of the use of force" and distrust of "others," (Lizotte, Bordua 1980; Williams, McGrath 1976, 1978; Wright et al 1983).

Among the life experience factors found related to gun ownership are arrest and victimization status (Schultz 1962; Williams, Marolla, McGrath 1981; Wright et al 1983). Although the use of alcohol has not been shown to be directly related to gun ownership, alcohol is a known facilitator of violence (Collins 1988; Pittman 1974; U.S. Department of Justice 1988).

In this study, we examine the relationship between pistol accessibility and race among urban dwelling low income males, controlling for variables previously found related to gun ownership. Given the disproportionate

**Table 1: Percentage of Poor Males in High Risk Violence Categories by Race**

High Risk Groups	Whites	African Americans	% Diff	P <
Use Alcohol	74	61	13	.001
Frequently Socialize in Bars or Taverns	28	25	3	.004
High Approval of Force	54	41	12	.001
Distrust of "Others"	51	82	-31	.001
Lowest Third of Family Incomes	20	32	-12	.001
Victimized	8	14	- 6	.001
Arrested	11	15	- 5	.001

representation of African Americans males in gun related crimes, we might conclude that African Americans have greater access to pistols than their white counterparts. By highlighting differences between poor urban African American and white male pistol owners, we hope better to understand any racial variation in gun related violence.

## METHODS

The data for this study were gathered by the National Opinion Research Center as part of their General Social Surveys. The number of pertinent variables we can examine is, of course, limited to what these surveys covered. Response to a question about the presence of pistols in the respondents' home was available from nine surveys done between 1973 and 1987. By combining these surveys, we could identify a subsample of 410 urban males whose annual total family income was in the lowest third of the sample (less than \$20,000 in 1991 dollars). It is documented that the highest percentage of violent crimes is concentrated in this population (Curtis 1975; Luckenbill, Doyle 1989).

### Sample and Data Collection

The sampling designs in the surveys varied over the years. In 1972 and 1974, probability sampling was used to the block level, and then quota sampling was used. In 1976, half the sample was selected as done in the previous surveys and half was selected using a full probability procedure. Surveys done after 1976 have used full probability sampling procedures. For more details on the sampling procedures, including information on sampling error, the reader should see Appendix A of the Cumulative Codebook (Davis, Smith 1988). In all years, the data were collected via face-to-face interviews by trained interviewers, administering a structured questionnaire.

Although the combined sample is large,

many questions examined were not asked of the entire sample. This led to low frequencies and, thus, it was necessary to dichotomize our predictor variables to guarantee enough cases for analysis. Even with this procedure, the frequencies in several categories of our predictor variables are small.

### Operationalization

**Access to Pistol:** The dependent variable was measured by asking respondents if there was a firearm in their home. If they responded "yes," they were asked if they had a pistol in their home. Household ownership of pistols is clearly an indicator of access to that type of weapon. Missing values, "don't know" and "refused" answers, for all.

Each of the following variables has been found to be related, both directly and indirectly, to violence in the United States. Persons being in the "high risk" category of these variables have been found to have experienced greater violence than have their counterparts. For example, the consumption of alcohol or frequenting places where alcohol is served has been found to be related to violence experience (Collins 1988). Using Collin's (1995) conceptualization, these variables may be considered "violence facilitators." That is, the greater the probability that these factors are present, the higher the probability of violence variables in this study, are not used in the analyses.

**Alcohol Use:** Respondents were asked "Do you ever have occasion to use any alcoholic beverage such as liquor, wine, or beer, or are you a total abstainer?" Although whites were more likely than African Americans to indicate use of alcohol, the difference was significant at the .001 level (see Table 1).

**Socialize in Bars:** To the question of how often they "Go to a bar or tavern," seven response categories were offered ranging from almost every day to never. For this analysis, we dichotomized the distribution of responses

**Table 2: Zero-order and Conditional Relationships Between Race and Pistol Ownership**

	Whites		African Americans		Gamma	P<
	%	N	%	N		
Zero-Order	10	268	19	142	.354	.006
<b>Conditions</b>						
Alcohol Use						
No	4	45	7	28	.246	.312
Yes	7	140	20	77	.518	.004
Socialize in Bar						
Low	4	79	12	34	.543	.054
High	3	68	24	21	.823	.001
Force						
Low	9	89	14	66	.230	.181
High	15	28	21	28	.228	.202
Arrested						
No	16	83	16	31	.017	.476
Yes	15	39	33	21	.467	.055
Victimized						
No	15	171	22	98	.257	.052
Yes	8	25	26	19	.608	.052
Distrust "Others"						
Low	13	77	15	13	.098	.408
High	11	109	17	93	.254	.103

on this item at the median (i.e., once a month or more "more frequent," and others "less frequent"). This was done to ensure enough cases for analysis in each grouping. Again, whites engaged in this activity more often than did African Americans and the difference was significant at the .004 level.

**Trust in "Others":** This dimension was measured by asking, "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?" African Americans were significantly more likely than whites to respond the "you can't be too careful" ( $p < .001$ ).

**Support of Force:** Summated responses to five-questions measure this variable. The questions ask for degree of approval of an adult male striking a male stranger in five separate situations, ranging in degree of provocation. "High" and "low" approval is based on whether the summated responses are above or below the index median. Whites were significantly higher ( $p < .001$ ) on this dimension than were African Americans.

**Arrest Status:** Respondents were asked if they had ever been "picked up, or charged, by the police for any reason (other than a traffic violation) whether or not you were guilty?" The responses were either "yes" or "no." Race was a significant predictor of arrest status ( $p <$

.001).

