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GUN OWNERSHIP AS AN EXPRESSION OF WHITENESS AND MASCULINITY

By

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B.F.A., Cleveland Institute of Art, 2003

A Thesis
Submitted to the faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

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in Sociology

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University of Louisville
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A Thesis Approved on

July 27, 2020

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to

Michelle and Nora.

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ABSTRACT

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Michael Daugherty

July 27, 2020

Public discourse on the topic of gun ownership in the U.S. is polarized, with the debate framed as a binary between unquestioned gun rights versus a complete ban. Gun ownership can have grave consequences: guns are used to commit acts of violence and suicide.

Interviews with white male gun owners explore the influence of white backlash, masculinity, and racial identity development in their decisions to own guns. This project explores the extent these reasons are related to race on the part of white males, starting with these two questions: How much does race play a factor in the action and thought related to guns? To what extent does a “white backlash” (King 1967) relate to gun ownership? Ultimately, the participants rarely expressed overt racialized sentiments or white backlash. However, themes emerged that align with current literature to suggest how gun ownership among white men operates as a “racial project” (Omi and Winant [1986] 2015) that reinforces white male hegemony.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Guns are undoubtedly a controversial issue in the United States. Extremes on both sides of the gun debate dominate media coverage. The news media often portrays gun owners as fanatical (Downs 2002). White nationalist groups have embraced the pro-gun agenda, adding an explicit racial element to the public debate on gun control (Berlet and Lyons 2000). This project investigates the interrelated roles of masculinity, security, and white identity in decisions to own guns.

Research on gun ownership has largely ignored issues of race, racial threat, and white identity. The current project uses interviews with white male gun owners to explore the influence of white backlash, masculinity, and racial identity development in their decisions to own guns. To explore the question of the relationship of “white backlash” (King 1967) and gun ownership, this project will collect in-depth interviews and analyze the resulting content.

GUN OWNERSHIP AND VIOLENCE

There are roughly 310 million guns possessed by civilians in the United States (Osno 2016). Since 2008, the percentage of gun-owning households has hovered between 37 and 45 percent (Statista 2018). Forty-two percent of households owned guns in 2017, similar to households in 2008 (Statista 2018). Eight million people have a license to carry a concealed firearm (Carlson 2015:4). While ownership rates appear to be holding steady in the United States, gun related violence is rising.

The firearm death rate (National Violent Death Reporting States [NVDRS]) in 2008 was 9.85 deaths per 100,000 people. This rate has increased slightly every year, with the 2016 rate being 12 per 100,000 people (Hauser 2017). Statistically, the act of keeping a gun in one's home increases the likelihood that someone in the home will be killed or injured in a gun related accident, attack, or suicide (Azrael and Hemenway 2000:286).

The rate of mass shootings, total mass shooting deaths, and average deaths per shooting have trended upward from 2008 to 2017. According to the publication *Mother Jones* (Cohen, Azrael, and Miller 2014), the time between mass shooting events decreased starting in 2012 and continued to decrease through 2013. The increased scrutiny of police shootings following the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement aligns with increasing numbers of police shootings in recent years. Deaths from police shootings ranged between 963 and 995 per year from 2015 to 2017 (The Washington Post 2018). Given the history of racial violence in the United States, especially with the recent police killings of people of color, it is worth exploring the racial discrepancies of gun ownership in the U.S.

RACE

Racial differences exist when it comes to who owns guns. According to the General Social Survey, in a ten-year period between 2006-2016, the percentage of respondents who had guns in their homes held relatively steady between 32% and 36% (GSS 2018). During the same period, a greater percentage of whites owned guns than any other racial group (2018). The white gun ownership rate ranged from 38.0% to 43.1% in the ten-year period, whereas the black gun ownership rate ranged between 15% and 21.8%. In other words, whites own guns at more than double the rate of blacks in the U.S. Why are whites more likely to own guns than blacks?

CONCEALED CARRYING

In the last couple of decades, the number of people who have a concealed carry permit has more than doubled, and all 50 states allow some form of concealed gun carrying (Osno 2016:2). National-level data for the number of people who have a concealed carry permit is not available; some states provide statistics based on certain restrictions, other states do not release the data at all (Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press 2018). Kentucky's state government provides a yearly report of how many concealed carry permit applications were received, as well as how many permits were granted (Kentucky State Police 2018). In 2006, 10,469 Kentucky residents applied for a concealed carry permit (Kentucky State Police 2018). In 2016, the number of applications was six times greater than 2006, reaching 64,140 (Kentucky State Police 2018). The number jumped 1.6 times between 2015 and 2016 (Kentucky State Police 2018).

My initial interest at the beginning of the study was the relationship between race and gun owners. More specifically, I was curious to explore the extent to which white gun ownership reflects "white backlash" (King 1967). In other words, is gun ownership a way of countering perceived threats to the privileges generated by white supremacy in the U.S.? As gun violence is a marker of racial terror in the U.S. (Nunn 2007), gun ownership can be considered a marker of a visible protection of those racial privileges by white gun owners. However, what is not necessarily clear is the degree to which this is a catalyst for owning a gun among white men, or a reason for continuing to own guns.

Therefore, the purpose of this project is an assessment of white male gun owners' experiences and views on why they own guns. I use grounded theory to explore the

relationships between masculinity, security, and white identity to understand white men's gun ownership choices.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

People say they own guns for a wide variety of reasons including protection, hunting, and sport (Parker et al. 2017). This project explores the degree that these reasons are related to race on the part of white males. How much does race play a factor in the action and thought related to guns? To what extent does a “white backlash” relate to gun ownership? To address these questions, this project collects in-depth interviews and analyzes the resulting content, using a grounded theory approach. The intent of this project is to explore these questions and hopefully uncover new or unexpected avenues to explore for future research.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

My interest in gun ownership is rooted in how it relates to race, specifically through the experiences of white males. The relationship between race and gun ownership has been addressed in the extant literature, but there is still an opportunity to expand the literature in terms of white supremacy or white backlash on the part of some gun owners. It is possible that adequate literature does exist in this area, and as I have continued my research, I have discovered more literature related to white gun ownership as a “racial project.”

On an individual level, the reasons people own guns range from recreation to protection (Parker et al. 2017). For this study, I focus on three types of reasons for owning guns that may have a relationship with whiteness: personal safety, doubt/mistrust/collective safety, and culture/worldviews. For some white gun owners, these reasons may be part of a larger “racial project” (Omi and Winant 2015:13), but this reasoning does not need to be explicitly stated, as it could implicitly guide their decisions around gun ownership. This racial project of white gun ownership is one of many small projects that contribute to the larger project of continued white dominance in the United States. The rationale by white gun owners discussed in the following sections can be placed into the racial formation framework, and this framework will be discussed in greater detail in the theory portion of the literature review.

PERSONAL SAFETY

Owning or carrying a gun for personal safety is commonly stated as a reason to own guns (Shapira and Simon 2018:1). Personal safety can be broken down into two main

categories: “avoidance” and “personal security behavior” (Giblin 2008:359). This section focuses on gun ownership as a strategy for protecting an individual and/or the family, with an emphasis on a threat from a potential attacker. Owning a gun for personal protection is a process that is influenced by fear of an attack, as well as a more general fear of a dangerous outside world (Shapira and Simon 2018). A gun owner who is concerned about personal safety may be influenced by fear, even though the chances of a violent attack are relatively low (Shapira and Simon 2018). Protecting oneself and family is an individual responsibility, and by imagining a potential shooting scenario as a “good guy versus bad guy” event, the gun owner may be more comfortable with owning or carrying a gun for protection (Shapira and Simon 2018).

The two basic types of protection are “avoidance” and “personal security behavior” (Giblin 2008:359). Avoidance is a technique an individual will use to “limit one’s exposure to victimization risk” (Giblin 2008:360). Owning a gun for protection is an example of a personal security behavior, because the owner intends the gun to be used to either make an attack more difficult, or as a warning to a potential attacker that an attack will be difficult (Giblin 2008:360).

The safety of an individual and their family is often a “primary motivation” for gun ownership, and some owners have reported a sense of anxiety and even “withdrawal” when the gun is not close at hand (Shapira and Simon 2018:1-2). A possible factor for an owner’s desire for protection is the perception that engaging in one’s everyday life is full of potential threats—that the “world is a dangerous place” (Shapira and Simon 2018:7-8). The notion of a dangerous world is an idea that is often presented to people taking gun classes, which may also reinforce this fear (Shapira and Simon 2018:7). General fears

about crime and the “deterioration of morality and increase in violence in society” are focused into potential personal attacks on the individual or their family (Shapira and Simon 2018:7-8). The events on 9/11 are also mentioned by gun owners as a starting point of a new type of terrorism that is a more tangible threat than pre-9/11 terrorist attacks (Shapira and Simon 2018:8).

