

**2013 Hamilton College Youth Poll:  
Attitudes towards Gun Control and School Violence**

**Designed and Analyzed by:**  
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**Survey Administered by:**  
Knowledge Networks

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## **Executive Summary**

Most high school feel relatively safe in their schools (over 90% feel very safe or relatively safe in their schools), though a significant number are concerned about the possibility of a mass shooting in their school or community (nearly 60% are either somewhat concerned, fairly concerned or very concerned). Students also believe that a number of different factors contribute to individuals committing acts of school violence, with mental instability and being a victim of bullying the ones deemed most important. A large majority of students (85%) agree or strongly agree that there should be stricter laws concerning background checks for gun purchases, and yet only 47% believe that stricter gun control laws will actually decrease gun related violence and 85% of respondents agree or strongly agree with the statement “Guns don’t kill people; people kill people.” 65% believe that it would be very easy or fairly easy to gain access to a gun. Attitudes vary significantly across the political spectrum, but do not differ along gender lines. Importantly, we find that attitudes towards gun rights and gun related violence are significantly shaped by the wording and framing of survey questions.

Stephen Wu, Professor of Economics at Hamilton College, and his students collaborated with the research firm Knowledge Networks to conduct the national Youth Poll on Gun Control and School Violence. The Knowledge Networks Panel is an online non-volunteer access panel whose members are chosen through a statistically valid sampling frame. 941 high school students from across the United States completed surveys. The survey was funded by Hamilton College’s Arthur Levitt Public Affairs Center.

### Other results:

- Students are fairly knowledgeable about recent school shootings. 92% of respondents were familiar with the Newtown, CT shootings and 88% were familiar with the Columbine shootings. Interestingly, 21% claimed to have heard about a shooting in Scarsdale, NY, which never occurred.
- Students are significantly more likely to feel safe at schools that have contingency plans in place in the event of an act of gun violence. 99% of students that claim that their schools have a good contingency plan feel very safe or relatively safe in their schools, but only 81% of students that do not feel that their schools have a good plan feel very safe or relatively safe in their schools.

- Those with guns feel safer with them, while those without guns would not feel safer with them. Of those with a gun in the house, 82% feel safer having this gun in the home, while only 30% of those without a gun say that they would feel safer with a gun in the house.
- Attitudes towards gun control and gun ownership greatly depends on political affiliation. For those that identify most closely as Republicans, 74% believe that individuals should have the right to carry a concealed gun, and 64% believe that a greater presence of armed citizens would decrease mass shootings, while for those identifying closely as Democrats, the analogous numbers are 43% and 39%, respectively.
- Estimates of gun related deaths vary by political affiliation. 17% of Democrats believe that there were more than 50,000 gun related deaths in the United States in 2011, compared with 5% of Republicans who believed there were that many. Meanwhile, 39% of Republicans believed that there were less than 10,000 gun related deaths in 2011, compared with 24% of Democrats. (The true figure is slightly over 30,000).
- Cueing people to think about previous school violence increases the likelihood that they believe arming teachers/staff would be a good idea. Some students were asked about their knowledge of various school shootings (such as Newtown, Columbine, and Virginia Tech) immediately before the statement, “Schools that have properly trained and armed nonteaching staff would become safer places”. Other students were randomly assigned a version where the question about school shootings was at the end of the survey. For students identifying as Republicans, this “cueing” increases the percentage of respondents strongly agreeing with the statement from 16% to 32%. For those identifying as Independents, cueing increases the percentage of students strongly agreeing from 14% to 23%, while for Democrats, there is no effect (16% in both versions).

### **Introduction and Data Description**

The issue of gun and school violence has been at the forefront of many policy debates in recent years, and especially in the last year since the tragic events in Newtown, Connecticut. This is an issue that divides the U.S. Congress and the American public as a whole. The purpose of this study is to gauge the opinions of youth across America.

The survey was conducted using the web-enabled Knowledge Panel®, a probability-based panel designed to be representative of the U.S. population. Initially, participants are chosen scientifically by a random selection of telephone numbers and residential addresses. Persons in selected households are then invited by telephone or by mail to participate in the web-enabled Knowledge Panel®. For those who agree to participate, but do not already have Internet access, Knowledge Networks provides at no cost a laptop and ISP connection. People who already have computers and Internet service are permitted to participate using their own equipment. Panelists then receive unique log-in information for accessing surveys online, and then are sent emails throughout each month inviting them to participate in research.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to recording demographic information, the survey also asks questions about general attitudes towards gun control, gun ownership and gun related violence, and exposure to guns at home and school. Background information is collected on gender, race, and family characteristics such as household income and parental education. Respondents also provided their class year, type of high school (public or private), and approximate size of the high school student body.