**Victim Status:** This index grouped persons into victim or non-victim status based upon their experience of being robbed or burglarized. Response groupings were simply "yes" or "no." The "victim" category includes respondents experiencing either type of victimization. African Americans were significantly more likely to indicate victimization than were whites ( $p < .001$ ).

#### Analysis

We use contingency analysis to assess the relationship between race and household pistol ownership. To assess the strength of associations we use Goodman and Kruskal's gamma coefficient. For each association examined, we report the probability of its occurrence by chance (based on t-test values). Our predictor variable is race, African American vs. white. The remaining variables examined, found by others to be related to firearms experience, serve as controls.

#### FINDINGS

The difference between poor white and African American males, for each "violence facilitator," is displayed in Table 1. The difference was significant for each of the variables examined. Whites, as compared to African

Americans, were over represented in the alcohol related violence facilitator categories. That is, whites were more likely to indicate that they used alcohol and more frequently socialization in bars or taverns. Similarly, the African American population was less likely to be rated as high on attitudes toward the use of force than were whites. It should be noted, perhaps, that 25 percent or more of the African American population was found to be in these violence facilitator categories. This is at least twice what might be expected given that African Americans account for only about 13 percent of the total U.S. population.

It is clear, in Table 1, that poor African American males are significantly more likely than their white counterparts to have been arrested, victims of crime, be distrustful of "others," and to be in the lowest third of the distribution of family income.

Given the relatively small numbers (142 African Americans and 268 whites) available for analysis, we suggest that the findings in Table 2 be cautiously interpreted. Table 2 is based on the observed variations in household pistol access between African Americans and whites. Both racial groupings are characterized as low income males, residing in cities with populations of at least 50,000.

Table 2 indicates that the zero-order relationship between race and household pistol access was statistically significant ( $p < .006$ ). The gamma coefficient indicates that we can reduce our error in predicting pistol access by over 35 percent when we shift from random prediction to prediction based on race. That is, when comparing African Americans and whites, our best prediction is that African Americans will be more likely to have access to pistols in their households.

Similar findings appear when we consider conditional relationships within high risk violence facilitator categories. Compared to whites, African Americans who consume alcohol ( $\text{Gamma} > .51$ ;  $p < .004$ ) and/or frequently socialize in bars or taverns ( $\text{Gamma} > .82$ ;  $p < .001$ ) are more likely to have access to pistols. Although the difference in pistol access between African Americans and whites, who were high on the force index, was not significant ( $\text{Gamma} > .22$ ;  $p < .202$ ), African Americans were nearly seven percent more likely to have household access to pistols than were whites.

Among those persons who had been arrested, African Americans were twice as

likely to indicate there was a pistol in their household ( $\text{Gamma} > .46$ ;  $p < .055$ ). African American victims, compared with white victims, were three times more likely to have household access to pistols ( $\text{Gamma} > .60$ ;  $p < .052$ ).

The relationship between race and pistol ownership was not statistically significant among persons who were distrustful of "others" ( $p < .103$ ). The direction of the relationship, however, was consistent with those just mentioned, i.e., African Americans were more likely to have household access to pistols ( $\text{Gamma} > .25$ ). That is, "mistrustful" African Americans were over six percent more likely to have access to pistols than were their white counterparts.

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

On the basis of this analysis, we can see that low income, urban, African American males tend to be more likely to have easy access to pistols than their white counterparts. This relationship ( $\text{Gamma}$ ) persists, though weak and not significant for "Force" and "Distrust," in all of the high risk violence categories identified. African American males who used alcohol were twice as likely as whites to own pistols. Among those who frequently socialize in places where alcohol was served, African American household pistol access was eight times higher than white access. Although we have no way of knowing whether or not the owners carried their pistols, such a conclusion is consistent with past research findings (Schultz 1962). Perhaps the dominant theory used today to explain the differences between African American and white crime rates centers on "subcultural" differences between these two groups. Certainly the evidence presented in this study suggest there are differences between the two races in terms of pistol access. This observation alone might help explain the differences in firearms homicides and assaults between the races if one also takes into account the "accessibility" thesis previously mentioned. That is, it is thought that persons who are emotionally out of control tend to reach for the nearest weapon.

Considering the statistics related to African Americans and gun incidents, it is important to note, that the only other significant predictor of the difference between African American and White male household pistol access was victim status, with African American victims being four times more likely

to have access. This may affect ones feeling about self protection and the dangers of his daily existence.

As noted earlier, we must cautiously interpret our findings. The estimates are likely to be unstable given that the number of cases available was quite limited. Perhaps the best solution to this problem would be to conduct a study that is specifically designed to assess the carrying of pistols or other firearms among persons who find themselves in high risk violence situations. In addition to the factors considered here, others should be considered. Among the factors we would like to see studied are variance in community crime rates and community racial integration and/or strife. For example, an increasing community crime rate might prompt people to own guns for self-protection, particularly if the situation is exacerbated by the fear of crime.

Clearly, more study of private arming in urban American is needed. Previous studies have been unable to explain more than 15 percent of the variance in gun ownership. Given the volatility of urban life among the poor, we need to increase our explanatory powers so that realistic public planning and educational projects can be effected.

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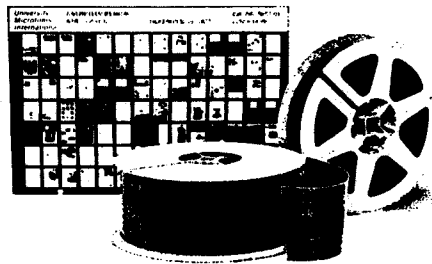
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