While a violent act against an individual or their family is statistically rare, the imagined brutality and potential harm of an attack outweighs the unlikelihood that such an attack will occur (Shapira and Simon 2018:7). Moreover, gun owners may place blame on themselves if they were not in possession of their gun during an attack and harm came to themselves or their family. In some owners’ minds, they would be just as responsible as the attacker (Shapira and Simon 2018:7). This responsibility to protect themselves and their families is often conceived as entirely up to each individual (Shapira and Simon 2018:9). Therefore, the gun is an effective tool for accomplishing the protection, as external groups or institutions like the police are considered a “reactionary force” and inadequate for protection (Shapira and Simon 2018:9). The gun owner can “fill perceived voids in formal social controls by taking simpler, readily available steps to protect themselves” (Giblin 2008:374).

To distance oneself from the potential negative associations of firing a gun at another person in self-defense, a gun owner may have internalized the “good guy vs. bad guy binary” (Shapira and Simon 2018:12-13). This binary transforms a potential attacker into an “abstract other” that makes the prospect of using the weapon for protection more acceptable to the owner (Shapira and Simon 2018:13). Potential violence becomes

abstracted, and makes killing someone “a legitimate, and indeed moral and necessary, action” (Shapira and Simon 2018:12).

DOUBT/MISTRUST/COLLECTIVE SAFETY

Beyond concerns with personal protection, apprehension about external forces in one’s life contributes to gun ownership. Mencken and Froese (2017) found that “owners’ [white gun owners] attachment to guns draws directly from popular narratives concerning American masculinity, freedom, heroism, power, and independence” (P. 2). This section covers: guns and “solv[ing] social problems,” mistrust or doubt in institutions, collective security, economic stress, and the maintenance of masculinity.

Some white gun owners regard gun ownership as carrying immense power, believing that “guns can solve social problems and make communities safer” (Mencken and Froese 2017:2). Owning a gun could be a response to a general doubt that the institutions and authorities, in a broad sense, can maintain order (Carlson p2015:9). If the society or the institutions are perceived to be lacking in “social control” (Liska 1992:4), individuals may gravitate toward gun ownership as a supplement. Black ([1976] 2010) says “Law varies inversely with other social control” (P. 107). A gun may represent a connection to what Black describes a sense of lawfulness, and hence “respectability” (Black [1976] 2010:111). This perception that society is declining also manifests in the phenomenon of “citizen protectors”—civilians self-appointing themselves as police, hence the need for owning guns (Carlson 2015). For some, the gun might symbolize self-sufficiency and their role as a protector of society and their family (Carlson 2015:2, 9).

The idea that society's institutions can no longer function (Carlson 2015:6) could lead to the perception of "collective security" being under threat, hence the rate of gun purchases increases (McDowall and Loftin 1983:1147).

There is a general sense of economic decline that many middle and upper-class whites describe as contributing to their ownership of guns (Carlson 2015:24-26). White gun owners may be comforted by their guns, as well as find meaning in them, in the face of economic stress or recession (Mencken and Froese 2017:2, 21). Guns provide a way for individuals to mitigate the stress of economic hardship, because the individual can focus on being a "protector" (Carlson 2015; Mencken and Froese 2017).

For some, the ownership of guns and related activities may be an expression of support for traditional gender roles (West and Zimmerman 1987:127), in a contemporary context of shifting ideas about gender (Carlson 2015:25). Being a gun owner is often associated with masculinity. Therefore, owning a gun preserves the tradition of the male as "family protector" (Mencken and Froese 2017:2 quoting Baker 2005). Additionally, being a gun owner is a strategy for the white male gun owner to "claim dignity" (Carlson 2015:27).

CULTURE AND WORLDVIEWS

The argument that guns are more likely to increase the risk for violence rather than prevent it (Azrael and Hemenway 2000), has little effect on one's opinion of guns. What truly matters for the formation of an opinion on guns, says Braman and Kahan (2006), are "cultural worldviews":

For one segment of American society, guns symbolize honor, human mastery over nature, and individual self-sufficiency. ... For another segment of American society, however, guns connote something else: the perpetuation of illicit social

hierarchies, the elevation of force over reason, and the expression of collective indifference to the well-being of strangers. (P. 570).

An individual's culture and worldviews are contributing factors to the gun ownership process. The upcoming section looks at the parts of culture and worldviews that have been discussed in the literature: gender, politics, and social decline.

Gender

For some owners, gun ownership is related to maintaining traditional masculinity. Mencken and Froese (2017) examine the gun as a symbol of "masculinity, independence, and moral identity" (P. 1). Gender and race intersect with gun ownership, as most gun owners are white men (Mencken and Froese 2017:3). The white male is also depicted as the typical gun owner in various forms of media, thus creating a feedback loop that encourages gun ownership among white males as their economic power is on decline (Mencken and Froese 2017:6). "Given the ubiquitous myth of the independent and heroic gunman, firearms seem a logical symbol to embrace" (McGrath 1984 quoted by Mencken and Froese 2017:6).

Politics

One's political beliefs can be an important factor for gun ownership. Groups who can wield influence on white gun owners are right-wing groups, white nationalist groups, the NRA, and second amendment groups. Recurring themes of individualism, tradition, and resistance to a repressive government are documented in the literature.

For many gun owners, individualism is an important part of their identity (Celinska 2007:233). Celinska (2007) suggests that some gun owners express individualism through gun ownership as a form of protection against a society that can no longer protect its citizens (233). The emphasis on individualism is promoted by the

National Rifle Association (NRA), through its online column, *The Armed Citizen* (Mencken and Froese 2017:5). *The Armed Citizen* (<https://www.americanrifleman.org/the-armed-citizen/>) is a collection of news stories that feature individuals using guns for self-defense or to protect others. The stories often emphasize the idea of a hero using a gun to protect themselves or others (O’Neill 2007:463). These stories encourage the reader to identify with the gun owners in the stories, reaffirming the notion that being a gun owner is a heroic act, and necessary to counteract a “terrifying foe” (O’Neill 2007:458).

Another factor that may encourage individuals to purchase guns is the idea of a federal government conspiracy to disarm the public. This is an idea that is often propagated by right-wing groups, claiming that the federal government is controlled by Jewish individuals who want to disarm “white, Aryan citizens” (Blee and Creasap 2010:275). In a more general way, there is a belief among some gun owners that the gun is “the only tool, cultural or physical, that can defend liberty and keep an unchecked government from repressing its citizens” (Mencken and Froese 2017:8).

Beginning with the Obama presidency, and continuing with the election of Donald Trump, there has been a reemergence of the visibility of right-wing groups in the public’s awareness. Right-wing groups, and certainly white nationalist groups, have a predominantly white, male constituency; this suggests an overlap with the motivations of some gun owners (Berlet and Lyons 2000). Related to these right-wing groups are: county-supremacy groups, “Middle American Radicals”, and the formation of the Tea Party (Zeskind 1996, 2006; Berlet and Lyons 2000; Blee and Creasap 2010). These groups influence gun owners in a variety of ways, including the creation and maintenance

of polarization between opposing groups and generating fears about the “chipping-away” of the second amendment (Berlet and Lyons 2000).

One example of the overlap between gun ownership and right-wing politics is the “county-supremacy” (Berlet and Lyons 2000:292-293) movement. This movement is hostile to the federal government, and thus anything beyond the Bill of Rights is an abuse of power by the federal government (Berlet and Lyons 2000:292-293). The county-supremacy movement operates by creating illegal courts that circumvent the local and state level authorities (Berlet and Lyons 2000). The individuals that create these courts view these courts as more lawful than the federal government; moreover, any attempt to amend the constitution is considered invalid, as only the Bill of Rights is considered legal (Berlet and Lyons 2000:293). This would presumably include a push-back to new laws or amendments to the constitution that effect gun ownership. Members of this movement are likely to own guns, and non-members may also be influenced to purchase guns or increase their gun collection.

Conservative groups are beginning to be looked at in the context of social movement theories. (Blee and Creasap 2010:271). Generally, members of conservative groups are not “fringe” outsiders, but “normal,” unassuming members of society that become involved with more extreme groups as they feel greater frustration with the direction of their society or country (Vertigans 2007:648). One catalyst for conservative movements is a longing for a perceived past glory; this backward focus is triggered by a sense of loss of power by a group (Lo 1982:109).

Is there a relationship between one being white and ownership of guns as a “white backlash”? Carlson (2015) notes that there is likely a segment of gun owners who

associate a perceived decline in social connections with a threat of an increasingly non-white America, but Carlson is careful to say this sense of social decline is experienced by whites and non-whites alike (P. 14). A white backlash could be related to “status threat” (Lio, Melzer, and Reese 2008). If a dominant group feels threatened, minority groups often become scapegoats (Lio, Melzer, and Reese 2008:9). This scapegoating can be seen from what Zeskind (1996) called “MARS,” or “Middle American RadicalS,” a term originally coined by Donald Warren (1976). Warren suggested that some white middle-class Americans held animosity toward both the poor and the wealthy, because they (the middle class) believed they were being used by the wealthy to pay for handouts to the poor (Warren 1976; Zeskind 1996:22). Furthermore, the white middle-class conflates race and economic class, leading to the organizing process of MARS (Zeskind 2008:23). A related trend is the white middle-class’s tendency to feel “resentment” toward nonwhites, as the percentage of non-whites increases in the U.S. (McCarthy 1998: 357-358, citing Nietzsche 1967). A larger percentage of nonwhites are poor, compared to whites (Macartney, Bishaw, & Fontenot 2013:1); subsequently, this has led some whites to engage in discourse that merges race and class—being nonwhite becomes synonymous with low socioeconomic status (Gans 2005:20). One example of this is the birth of the Tea Party, a majority white group (Zeskind 2011:1) that appeared in 2009, shortly after the beginning of Barack Obama’s first term as president. The Tea Party claimed economic rationale for their arguments, however there is evidence that fears of economic or class “dispossession” were in fact coded language for the changing racial makeup of the United States, not concerns over the national debt or the cost of health care (Zeskind 2011: 496, 502-504).