The survey asked the respondents to rate the importance of various factors that may contribute to gun and school violence, including: being a victim of bullying, mental instability, exposure to video games or violent movies, use of alcohol or illegal drugs, and media coverage of other school shootings. There was also a question that asked about the students' knowledge of various incidents of school violence, including incidents at Columbine High School, Newtown Elementary School, Virginia Tech University, and the Amish School shooting in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Survey takers were also asked about their exposure to guns, including whether or not someone in their household owned a gun, whether they had ever fired a gun, and how easy they thought it would be for a student at their school to obtain a gun.

An additional goal of our survey was to determine whether student attitudes may be shaped by the ordering, framing, and wording of questions. To do this, we generated several different versions of the survey

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<sup>1</sup> More technical information is available at <http://www.knowledgenetworks.com/ganp/reviewer-info.html>. Knowledge Networks delivers quality and service to guide leaders in business, government, and academia – uniquely bringing scientifically valid research to the online space through its probability-based, online Knowledge Panel®. The company delivers unique study design, science, analysis, and panel maintenance, along with a commitment to close collaboration at every stage of the research process. Knowledge Networks leverages its expertise in brands, media, advertising, and public policy issues to provide insights that speak directly to clients' most important concerns. For more information about Knowledge Networks, visit [www.knowledgenetworks.com](http://www.knowledgenetworks.com).

and randomly gave these versions to different respondents. For half of the respondents, the question on the knowledge of previous school shootings was placed near the beginning of the survey, while the other half of respondents were asked this question at the end of the survey. It is possible that by cueing some students to think about prior acts of school violence would shape their attitudes towards gun control and gun ownership policy. For one question regarding views on the strictness of gun control policy, some respondents were randomly assigned a version that provided the information that, “Utah and South Dakota have relatively loose gun control laws and low rates of gun violence per capita” before being asked whether or not they agreed that “gun control laws in most states are too strict.” Other respondents had a version with no prompting, while a third group were assigned a version that provided information that “Louisiana and Missouri have loose gun control laws and high rates of gun violence per capita” before being asked about the strictness of gun control laws.

## Analysis

Table Tables 1-7 show the distribution of responses to a number of questions on attitudes towards gun ownership and gun control policy. Students are generally in agreement about the importance of protecting rights to gun ownership. 77% agree or strongly agree that individuals should have the right to carry guns in order to protect their property, while 60% agree or strongly agree that individuals should have the right the carry a concealed gun. While the vast majority of respondents believe that there should be stricter laws concerning background checks for guns (85% agree or strongly agree), less than half (47%) believe that stricter gun control laws will actually decrease gun related violence. Instead, nearly three quarters of students (74%) agree or strongly agree with the statement that “schools that have properly trained and armed nonteaching staff would become safer.” Nearly 60% believe that schools should have metal detectors for security purposes.

**Table 1: Individuals should have the right to carry guns in order to protect their property.**

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Cumulative Percent</b>
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>3.98</b>	<b>3.98</b>
<b>Disagree</b>	<b>162</b>	<b>17.42</b>	<b>21.40</b>
<b>Agree</b>	<b>503</b>	<b>54.09</b>	<b>75.48</b>
<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>228</b>	<b>24.52</b>	<b>100.00</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>930</b>	<b>100.00</b>	

**Table 2: Individuals should have the right to carry a concealed gun**

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Cumulative Percent</b>
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	76	8.25	8.25
<b>Disagree</b>	288	31.27	39.52
<b>Agree</b>	400	43.43	82.95
<b>Strongly Agree</b>	157	17.05	100.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>921</b>	<b>100.00</b>	

**Table 3: There should be stricter laws concerning background checks for guns**

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Cumulative Percent</b>
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	21	2.27	2.27
<b>Disagree</b>	118	12.73	14.99
<b>Agree</b>	412	44.44	59.44
<b>Strongly Agree</b>	376	40.56	100.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>927</b>	<b>100.00</b>	

**Table 4: Stricter gun control laws will decrease gun related violence**

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Cumulative Percent</b>
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	144	15.48	15.48
<b>Disagree</b>	346	37.20	52.69
<b>Agree</b>	319	34.30	86.99
<b>Strongly Agree</b>	121	13.01	100.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>930</b>	<b>100.00</b>	

**Table 5: Schools that have properly trained and armed nonteaching staff would become safer**

	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Cumulative Percent</b>
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	38	4.08	4.08
<b>Disagree</b>	205	22.02	26.10
<b>Agree</b>	507	54.46	80.56
<b>Strongly Agree</b>	181	19.44	100.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>931</b>	<b>100.00</b>	

**Table 6: Schools should have metal detectors for security purposes**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	46	4.97	4.97
Disagree	244	26.38	31.35
Agree	455	49.19	80.54
Strongly Agree	180	19.46	100.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>925</b>	<b>100.00</b>	

Tables 7-10 show responses to questions regarding school safety. Over 90% of students feel very safe or relatively safe at their schools. Almost two thirds feel that their school has constructed an adequate contingency plan in the event of an act of gun violence, and over two thirds have participated in a practice emergency drill for a potential armed intruder. Nonetheless, a majority of students (almost 60%) are at least somewhat concerned about the potential for a mass shooting at their school.

