Young People's Attitudes Towards Guns in America, Great Britain, and Western Australia

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Attitudes of young people in the United States of America (n = 145), Great Britain (n = 177) and Western Australia (n = 219) towards the possession and use of firearms were explored. These were measured on an Attitudes Toward Gun Scale [Branscombe et al., 1991 "A three factor scale of attitudes towards guns," Aggr. Behav. 17:261], with particular reference to its three underlying dimensions (rights, causes crime, and protects from crime). Findings on these three dimensions of the ATGS indicate American respondents to be in greatest favour of gun possession, scoring significantly higher than Australian and British respondents in the belief that it is a citizen's right to own a gun, and that guns provide protection from crime. Australian and British respondents scored higher on items referring to the belief that guns stimulate crime. An additional item added to the scale by Cooke and Puddifoot [2000] concerning the right to carry concealed weapons gained little support from British, Australian, or American respondents. This, together with low mean scores by respondents from all nations on protection, questions the introduction of 'gun-carry' laws in many states throughout the USA. Discussion centres upon the implications of such findings, and the usefulness for future research of a measure designed to explore why people own guns, choose to carry weapons, and keep guns in the home. Aggr. Behav. 30:93–104, 2004. © 2004, Wiley-Liss, Inc.

Key words: guns; firearms; protection; crime; rights; gun carry laws

INTRODUCTION

Numerous firearms incidents have brought attention to the gun control debate in the last decade, but response to such events has differed between nations. Incidents in Britain (Dunblane), Australia (Tasmania), and America (Columbine) are examples of such tragedies. In Australia there has been pressure towards greater gun control, and in Britain, where gun carrying has not been customary, a complete ban on the possession and ownership of handguns was introduced following the shooting of school children in Dunblane, Scotland. In America laws vary considerably across states. This study aims to explore young people's attitudes towards citizen's use of guns in Britain, America, and Western Australia.

While little is understood regarding the psychological effects of weapon carrying, weapon use, and associated attitudes in Britain and Australia, some research has been conducted in
DISCUSSION

Patterns of response have been analysed according to nationality and gender. American respondents scored the highest (most favourably) towards the use of guns, scoring the highest of the three nations on Rights, and Protection, and the lowest on Crime. American respondents were the most likely to believe that it is an individual’s right to own a gun, that it may protect an individual from crime, and least likely to believe that guns stimulate crime. However, while it is clear that American respondents scored the highest of the three nations on Protection, the mean score was still lower than might be anticipated, particularly in the context of mean scores for the other two factors. American respondents showed the highest scores on Rights (mean 3.6), followed by Crime (mean 3.1), and then Protection (mean 2.4), suggesting that American respondents believe that guns are more likely to protect from crime than to stimulate crime from.

There was a strong similarity between the scores for British and Australian respondents. Scores for these respondents were highest on Crime, followed by Rights, and finally Protection, i.e. British and Australian respondents were most likely to believe that guns stimulate crime. Surprisingly however, both British and Australian respondents scored higher on Rights, than they did Protection, suggesting that participants have stronger beliefs in an individual’s Right to own a gun than a gun’s capability of protecting an individual from crime. In fact, all three nations scored lower on Protection than on any other factor. These findings do not accord well with arguments sometimes mooted for keeping guns for protection from crime.

Nationality appears to be the strongest factor influencing young people’s attitudes towards guns. Patterns of difference could not be attributed to gender alone, as gender patterns differ between the three nations. However attitudes towards guns were probably easier to predict in the USA sample, where there were very clear, significant differences between male and female responses. British and Australian respondent’s scores were more varied, not so predictable, and generally did not show consistent patterns of difference.

Overall American male respondents showed greatest support for gun use, but the main source of difference between American males and any other group was within the Rights dimension. The Rights dimension was the only factor that included gun use for purposes outside crime, the two other factors being directly related to crime (stimulates Crime, and Protection from crime). In these two dimensions no other issues are addressed outside of crime, while items in the Rights dimension not only explore beliefs concerning freedom, independence, the right to bear arms, and other political/abstract beliefs, but also refer to the use of guns for hunting and sport. Given that the USA respondents were drawn from South Carolina, where hunting is a popular pastime for many (particularly males), this finding suggests that guns carry more significance to American males than to any other group studied here.

In conclusion the use of the ATGS in this comparative study has assisted in exploring people’s attitude towards guns in three different nations. Unexpected findings from this study are the lack of support for ‘concealed weapons/gun carry laws’ in the American sample, and the low scoring across all three nations in the belief that guns provide protection from crime, suggesting that weapons/guns are kept for other purposes. Future research might focus on differences in gun-related attitudes and behaviours between specific regions within nations as well as across international boundaries.