The extreme division between the political right and left exists in the attitudes and discourse related to guns (Lio, Melzer, and Reese 2008:7). Lio et al. (2008:10) mentions “polarization-vilification;” a process that pits one side against another by making severe moral distinctions between the opposing groups (McCaffrey and Keys 2000:44). When a group or individual is labeled “evil,” it becomes easy to discredit them and convince others to accept this “evilness” as reality, often through the deployment of emotionally charged terminology (McCaffrey and Keys 2000:50-51). So, not only does gun ownership generate divisions, but these divisions can be exaggerated and used to create even more animosity and entrenchment. For gun owners, this may solidify their status as a gun owner even more, as well as encourage increasing their number of guns. This suggests that some non-gun owners who identify as being on the conservative side of the political spectrum, may be influenced to become gun owners.

One well-known group that has large influence with gun owners is the National Rifle Association (NRA). According to Carlson (2015), the NRA is a powerful force whose lobbying efforts have helped grow access to gun and concealed carry permits, which in turn increases the likelihood of guns becoming more incorporated into peoples’ daily lives and (P. 6). In addition to lobbying, the NRA uses polarization to promote their agenda. This is accomplished through the “construction of moral boundaries” (Lio, Melzer, and Reese 2008:8). In their article, Lio et al. (2008) describe a process that the NRA uses to construct “‘model’ and ‘nightmare’ citizens” to influence their followers. The NRA often uses nonwhite scapegoats in these “constructions” to utilize these “symbols of status threats” (Lio et al. 2008:9-10). Another technique a group may employ is the “appropriation of a master frame” (Lio et al. 2008:8). The NRA, whose

majority of members identify as republican, and more likely to be conservative (Parker et al. 2017), appropriates the civil rights “master frame,” claiming that the NRA is a legitimate defender of civil rights. This is a strategy to counter the anti-gun rhetoric that is associated with left-wing groups, who are also traditionally associated with the civil rights movement. Therefore, those who defend the second amendment become equivalent to those who fought for civil rights for blacks in the 1960’s (Lio et al. 2008:11-12, 21).

In addition to “frame appropriation,” institutions, movements, or groups engage in “counterframing” (Lio et al. 2008:10). Lio et al. cite McCaffrey and Keys (2000) with these three “counterframing” techniques: “polarization-vilification”, “frame debunking”, and “frame saving” (P. 10):

Polarization-vilification defines social situations as “us versus them” and frames conflicts in moral terms. Supporters of a cause are portrayed as moral agents fighting against a moral threat posed by their opponents, who are demonized. Frame debunking advances one’s own claims by discrediting competing ideologies. Frame saving denotes the efforts to rescue a frame that has been challenged or denounced.

Downs (2002) defines frames as “sets of concepts that help an individual organize and interpret language and experience” (P. 46). The “cosmopolitan worldview,” is described by Downs (2002) as “cultural frames of reliance on others, specialization, risk avoidance, and government responsibility for risk reduction”. This worldview, often expressed by the news media, helps to maintain the polarized nature of discussion of guns, because it suggests an anti-gun media bias that simplifies the discussion (Downs 2002:45, 53).

Social Decline/Fear

An analogue to some gun movements can be found in the “prepping” movement, where individuals lose trust in the government’s ability to handle a large-scale crisis,

thereby preparing or “prepping” for a potential breakdown in society (Kabel and Chmidling 2014:259).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The narratives of safety, government mistrust, and worldviews that emphasize threats to identity—that contribute to gun ownership on the part of some whites, can be organized as sensitizing theories. These sensitizing theories arguably couple with Omi and Winant’s ([1986]2015) racial formation theory, which provides the overarching theoretical framework for this project. Racial formation is “the sociohistorical process by which racial identities are created, lived out, transformed, and destroyed” (Omi and Winant [1986] 2015:09). This is accomplished through “racial projects” ([1986] 2015), which are processes that racialize society in support of white domination and are “rearticulated” over time to support this unequal power relation. The current rearticulation of the white racial project is “colorblindness” ([1986] 2015)—the dominant understanding of race at this point in history that situates racism as an individual problem and eschews focusing on structural inequalities that support white racial advantages (Bonilla-Silva [2003] 2014). I argue that gun ownership on the part of white men could be another, underexplored aspect of whiteness as a racial project. Racialization is also an important component of racial formation. Racialization, or attributing a meaning or value to skin color and other physiological features of bodies, assists with perpetuating racial hierarchy, or structure, resulting in white supremacy. White supremacy has tangible consequences—therefore, race is “real” (Omi and Winant [1986] 2015; Bonilla-Silva 1999, [2003] 2014; Holloway 2007; Hughey 2012; Shapira and Simon 2018).

The Racial Contract

Mills's (1997) racial contract explains how white supremacy continues to act as a dominant project within the racial formation process and connects to the importance of gun ownership. White supremacy is the status quo, and this power dynamic is hidden in plain sight and ensures continued dominance. An important component of the racial contract is an agreement between all whites to ignore or disregard the reality of white domination to perpetuate the domination, also referred to as the epistemology of ignorance (Mills 1997). The epistemology of ignorance is built on an inaccurate version of history, which is promoted as the "official" version of history and, adopted by the general white population and "validated by white epistemic authority" (Mills 1997:18). This false or misleading history sidesteps the horrors committed by whites against nonwhites, and which allows them to maintain the understanding that nonwhites are unequal to whites, or not truly human (Mills 1997:97-98). Under this historical perspective, if whites in the U.S. were to consider slaves or Native Americans as equals, it would negate the notion of white supremacy. The epistemology of ignorance prevents a reckoning, on the part of whites, with historical atrocities against nonwhites. Therefore, white supremacy remains unacknowledged and unchallenged.

Gun ownership could be thought of as both a manifestation of the privilege of being white, and a tool for some whites to maintain dominance over nonwhites. The use of law by the state, coupled with the white populace's amnesia regarding the origins of gun laws, was one way the racial contract operated to uphold "racial order" (Mills 1997). This phenomenon has ramifications today. Because guns were such an essential part of colonization and slavery, guns "telegraph subconscious histories of violence and condition embodied behaviors" (Livingston 2018:345). In general, only white men were

granted the right to own guns until the Fourteenth Amendment was passed in 1868 (Metzl 2019:66). The democratization of gun ownership was continually resisted, as can be seen with: the southern postbellum “black codes,” which restricted black people from owning guns; efforts from groups like the Ku Klux Klan to round up guns; and the implementation of gun control laws as a reaction to the black power movement (Winkler 2011; Metzl 2019:65-67). There are countless instances of white civilians and police officers reacting with force, sometimes deadly, when encountering a nonwhite individual who is legally carrying a gun in public (Metzl 2019:70-71). For some whites, owning a gun may be a way to channel the historical use of guns to enforce white supremacy without needing to deliberately connect this history of white supremacy with their decisions, because it has always been a readily supported right of whites to own guns throughout history (Cottrol and Diamond 1991:6 pdf; Metzl 2019:63). Thus, I argue guns are a useful tool in establishing and enforcing the relationship between whiteness and Americanness and provide an example of how whites have maintained their privilege in the United States. “From before the birth of the nation, American laws, mores, and traditions coded armed white men as defenders and armed black men as threats. Not just the bodies were racialized; so were the guns as well” (Metzl 2019:72).