**Table 7: How safe do you feel in your school?**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Very safe	260	29.78	29.78
Relatively safe	550	63.00	92.78
Relatively unsafe	53	6.07	98.85
Very unsafe	10	1.15	100.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>873</b>	<b>100.00</b>	

**Table 8: Do you feel that your school has constructed an adequate contingency plan to keep safe in the event of an act of school violence?**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
No	314	36.22	36.22
Yes	553	63.78	100.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>867</b>	<b>100.00</b>	

**Table 9: Have you ever been present in school for a practice emergency drill for a potential armed intruder?**

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
0	274	31.39	31.39
Yes	599	68.61	100.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>873</b>	<b>100.00</b>	

**Table 10: How concerned or worried are you that a mass shooting could happen in a school in your community?**

	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Not Concerned	385	41.18	41.18
Somewhat Concerned	383	40.96	82.14
Fairly Concerned	111	11.87	94.01
Very Concerned	56	5.99	100.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>935</b>	<b>100.00</b>	

Tables 11-14 show how attitudes and viewpoints vary according to political affiliation and exposure to guns. Respondents identifying as Republicans are most likely to agree or strongly agree that individuals should have a right to carry a concealed weapon (74%). The analogous figures for those identifying as Independents or Democrats are 61% and 44%. Similar differences exist across party lines for agreement to the statement, “A greater presence of armed citizens would decrease the risk of mass shootings.” 64% of Republicans agree or strongly agree with this statement, but only 50% and 39% are in agreement with this statement for Independents and Democrats, respectively. In Table 13, we see that those with guns in the house feel safer with them (82% of this sample), but most of those without guns in the house would not feel safer with one in the house (only 30% would feel safer). Interestingly, people’s perceptions of facts are also shaped by their political views. Republicans are much more likely to estimate a lower number of gun related deaths than Democrats are. This is shown in Table 14.

**Table 11: Individuals should have the right to carry a concealed gun**

Republicans:	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
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	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Strongly Disagree	6	2.46	2.46
Disagree	58	23.77	26.23
Agree	120	49.18	75.41
Strongly Agree	60	24.59	100.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>244</b>	<b>100.00</b>	

Independents	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Strongly Disagree	34	7.89	7.89
Disagree	132	30.63	38.52
Agree	188	43.62	82.13
Strongly Agree	77	17.87	100.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>431</b>	<b>100.00</b>	

Democrats	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Strongly Disagree	35	15.22	15.22
Disagree	94	40.87	56.09
Agree	83	36.09	92.17
Strongly Agree	18	7.83	100.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>230</b>	<b>100.00</b>	

Table 12: A greater presence of armed citizens would reduce the risk of mass shootings.

Republicans	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Strongly Disagree	12	4.92	4.92
Disagree	75	30.74	35.66
Agree	111	45.49	81.15
Strongly Agree	46	18.85	100.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>244</b>	<b>100.00</b>	

Independents	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Strongly Disagree	45	10.37	10.37
Disagree	172	39.63	50.00
Agree	162	37.33	87.33
Strongly Agree	55	12.67	100.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>434</b>	<b>100.00</b>	

Democrats	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Strongly Disagree	38	16.67	16.67

Disagree	102	44.74	61.40
Agree	60	26.32	87.72
Strongly Agree	28	12.28	100.00
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Total	228	100.00	

**Table 13: What is your best estimate of the number of deaths that occurred in 2011 in the United States due to all types of gun violence?**

Republicans	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
-----+-----			
Less than 10,000	95	38.93	38.93
Between 10,000-20,000	93	38.11	77.05
Between 20,000-50,000	43	17.62	94.67
More than 50,000	13	5.33	100.00
-----+-----			
Total	244	100.00	

Independents	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
-----+-----			
Less than 10,000	146	33.72	33.72
Between 10,000-20,000	180	41.57	75.29
Between 20,000-50,000	78	18.01	93.30
More than 50,000	29	6.70	100.00
-----+-----			
Total	433	100.00	