Whiteness as Americanness

The relationship between whiteness and Americanness is part of racial formation (Omi and Winant 2015). For example, in the early twentieth century, the courts deemed who, among immigrants, could identify as “white,” which gave them legal standing to become American citizens. Given that the courts readily constructed American citizenship to be only for whites pre and post-slavery into the twentieth century, it

becomes clear that one must be white to be American (Haney-Lopez 2006). The interchangeability of “white” and “American” is often unquestioned by whites themselves. For white Americans, being white is the normal or default racial category that goes unacknowledged, while all other racial groups exist in opposition to whiteness; to be non-white can often translate to being non-American (Frankenberg 1994; Hughey 2010). Not only is whiteness related to Americanness, it is related to masculinity—given the historical reality that white men had the ability to obtain full citizenship, status, and privileges. Regardless of political ideology, white men generally utilize a relatively standardized notion of whiteness (Hughey 2010, 2011, 2012). Race is understood in terms of a binary of white and nonwhite—with white being the superior racial category, despite variations in how people view and operate within whiteness due to their material positions. White men still frame blackness—emphasizing black men, as a threat to whiteness generally, and white women in particular (Hughey 2012). Moreover, many whites associate black men with crime (Stroud 2015:85). Repeating negative tropes of black men and the need for protecting white womanhood allows some white men to “prove” their white male persona and reinforce whiteness as a racial project. White male dominance is reinforced through the owning and carrying of guns, because it is assumed that when a white man possesses a gun, he is not a criminal and he is performing his duty as a “good guy” (Stroud 2015; Metz 2015:23). The glorification of the mythology of the settler and cowboy in popular culture, manufacturers, and groups like the NRA aid in the replication of the virtuous white male archetype (Melzer 2012; Stroud 2015; Metz 2019). Stroud (2015) argues that the “social construction of the good guy is one example of hegemonic masculinity” (p. 33). Hegemonic masculinity can be thought of as an ideal

form of masculinity, which is constructed through “contrasts between masculinity and femininity and various forms of masculinity” (Stroud 2015:33). When viewed as a racialized and gendered object, a gun may provide white men a way to display the virtue of being a law-abiding, ideal male: “Given its central role in American culture, the good guy is the ultimate masculine ideal” (Stroud 2015:33).

Once the degree to which whiteness interacts with Americanness and masculinity is understood, it is clear that white males in the United States enjoy significant privilege. One of these privileges of whiteness is material benefits (Haney-López 2006). The material benefits of whiteness can be framed as a form of property, given full citizenship status throughout American history has incorporated property ownership as a key component. The foundations of whiteness as property is intertwined with two events: the ignoring of the land rights of Native Americans, and the conception of blacks as slaves and objects of commodity. By default, whites became the only owners of property. The current form of whiteness as property is “modern property” (Harris 1993). Whites obtain modern property by expecting and demanding privileges because of their whiteness, and this is reinforced by law and history (Harris 1993:1714).

Whiteness is hegemonic and in flux (Winant 2004; Hughey 2012). Increasingly, whites experience “white racial dualism”—that is, the state of benefiting from being white, while understanding that the benefits come at the expense of nonwhites (Winant 2004:4). Gun ownership is important because it is a material property that whites are privileged to, both historically and today. Research finds that the most likely gun owner in the U.S. is a white male (Celinska 2007:233; Mencken and Froese 2017:3). According to the General Social Survey (2018), the percentage of whites that owned guns was about

twice that of blacks. Guns can offer a sense of security for some whites who are unsettled by the ramifications of “white racial dualism,” as was the case when guns were used by whites who feared retaliation from former slaves (Bogus 1998; Dunbar-Ortiz 2018). This need for protection from an imagined nonwhite threat continues today. Despite data showing that general gun violence is down compared to twenty years ago, many whites feel a need to carry guns to protect against a perceived threat from nonwhite criminals (Metzl 2019:49). In addition to providing a sense of security or protection against feared retaliation, owning guns may be one way whites communicate their “true” Americanness. That is, gun ownership may signal the importance of guns to the maintenance of white supremacy in the United States. Gun ownership is a way to maintain and protect white privilege over resources and opportunities (elaborated below). In addition to the symbolism of the gun as both property and a means to protect property, guns may be a way to communicate traditional white masculinity and a display of the protection of white women.

Social Construction of Race

One of the crucial ways that the racial project of whiteness sustains itself is through the legal construction of race. Once the courts established that being white was synonymous with being American, whites gained a tighter grip on power. The legal construction of whiteness and its relationship to citizenship and gun ownership is an important extension of Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Delgado and Stefancic 2012). CRT can be thought of as a collaboration of disciplines and theories that work together to critique racism and work against it. According to CRT, racism is socially constructed and is part of the daily experience of all individuals reinforced by institutional processes and

policies (Delgado and Stefancic 2012). The social and legal construction of race benefits all whites, and whites determine how nonwhites are racialized to meet a particular need (Delgado and Stefancic 2012). According to Delgado and Stefancic (2012), CRT has six main components: (1) racism is not an “aberration;” (2) whites benefit from racism, therefore racism is not challenged; (3) race is socially constructed, not a biological reality; (4) nonwhite groups are racialized to different degrees and in different ways, depending on the needs of whites (“differential racialization”); (5) no individual can be reduced to a single demographic identity; and (6) it is crucial that the experience of racial oppression be delivered by nonwhite individuals, as their personal stories deserve to be heard to counter the dominant white narrative (p. 7-10). As mentioned previously, the history of the United States is full of instances of the gun rights of nonwhites being expanded and contracted depending on the needs of whites. This is why in Virginia, free blacks as well as slaves were armed to defend frontier plantations, but in 1967, a California gun control law was signed banning the carrying of guns in public—in response to the growing influence of the Black Panthers (Cottrol and Diamond 1991:6 pdf; Winkler [2011], 2013:244-245). If white men are overwhelmingly the owners of guns both today and in the past, then CRT argues that this differential in gun ownership is inherently linked to the legal and social processes of the U.S. that crafted gun ownership as an extension of the property and privileges of whiteness. Further, this extension means that the power of white men to be positioned as ideal Americans throughout history anchors the legal processes of affixing gun ownership to Americanness and is part of the larger racial project of whiteness generally, and white masculinity more specifically.

Gun ownership and whiteness are partially sustained through law and governmentality. These are elements of the social construction of race, which CRT posits as an element of white domination. The law as a social construction has three components that I discuss to show how they have interacted with whiteness and gun ownership: governmentality, neoliberalism, and illegality.

A gun may provide reassurance for a white man to protect himself and his family from a perceived threat from a nonwhite male, particularly since the construction of the ideal white family is of a heterosexual man and woman forming the center of the family. Similarly, owning a gun may be a reaction to a perceived threat to the “whiteness” of a geographic place.

Operating alongside, and sometimes connected with the legal construction of race, is shifting governmentality. The state, already built on white supremacy and operating as a mechanism for its continuation, shifts how governmentality is applied to the populace.

Governmentality. Neoliberalism as a racial project (Omi and Winant [1986] 2015) works in conjunction with governmentality. Governmentality refers to the techniques for controlling a population, and these techniques are constantly changing. The division between the state and the general population blurs over time. The concept of governmentality, as conceived by Michel Foucault, interprets power as something fluid that can be transferred throughout different levels of society (Walters 2012:12). Foucault called the constant interactions between different levels of society, institutions, groups, individuals, etc. as “microphysics of power” (Foucault 1977; Walters 2012:13). I interpret the current mode of governmentality in the United States as dependent on neoliberal ideology. The below example of “citizen protectors” (Carlson 2014) shows

how private individuals have taken up some of the duties that one might expect of law enforcement or other state-sanctioned authorities. This phenomenon of citizen protectors shows how power is transferred from the state to the private individual as a “technique of government” (Foucault 1977; Walters 2012:11) for controlling the populace.

Neoliberalism. Neoliberalism encourages the movement of power from the state to private entities or individuals (Carlson 2014:336). Once “responsibilized” (Garland 1996:452; Carlson 2014:336), private citizens take on responsibilities typically reserved for the state. This process manifests in policies like “stand your ground” laws and the increase in the concealed carrying of guns. A central component of neoliberalism is the emphasis of “personal responsibility” (Reiman and Leighton 2010; Stroud 2015).

Because neoliberal ideology connects crime to a lack of personal responsibility, whites who have conflated crime with nonwhiteness are able to ignore the structural causes of criminal behavior (Reiman and Leighton 2010; Stroud 2015). The status of being a responsible individual, that neoliberalism provides, encourages the carrying of guns by some white males who want to show they are willing to take up the personal responsibility of protecting themselves and others (Carlson 2014; Stroud 2015:116).

One “threat” to the white male citizen protector is the “illegal” nonwhite. The classification of nonwhite individuals as “illegal,” and their surveillance by the state and private individuals, is an example of how neoliberal governmentality shifts power from the “top,” down to individuals.

Illegality. Illegality is “a racialized, spatialized social condition which operates as governmentality by marginalizing and criminalizing immigrants” (Hiemstra 2010:74). In a neoliberal governmentality environment, whites may feel empowered or “conscripted”

to monitor those who are known or assumed to be immigrants (Hiemstra 2010:88).

Hiemstra (2010:77-78) cites Willen's (2007) "three dimensional" conceptualization of illegality: the first dimension is legal, the second dimension is racialization, and the third dimension is an individual's experience as "illegal" in the world. These three dimensions can be thought of as three steps in the process of illegality:

Immigration laws make migrant labor cheap while simultaneously categorizing, managing, and marking migrants in particular ways. The power of the law facilitates processes of racialization, through which immigrant bodies become marked as marginal, a marginalization deepened by powerful discourses of illegality that criminalize immigrants. Illegality also changes the spatiality of the border by drawing it inward (unevenly) from the country's physical boundaries in ways that profoundly impact immigrants' daily lives. (Hiemstra 2010:81)

Hiemstra (2010) discusses the way immigration laws in Colorado created a situation where police must inform Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) if they suspect an arrested individual is in the U.S. illegally, and public workers must require proof of a legal residence from individuals seeking public assistance (P. 87-88). Consequently, public workers become surveillants in a neoliberal governmentality project that monitors suspected illegal immigrants (P. 87-88). Private citizens are conscripted into this system as well. Everyday acts of discrimination and intimidation are ways that private citizens work to control immigrants at a local level (P.88).

Gun ownership on the part of whites can be framed as a possible "technique" (Foucault 1977) of governmentality—a way to police the civilian population, especially nonwhites. A "responsibilized" (Garland 1996; Carlson 2014) private citizen may decide that owning a gun is necessary for performing their duty as a monitor of, and/or protector against those deemed "illegal."

Neoliberalism uses the fears and resentments of whites to “rearticulate” (Omi and Winant [1986] 2015) reactions to nonwhite advancements. The neoliberal “techniques” (Foucault 1977) of governmentality that utilize the ownership of guns by white males also relate to theories of social threat/control and white backlash. I interpret social control and white backlash as relatively fast and direct responses to maintain white supremacy in the United States. Neoliberalism, with its “colorblind” (Bonilla-Silva 2014) ideology, is the current iteration of the white racial project and can be traced back to various threats and responses, which are detailed below.

Social Threat and White Backlash

Perceived social threats may lead whites to purchase guns or continue owning them. These threats may be some combination of: status anxiety (de Botton 2004; Carlson 2014); general social threat (Blalock 1967; Liska 1992; and racial threat (Blalock 1967; Flores 2015; Stroebe, Leander, and Kruglanski 2017). In response to these social threats, a government or other institution with authority will respond with “social control” (Liska 1992). Threats to the white status quo are met with a “white backlash” (King 1967; Hughey 2013). White backlash can operate at an official level as a form of social control, or it can operate on a smaller scale.

Social threats. The [social] threat hypothesis assumes that social control is a response of elites, authorities, and majorities to acts, people, and distributions of people deemed threatening to their interests” (Liska 1992:174). Within the framework of whiteness as a racial project, the reactions (social control) to perceived threats to whites in the U.S. is akin to the below discussion of understanding white backlash as a rearticulation (Omi and Winant 2015).

Throughout most of the twentieth century, and continuing today, there has been a decline in the dominance of the white male in all spheres, especially competition for jobs (Steinhorn 2014; Metzl 2019:74). By owning guns, white males may derive psychological protection against the threats to their dominance, because the gun symbolizes the historical power of white men (Steinhorn 2014; Metzl 2019:74). On the level of individual protection, guns are needed to defend a white male or his family from an imagined attacker (Stroud 2015; Metzl 2019): “gun ownership [becomes] a defense of internalized notions of racial order as well as an external personal safety” (Metzl 2019:75 referencing Stroud 2015).

In addition to guns functioning as an offset against challenges to white dominance, they also protect against victimization. For some white men, being a victim of an attack would threaten their sense of masculinity, as being a victim of a physical attack may be thought of as something that happens mostly to women (Stroud 2015:50).

The reactions to social threats and status anxiety experienced by white people can be conceptualized as “white backlash” (King 1967) and other social control responses, which are detailed below.

White backlash and other responses. White backlash is a counteraction to advances made by nonwhite groups (King 1967). Hughey (2014) describes white backlash in terms of three “waves” (P. 722). The first was an overt, and violent, reaction to the civil rights movement, to minimize the gains of nonwhites. Placed in the context of racial formation, the white backlash of the 1960s was a rearticulation, on the part of whites, to the civil rights movement (Omi and Winant 2015:165).

The backlash to the civil rights movement morphed into “new right” ideology, which harnessed white resentment and framed it as mainstream (Omi and Winant 2015). This second wave was a hallmark of the Reagan administration through the 1990s, as new right ideology used racial code words and attacked social welfare programs to harness white resentment (Hughey 2014:722).

The third backlash centers around the 2008 election of president Barack Obama. Movements such as the Tea Party and the Birther movement employed thinly veiled racial codes to continue channeling white resentment, as the election of a black man challenged long-held notions of who was a real American, and therefore who could be president (Hughey 2014:723). It is reasonable to frame the election of Donald Trump as a continuation of the third wave, considering Trump’s repeated use of both coded and blatantly racialized rhetoric.

White men may identify with ideologies that mesh with a backlash, to make sense of a country headed in a less white-centric and male-centric direction (Gidron and Hall 2017:63). The general white population operates within the white backlash, while on a more institutional and organized level, reactions to threats to white supremacy can be understood with social control hypotheses.

The three types of social control are: “fatal,” “coercive,” and “beneficent.” Fatal control refers to the use of homicide to control a threat. Coercive control is accomplished by the criminal justice system. Beneficent control is accomplished through social welfare programs.

“Law varies inversely with other social control” (Black 2010:107). Social control varies in amount and type, depending on the time and setting. Social control also has an

inverse relationship with “respectability,” so in a society with many laws, individuals who commit crimes are viewed as having low respectability. A common source of a perceived threat for white males is the experience of traveling through neighborhoods that are predominantly nonwhite (Stroud 2015:97). Stroud (2015) describes the use of code words like “war zone,” “bad parts of town,” and “bad neighborhood” that white men use when discussing their decision to carry guns in public (p. 96-97). These coded phrases are examples of how some whites imagine nonwhite neighborhoods to be inherently dangerous (Davis 2007; Stroud 2015:99-100). This racialized fear of crime on the part of whites leads to an increase in social control mechanisms, such as increases in arrests (Chiricos, McEntire, and Gertz 2001:323).

Social control in the U.S. acts as a racial project by using law unequally between whites and nonwhites. When the various levels of government no longer officially target nonwhite groups with codified laws, official institutions like the police may still implement social control via fatal or coercive means, and the private citizen may purchase guns or become a gun carrier to fill a perceived vacuum in state-sanctioned social control.

It may be the case that gun ownership acts as a reaction to a perceived lack of a governmental social control response to threats to white supremacy. Over time, the overarching white backlash has rearticulated into “new right” ideology that generates white resentment (Omi and Winant [1986] 2015:190). Perhaps guns provide a tangible sense of security as a form of protection from perceived threats, or they symbolize the power and control that whites have enjoyed, both historically and in the current moment.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

White male gun owners were the focus of the study. This is a qualitative study with data collected from in-depth interviews. Participants were chosen from a Southeastern city and surrounding area. The researcher's strategy for recruiting the initial participants utilized contacts from a previous project.

DURATION AND SCOPE

The interviews were conducted between February 28, 2019 and May 9, 2019. The project was limited to a mid-size city in the Southeast region of the U.S., and surrounding area. The city was chosen because it is the where the researcher lives. Eleven in-depth interviews were conducted. Ten of the eleven participants reside within an approximate radius of twenty miles from the city's center. One participant resides about 80 miles outside the main sample location. The original goal was to interview eleven to fifteen participants. This number was based on what the original proposed duration of the project. The interviews stopped after the eleventh interview in order to begin moving toward finishing the project, as it was beginning to stall. In qualitative research, the number of interviews is ideally based on data saturation—meaning the point when no new concepts or trends are being revealed in the data (Seidman 2013:58-59). It is likely that data saturation was not met with eleven interviews.

RESEARCH SITES

Interviews were conducted at cafes, restaurants, and libraries. One interview was conducted over-the-phone; during the interview the participant was at home and the

researcher was at a café. Participants chose the interview locations, and the researcher urged the participants to pick locations that were convenient for them.

INTERVIEWS

Interviews provide an opportunity to get a more in-depth perspective of gun owners in their own words (Seidman 2013:9). One of the major advantages of interviewing is that it provides an opportunity to explore a topic with someone who has lived experiences (Gillham 2000:16). Sometimes an interview participant is reluctant to be candid, especially if the interview involves a sensitive topic (P. 16) like guns and race. While interviews are useful for obtaining rich detail, the longer the interview, the more time that is needed for transcription and analysis (Gillham 2000:9; Seidman 2013:11).

Another aspect of interviewing that must be considered and navigated with care is “interviewing as exploitation” (Seidman 2013:12). The interviewer is in a position of power relative to the participant in the interview setting (P. 12), so it is important that the interviewer treat the participant with respect, and as a collaborator in a process of learning (P. 12). Beyond the ethical treatment of the participants, this project tries to offset the imbalance of “reciprocity” (Seidman 2013:110), meaning the benefit that the interviewer receives from the interviewee compared to the benefit the participant receives (P. 110). Interviews as a research method inherently give participants the opportunity to share their own stories and thoughts (P. 110), thereby having a chance to represent gun owners as real people, not caricatures. I expressed genuine interest in the participants’ thoughts, which made the process more positive and worthwhile for the participant (P. 110).

In-depth interviews allowed me to explore gun ownership from the point of view of the participants (Gillham 2000:16; Seidman 2013:13). The significant amount of time required by the interview process (Gillham 2000:9; Seidman 2013:11) was outweighed by the knowledge gained from the participants' sharing of their experiences.

The interview questions were aimed at: day-to-day experiences and personal history with guns; what meaning the participants attributed to being gun owners; thoughts on carrying a gun; and the relationship between the gun owning world and non-gun owning world.