Democrats	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
-----+-----			
Less than 10,000	56	24.24	24.24
Between 10,000-20,000	83	35.93	60.17
Between 20,000-50,000	53	22.94	83.12
More than 50,000	39	16.88	100.00
-----+-----			
Total	231	100.00	

**Table 14: For those with a gun in the house: do you feel safer having a gun?**

	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
-----+-----			

<b>No</b>		<b>62</b>	<b>17.77</b>	<b>17.77</b>
<b>Yes</b>		<b>287</b>	<b>82.23</b>	<b>100.00</b>
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<b>Total</b>		<b>349</b>	<b>100.00</b>	

**For those without a gun in the house: would you feel safer with a gun?**

		<b>Freq.</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Cum.</b>
-----+-----				
<b>No</b>		<b>405</b>	<b>70.31</b>	<b>70.31</b>
<b>Yes</b>		<b>171</b>	<b>29.69</b>	<b>100.00</b>
-----+-----				
<b>Total</b>		<b>576</b>	<b>100.00</b>	

Finally, we show how framing and ordering of questions may have an influence on attitudes towards guns and gun related policy. In Table 15, we show the distribution of reactions to the statement “Schools that have properly trained and armed nonteaching staff would become safer.” Half of the sample was asked this question directly after being asked about their familiarity with a number of different prior acts of school violence (including Columbine, Newtown, and Virginia Tech, among others). For this group, 23% of the sample strongly agreed that schools would be safer with trained and armed staff. For the other half of the sample, the question about familiarity with previous acts of school violence was not asked before their reaction to having armed personnel at schools. For this group, only 16% strongly agreed that having armed staff would increase school safety.

In Table 16, we explore the extent to which prompting people with relevant information can sway people’s views on gun control laws. All respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the statement “I believe that gun control laws in most states are too strict.” For one third of the sample, this statement was preceded with the information that “Utah and South Dakota have relatively loose gun control laws and low rates of gun violence per capita.” For this group of respondents, 45% agreed or strongly agreed that gun control laws are generally too strict. For another third of the sample, there was no corresponding information about specific states. For this group, only 30% agreed or strongly agreed that gun control laws are too strict. The final third of the sample was provided with the information that “Louisiana and Missouri have loose gun control laws and high rates of gun violence per capita”. Interestingly, this group responded similar to the group with no information. 31% of these respondents agreed or strongly agreed that gun control laws are too strict. The interesting implication is that

lobbyists may be more effective in swaying opinions by providing information about the possible benefits of loose gun control laws than about their potential costs.

**Table 15: Schools that have properly trained and armed nonteaching staff would become safer (Respondents who were cued to think about prior acts of school violence directly before this question)**

	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Strongly Disagree	14	3.04	3.04
Disagree	100	21.69	24.73
Agree	240	52.06	76.79
Strongly Agree	107	23.21	100.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>461</b>	<b>100.00</b>	

(Respondents who were not cued to think about prior acts of school violence)

	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Strongly Disagree	24	5.11	5.11
Disagree	105	22.34	27.45
Agree	267	56.81	84.26
Strongly Agree	74	15.74	100.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>470</b>	<b>100.00</b>	

**Table 16: I believe that gun control laws in most states are too strict.**

(Respondents who were provided with information that Utah and South Dakota have relatively loose gun control laws and low rates of gun violence per capita)

	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Strongly Disagree	22	7.59	7.59
Disagree	137	47.24	54.83
Agree	96	33.10	87.93
Strongly Agree	35	12.07	100.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>290</b>	<b>100.00</b>	

(Respondents who were provided with no additional information).

	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Strongly Disagree	41	13.49	13.49
Disagree	170	55.92	69.41
Agree	66	21.71	91.12
Strongly Agree	27	8.88	100.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>304</b>	<b>100.00</b>	

(Respondents who were provided with information that Louisiana and Missouri have loose gun control laws and high rates of gun violence per capita).

	Freq.	Percent	Cum.
Strongly Disagree	41	12.35	12.35
Disagree	186	56.02	68.37
Agree	82	24.70	93.07
Strongly Agree	23	6.93	100.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>332</b>	<b>100.00</b>	

## Conclusion

Using data provided by Knowledge Networks, we analyzed youth attitudes towards guns and gun and school violence. We find that the great majority of students feel relatively safe in their schools and agree that their schools generally have good contingency plans in place in the event of an armed intruder entering the school. Nonetheless, most students still have at least some concern over the possibility of a shooting at a school in their community and nearly three quarters of those sampled believe that having armed personnel would make their schools safer. Most of the respondents agree that individuals should have the right to carry guns, but that there should be stricter background checks for purchase of guns. Unsurprisingly, we find that attitudes towards gun policy vary along political lines, but these attitudes are very susceptible to being swayed by the framing of questions and prompting of information.