SAMPLING

The first stage of sampling involved contacting various gun-related groups and acquaintances who know white male gun owners. Because this study focused on exploring the relationship between whiteness, and to a lesser degree masculinity, and gun ownership, it was logical to begin with a "purposive sample" (Babbie 2013:128-129) of white males who have owned, or currently own guns. The researcher is also a white male, so it is possible that the participants may have been more comfortable than if the interviewer had been nonwhite or female.

The only restriction with this population was age. The participants were 18 years or older, to ensure the participants were old enough to consent (LeCompte and Schensul 2015:58). The youngest participant was in his late twenties—this allowed for participants who had been gun owners longer and may have had more experiences to draw from. However, this was not a strict guideline, as the youngest participant offered valuable insights as well. Originally, current or former members of the military or police were planned to be avoided if possible, as they have a specific connection with guns that is

outside of the everyday experience that this study is examining. Because finding participants proved to be a slow process, it was not possible to eliminate former military or police officers. From this initial sample, I used “snowball sampling,” a technique that uses participant referrals for other potential participants (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981; Babbie 2013:129). Having interviewed gun owners for a previous class, I established relationships that yielded further participants. In turn, the second level of participants provided me with further contacts. This established another level of separation from the original contacts. One of the earlier interviews recommended an anonymous gun forum as a recruitment tool, and I was able to generate a new participant from that resource.

PARTICIPANT OVERVIEW

As previously mentioned, the participants were all white males. Their general ages ranged from mid-twenties to mid-seventies. The median general age range was mid-forties to mid-fifties. One participant did not have a gun registered under his name; however, he does share it with his wife (the owner) and fires it at gun ranges. He is the only participant that did not have a concealed carry license. Three participants grew up in a different region than the region of the study, and one participant immigrated to the U.S. as a young child. Three participants did not grow up with guns being part of their experience. The other participants grew up with guns, to varying degrees. Three of the participants are retired. The other eight participants reported their occupations as: creative freelancers (two participants); students (three participants); manager; business owner; and I.T. manager.

DATA ANALYSIS

Ten of the interview audio files were recorded with a digital audio recorder, and one was recorded using a mobile phone app. The audio files were uploaded to a computer and transcribed using an online service called Trint. The Trint website generated the transcripts using “automated speech-to-text algorithms” and can only be accessed by the user of the service (trint.com/faq). The computer that stored the audio files is password protected and is only used by the researcher.

Coding

Charmaz (2006) breaks grounded theory coding into two main steps. The first step is an “initial phase” that applies a code to each piece of data (P. 46). This was done by giving each sentence in an interview transcript a code. The second step, or “focused” phase, involved organizing the codes and finding trends (P. 46). These steps were accomplished using hand coding.

Line-by-line coding is useful because it forces the researcher to focus on the data and code what is represented in the data, instead of applying assumptions (Charmaz 2006:50). Because this technique was guided by the data in the transcript, any unexpected ideas that popped up were useful in subsequent interviews and exposed areas that should be considered moving forward (P. 50-51): “the grounded theory method itself contains correctives that reduce the likelihood that researchers merely superimpose their preconceived notions on the data” (51). An additional strength of line-by-line coding is that it encourages the researcher to be critical about the data and their own process (P. 51).

Memos

During the coding process, it is helpful to write memos. While coding, if something stood out, I recorded these thoughts in a memo. This was a way to loosely form trends and categories, as well as leading to the writing process of the thesis paper (Charmaz 2006:72).

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

A wide range of themes emerged from my interviews with eleven white men who owned guns. In total, nineteen separate themes and ninety-five “subthemes” were identified while coding the interview transcripts. To better organize the interview themes, four overarching frames were created: *Gun Ownership*, *Gun Culture and Conflict*, *Gun Rights and History*, and *Other Gun Thoughts*. These frames better situate the different themes derived from the interviews in relation to one another as part of a broader discussion of gun culture, history, and other related gun thoughts. Table 1 provides a summary of the individual respondent themes, while Table 2 places the themes within each frame.

The first table shows how often a theme was discussed by each participant. This table also shows the mean for each theme occurrence, as well as percentages that show each participant’s share of the total amount of theme occurrences. The second table organizes the themes into four frames and provides a brief description of each frame and the corresponding themes. Frequencies of the frames and themes are provided, as well as the percentage of the theme occurrence within a frame. I elaborate further below on each frame and its corresponding themes.

Table 1

Participant	Themes											Row and Ratio Percentage (All Themes)
	Gun as Tool	Shooting Individuals	The Gun Owner Experience	Non-Gun Owners	Gun Violence	Rights	Gender and Guns	Race and Guns	Social and Political Issues	Row and Ratio Percentage	Row and Ratio Percentage	
Anthony	2	2	6	14	5	5	4	5	3	0	46/1134 (4.06%)	73/1134 (6.44%)
Brad	2	2	7	18	6	6	1	1	1	5	53/1134 (4.67%)	128/1134 (11.29%)
Carl	5	2	8	22	4	0	5	4	7	0	57/1134 (5.03%)	128/1134 (11.29%)
Dennis	7	4	7	36	7	7	6	4	8	11	105/1134 (9.26%)	189/1134 (16.67%)
Evan	1	1	2	9	7	1	1	9	1	6	38/1134 (3.35%)	81/1134 (7.14%)
Fred	3	0	5	28	5	2	4	1	2	2	52/1134 (4.59%)	112/1134 (9.88%)
Glen	4	3	4	18	5	4	5	9	3	5	60/1134 (5.29%)	115/1134 (10.14%)
Hugh	1	4	3	23	4	4	2	3	5	2	51/1134 (4.50%)	87/1134 (7.67%)
Irwin	2	5	4	12	2	1	1	2	3	1	33/1134 (2.91%)	70/1134 (6.17%)
Jordan	1	1	2	17	2	2	2	6	2	0	35/1134 (3.09%)	78/1134 (6.88%)
Kurt	0	2	5	22	1	1	2	0	0	7	40/1134 (3.53%)	105/1134 (9.26%)
Column ratio and percentage	28/1134 (2.47%)	26/1134 (2.29%)	53/1134 (4.67%)	219/1134 (19.31%)	60/1134 (5.29%)	33/1134 (2.91%)	33/1134 (2.91%)	44/1134 (3.88%)	35/1134 (3.09%)	39/1134 (3.44%)		
Mean	2.55	2.36	4.82	19.91	5.46	3	3	4	3.18	3.55		

Table 1

Participant	Themes										Row and Ratio Percentage (All Themes)
	World is Dangerous	Gun Ownership's Influence	Who gets to Own a Gun	Carrying a Gun	Gun Ownership and Authority	U.S. Gun Culture	Guns as Protection	Assault-Style Rifles	Guns and Geography	Row and Ratio Percentage	
Anthony	8	2	3	7	5	1	1	0	0	27/1134 (2.38%)	73/1134 (6.44%)
Brad	11	8	2	17	19	4	5	3	6	75/1134 (6.61%)	128/1134 (11.29%)
Carl	8	4	2	7	7	5	4	1	1	39/1134 (3.44%)	128/1134 (11.29%)
Dennis	16	12	5	16	11	3	10	4	7	84/1134 (7.41%)	189/1134 (16.67%)
Evan	6	11	2	7	2	4	6	4	1	43/1134 (3.79%)	81/1134 (7.14%)
Fred	14	8	2	19	7	1	5	1	3	60/1134 (5.29%)	112/1134 (9.88%)
Glen	10	7	6	9	5	3	5	4	6	55/1134 (4.85%)	115/1134 (10.14%)
Hugh	9	2	1	9	8	0	3	2	2	36/1134 (3.17%)	87/1134 (7.67%)
Irwin	9	2	3	10	3	1	4	1	4	37/1134 (3.26%)	70/1134 (6.17%)
Jordan	10	2	5	13	4	5	2	0	2	43/1134 (3.26%)	78/1134 (6.88%)
Kurt	7	3	3	30	8	11	3	0	0	65/1134 (5.73%)	105/1134 (9.26%)
Column ratio and percentage	108/1134 (9.52%)	61/1134 (5.38%)	34/1134 (3.00%)	144/1134 (12.70%)	79/1134 (6.97%)	38/1134 (3.35%)	48/1134 (4.23%)	20/1134 (1.76%)	32/1134 (2.82%)		
Mean	9.82	5.55	3.09	13.09	7.18	3.46	4.36	1.82	2.91		

Table 2

Frame/Theme	Short Description	Frequency	Frame Total %
<i>Gun Ownership</i>	Day-to-day and individual aspects of being a gun owner.	502	100%
The Gun Owner Experience	Owning a gun has a wide range of effects on the owner: urge to have gun nearby; guns as social connection; stigma.	219	43.63%
Non-Gun Owners	How the gun owner relates to non-gun owners.	60	11.95%
Gender and Guns	Includes women and guns, masculinity, and experience of being a white male.	44	8.76%
Race and Guns	Includes commenting on diversity of gun owners, relevance of race for gun ownership, and expressing victimization of white males.	35	6.97%
Carrying a Gun	This includes participant's thoughts on concealed carrying, open carrying, and the meaning/importance of carrying.	144	28.69%
<i>Gun Culture and Conflict</i>	How the participants understand gun ownership's relationship to the larger society.	422	100%
Social and Political Issues	Includes polarization, police shootings, immigration, and danger of the Left.	39	9.24%
World is Dangerous	Includes discussion of survivalism, the direction the nation is moving, and the threat of criminals.	108	25.59%
Gun Violence	Includes effect of gun control on gun violence, how gun violence is framed by others, and causes of gun violence.	33	7.82%
Gun Ownership's Influence	Includes militarization of daily life, gun rights movements, gun as a symbol.	61	14.45%
Gun Ownership and Authority	Includes gun ownership and the government, police interactions, and government subsidization of gun ownership.	79	18.72%
Guns as Protection	Participant's thoughts on who is worthy of the use of guns for protection, what guns protect against, and how the individual is responsible for protecting themselves and family.	48	11.37%
Who gets to Own	Participant's thoughts on who should be allowed to own guns. Also includes thoughts related to barriers to ownership.	34	8.06%
Assault-Style Rifles	Participant's thoughts on assault-style rifles. This includes discussion of guns like the AR15	20	4.74%

Table 2

Frame/Theme	Short Description	Frequency	Frame Total %
<i>Gun Rights and History</i>	Gun ownership in the context of history and geography.	156	100%
U.S. Gun Culture	History of guns in the U.S.; thoughts on NRA.	38	24.36%
Guns and Geography	Participant's thoughts on geography relates to gun ownership. This includes comparing urban gun owners with rural gun owners, regional differences in gun culture, and dangerous parts of cities.	32	20.51%
Rights	Participant expressing general concepts of rights, freedom, the frontier, patriotism, and liberty.	33	21.15%
Individuals	The gun owner as an individual has a lot of responsibility for the safety of himself and others. Protection from others is only the responsibility of individuals. When the individual is not valued, freedom is lost.	53	33.97%
<i>Other Gun Thoughts</i>	Participants' thoughts on guns as objects and what it is like to shoot a gun.	54	100%
Gun as Tool	Guns don't have an inherent meaning or symbolize anything. Any tool can be used to cause harm, and a gun is no different.	28	51.85%
Shooting Activities	What the experience of shooting a gun is like for the participant.	26	48.15%
<i>Total Occurrences</i>		1134	---

GUN OWNERSHIP

The themes falling under the *Gun Ownership* frame represent the day-to-day aspects of being a gun owner and the internal and individual experiences of the participants. The main themes discussed in this section are: “The Gun Owner Experience” (43.63% of the occurrences and the most common theme), “Non-Gun Owners” (11.95% of occurrences), “Gender and Guns” (8.76% of occurrences), “Race and Guns” (6.97% of occurrences), and “Carrying a Gun” (28.69% of occurrences). The *Gun Ownership* frame represents 44.27 percent of the theme occurrences across the entire project.

To varying degrees, the participants assigned meaning or value to gun ownership. Some saw gun ownership as something that is matter of fact and akin to owning a car. Some considered gun ownership as a duty and necessary for being a free citizen. Gender and race were topics that only occasionally arose without direct questions. Opinions on carrying guns outside of one’s home were varied and numerous.

The Gun Owner Experience

The personal experience of owning guns was a fundamental theme that emerged in the interviews. This theme contains subthemes of psychology and gun ownership, day-to-day gun ownership experiences, social life and guns, and the gun owner identity. “The Gun Owner Experience” theme accounted for the most occurrences within the *Gun Ownership* frame, with 43.63 percent of the occurrences; it accounted for 19.31 percent of all themes within the project.

Discussions of the internal experiences of gun owners often arose when interview questions addressed the carrying of guns. A student in his late 30s named Brad discussed

how it felt when he was not carrying a gun: “So, I mean it’s just second nature to me to carry a gun. Like, like to be honest I feel almost naked if I don’t have one.” Later, Brad described the feeling further: “It’s something I’ve always had for my entire adult life. And therefore, if I don’t have it I’m automatically reaching for it. There’s a reason I keep my holster on me even though [it’s not] there. So I can feel the weight and think it’s still there.”

When asked to imagine what it would be like if they were no longer able to own guns, many expressed that it would be a negative experience. Irwin, who was retired and in his 70s said, “Well, I’d feel vulnerable. I don’t know. I can’t imagine a circumstance where I wouldn’t have guns. But the problem is that, you’ll never have a situation where the criminals don’t have guns or have access to them somehow.” While Irwin framed the lack of guns as losing the ability to protect himself, other participants invoked the loss of natural rights or a source of recreation.

Many of the participants mentioned being extremely aware of their surroundings, and the people around them. Dennis, a student in his 30’s, expressed a strong sense of awareness of others and the need to have a gun for protection:

Being more attuned to the aspect of my own safety has uh, it has changed the way I interact with people, especially strangers on the street, who like, I don’t know at all. They don’t look professional or well-dressed like, you know, they’re like a bum. Even when I don’t have my gun on, I say, [unclear] I can hear you fine, what do you want? . . . Keeping you know, a bit of distance between me. . . . I mean, I look around more often, you know, I try to, be smarter without it letting, without living a life of fear.

It may be worth considering to what degree this “situational awareness” (a term used by Fred) adds stress to an individual’s daily life. While non-gun carriers can certainly

practice “situational awareness,” they do not have to worry about keeping a gun concealed or having it stolen.

Throughout the interviews, there was a strong emotional component for some participants. As we saw earlier with Evan’s concern that not having guns would take away a large part of his life, Fred also expressed the emotional impact guns have for him. Fred is an I.T. manager in his early 50s. He described an occurrence when he was openly carrying a gun in a store, and was approached by a military veteran:

I was in Wal-Mart one particular day, and, young man, came walking straight up to me. Extending his hand, said “I want to thank you for protecting the Second Amendment.” He was, he was an Iraqi war veteran, that had been in the sandbox. And he was thanking. I’m sorry, I get choked up about this one. He was actually thanking me.

For Fred, recalling this story brought up an emotional response, and he was audibly becoming choked up. While no other participants expressed emotion to that level, it is clear that the personal connection to gun ownership is often strong.

Some participants did not express an emotional connection to guns or were dismissive of the idea that one could become emotionally connected to them. Glen, a student in his 20s, seemed noncommittal about how important guns were to him: “So, not that firearms are the central part of my life, 'cause they're not. Like I've said, I see them as a tool.” As will be discussed later, a common theme was the idea that a gun is just like any other tool. Therefore, for Glen, he might argue that you can’t be connected to the gun in any sort of emotional way, because it is only a tool. Irwin might have disagreed with Glen, as carrying a gun, “gives me a lot greater feeling of self-confidence.”

Eight of the eleven men interviewed for this project grew up with guns. The presence of guns early in life corresponded to the importance of their identities as gun owners. As Carl described:

Yeah, my dad, my dad was one of those types that if Facebook was around he'd probably get in trouble because, one of my earliest recollections, not a recollection but a picture, was me in diapers and he laid a hunting rifle like across my lap to take to his buddies at work and show it to 'em, so. You know that would have been . . . And I grew up, you know, I had a stuffed deer head mount in my bedroom growing up, and stuffed pheasant, and had shotgun and rifle hanging, and I still own those, you know they're passed down.

Carl mentioned that he has guns that were passed down to him. He has been around guns his entire life. Those exposed to guns early in life may “internalize” the day-to-day reality of gun ownership, which Berger and Luckmann (1996) describe as part of “primary socialization” (p. 130-131). Fred talked about seeing guns clearly on display in his childhood home: “Back in the '70s everybody had wooden double-glass door gun cabinets. . . . And since the time I was about seven or eight years old, I knew exactly where he kept the key to the cabinet.” Jordan shared memories of him and his friends bringing guns to school on Friday so they could go hunting after school. This was common for his teachers as well: “Teachers had guns. We talked about guns. Teachers would show us guns in their, out of their trunks.”

Distinctions between gun owners who grew up with guns, compared to those who did not, were very apparent to some participants. One of the terms to describe someone who grew up with guns is “Fudd.” Dennis explained that the term originated with, “Elmer Fudd, I think from the cartoon.” From Dennis’s point of view, as someone who did not grow up with guns, “Fudds” are more complacent in terms of gun rights; “Fudds” have always had guns as part of their lives, and have taken gun ownership, as a right, for

granted. Another theme that emerged was that gun owners are a diverse group, and that this diversity shows that guns are a benefit for society and a way to connect people who might not normally interact with each other. From Carl's point of view, he did not fit the mold of what a typical gun owner is, and he was part of this diverse group: "I mean, the Second Amendment, it doesn't matter whether you're right wing, left wing, straight, you know, gay."

The public sphere is not always welcoming, from a gun carrier perspective. I asked how the participants felt about encountering "no guns" signs that are posted in various places. The responses ranged from amusement, annoyance, and disregard. Glen recalled his thoughts when encountering "no guns" signage at a college: "When I go to the university, I think, hello killing spree, because I see those on the law school all the time."

Another burden on the gun owner is the awareness that even though they may never need to use their gun for defense, they need to be prepared to do so. Evan was very aware of this mental state:

Ninety-nine percent of the time, you're never going to use it. But, you [need to] be prepared for the one time that you do. And then maybe [unclear], you may choose not to use it. And it may be the best thing 'cause you didn't, but, it's kinda like a case by case basis I guess. It ain't like you're going to have a lot of opportunities to do that, thank god. But you know I think you should at least run that scenario through your head several times before you, you know before you ever get in that situation, you know, so. I hate to think about having to do it. But I'm sure most people that carry, feel that same way.

Other participants shared experiencing a relative amount of stress in anticipation of the possibility the gun may be needed for protection, but this was offset by the security that a gun provided the participants.

The participants described gun ownership as essential and natural. Some participants expressed feeling uncomfortable when they were not near their guns and expressed that not having guns at all would be a negative experience. Most of the participants grew up with guns, and this has informed their current lives. Many of the participants described being hyper-aware of their surroundings or practicing “situational awareness,” and they connected this to being gun owners and/or carrying their guns in public. The participants’ thoughts on non-gun owners are discussed in the next section, which includes examples of positive and negative interactions with non-gun owners.

Non-Gun Owners

How guns and gun ownership were perceived by non-gun owners was an important theme for the participants. The “Non-Gun Owners” theme accounted for 11.95 percent of theme occurrences within the *Gun Ownership* frame, and 5.29 percent of theme occurrences across the entire project. Notable subthemes that emerged were concerns about non-gunowners being misinformed, concerns about non-gun owners having unfair influence on gun regulation, and descriptions of interactions with non-gun owners.

A recurring concern was that there are deep misunderstandings about guns held by various groups, especially the news media. Many participants expressed respect for the rights of those who do not wish to own guns; however, the participants considered non-gun owners to be misguided in any support for increased gun regulation. The politicization of guns (Braman and Kahan 2006; Celinska 2007; Carlson 2015; Mencken and Froese 2017) was lamented by some participants. Many of the participants understood gun ownership as matter of fact, or a default status, and not something to be

debated or interfered with by the government. There were wide differences among participants regarding interactions with non-gun owners; one participant who openly carried nearly everywhere claimed to almost never experience negative reactions, while another participant has felt deeply stigmatized by co-workers who knew he owned guns.

Dennis expressed confidence in his assessment of non-gun owners having a flawed understanding of gun ownership:

The problem we get is when people start demonizing gun ownership, in places like [name of a city], where they stop teaching the responsibilities of what a gun is. . . . If you don't tell them every fact and [unclear] to the way you do it, they will piece it together themselves, and they will often piece [it] together wrong.

This frustration with non-gun owners having influence on the gun control issue was also expressed by Evan, who doesn't "like the idea of people who don't own guns, telling people who own guns . . . what to do with them." Expressing similar sentiments to Dennis and Evan, Fred considers gun regulations as "emotional attempts to extend control over an individual decision to exercise a right or not."

A commonality between Dennis, Evan, and Fred is their imagining of non-gun owners as uninformed or misinformed, as well as irrational. They used language like: "piece together wrong," "misinformation," and "emotional attempts." All three participants were also uncomfortable with non-gun owners' involvement in decisions that might affect gun owners.

The participants had a wide range of opinions and descriptions of interactions with non-gun owners. Hugh described encountering unpleasant interactions with coworkers regarding gun ownership:

I know that there are people thinks differently of me because I have guns. And, they're a little judge-y. Especially the people I work with. Who are very, they're young. You know, very liberal, and uh, so I think that they, they have an opinion

on it. I think it's just like, it's my right, you know. It's in the constitution. And, I think I'm a responsible gun owner and I have a right to carry, to have a gun and carry it if I want.

Conversely, Irwin talked about being an open carrier for about fifty years, and only having one negative reaction from another person:

I've only had one person in my lifetime ever come up and complain to me about it. . . . She said it scared her but it didn't scare her enough that she was afraid to come up and talk to me about it. So I don't really think she was scared. She may have been something else, but not, I don't think scared was a proper description of what she was. But, I don't know what she was but. Just because I don't say anything doesn't mean that they approve, or that they like it, or that they're comfortable with it. But, I'm not really too concerned with their comfort level. I'm more concerned with my comfort level and I feel better if I'm armed.

Irwin did acknowledge that others may be uncomfortable expressing disapproval to someone carrying a gun. As mentioned above, Fred was thanked by a stranger for carrying a gun in public; this highlights the variety of interactions with others that are not wholly negative around gun ownership. A gun owner's experience with the general public is likely to be influenced by other factors as well. One may receive a very different reaction carrying a gun in a city compared to a rural area; or depending on the race of the carrier compared to the racial makeup of the environment (Leonardatos 1999; Mencken and Froese 2017). Other perspectives exist about who gets to be a gun owner in relation to gender and race, which will be further discussed below.

Gender and Guns

The discussion around gender and masculinity in the context of guns was often related to the participants' conception of how gun ownership corresponded to "being a man" and their role as a protector. Participants also noted that guns were a way for women to "level the playing field," against the perceived superiority of a male attacker. Our conversations rarely included overt statements of gender or masculinity. However, a

few participants expressed opinions on the current #MeToo climate in relation to their perceptions of men being unfairly attacked. “Gender and Guns” accounted for 8.76 percent of theme occurrences within the *Gun Ownership* frame, and 3.88 percent of all theme occurrences across the entire project.

One of the few participants who discussed gender in some detail was Glen, a student in his mid-20s. Glen expressed concern that the U.S. was going “too far” with gender equality. Here is our exchange:

Glen: I know in the day and age, we kind of live in the future is female age. Everyone's getting the shirts.

Interviewer: The future is female?

Glen: Yeah, the future is female. . . . I see that shirt all the time. A lot at the law school. And, I think people are just taking the current Feminist mentality too far. Away from its true meaning. I consider my wife to be a true feminist. She is pro-life. She's a police officer. Believes in the second amendment. Republican through and through. Believes in law and order. And, empowering women. But, she also respects that men have the same equality. She understands that equity is not the way. And that's not me telling her, influencing her, whatever. That's the way, she came to believe. That's [unclear]. And it's, it's; for me, being a man, I view firearms, because this is the age I live in; firearms, I view that as my most effective way to defend my family. The family I hope to have, because I don't have kids yet. But for now, defend my wife. But also my mother, my dad, my brother.

For Glen, assigning men the role of protectors of their wives and family is compatible with feminism. In Glen's understanding of feminism, men and women are inherently different; he says his wife is a “true feminist” who “understands that equity is not the way.” A gun can be a way for women to “level the playing field:”

Biologically, I'm not sexist in any way. I just look at the facts. Biologically, more often than not, a man is stronger than a woman. And a firearm, especially in abusive relationships, levels the playing field. And even amongst men--you have a four-foot scrawny individual, who is getting pummeled by a six foot guy. A firearm is going to level the playing field. That's what firearms have always done.

Glen is using common rhetoric that men use to reinforce masculinity (Hughey 2012): women are physically weaker than men, so having an unequal share of power between men and women is justified. Hughey (2012) suggests that men frame women as being weak and in need of male protection, as a way to reinforce traditional masculinity. Ultimately, as Glen mentioned above, men are responsible for protection.

Hugh expressed frustration with the current moment of critically examining male dominance in the U.S.:

Some people's lives deserve to be ruined. Some don't. . . . Or, you know, anybody can make up a lie about anybody. You know, like, you don't see white men making lies up about women. I'm sure, that, a lot of the accusers are truthful. But, of all of these guys and powerful men that have been brought down, somewhere in there, there was a lie. And that person's life is ruined, you know, careers are ruined by a lie. And it's because they're a white male. They're a victim of that. I think it's a big problem and I think everybody needs to be, quit being so sensitive.

Hugh also brought up the aspect that many of the men who have been accused of wrongdoing are white, and that this is partially why they are being accused: "They're a victim of that. I think it's a big problem and I think everybody needs to be, quit being so sensitive." Hugh feels deeply about what he perceives as unfair attention on race and gender. Hugh dismissed the idea of "white privilege" as "ridiculous:"

I'm not allowed to have an opinion on anything. I got to walk on eggshells. . . . I mean like; on National Women's Day. One of the girls at work was like, it's National Women's Day. [unclear] "Fuck, men. Men suck." And I'm like, I'm like, "what?" She's like, "no, men fucking suck." I'm like, if I, can I, there is no way I could say that, as a man. . . . I have to be so careful about what I say in this whole like, I don't know, the White Privilege thing. . . . if I'm in Helena, Montana. You know, maybe there's some white privilege there, you know. But, I don't think it's as big as everybody says, and, I don't know. I just think it's ridiculous.

Carl was skeptical of the project's focus on white males:

Carl: Why just white males?

Interviewer: Well, white males are, they're the ones, um [that] proportionately own [the] most guns out of any group. So, I'm kind of curious, is there something there?

Carl: [Aren't whites] the largest part of the population though?

Interviewer: Well, it's proportion, . . . a white male is more likely to own a gun than any other group.

Participant: Why do you think that is?

Interviewer: That's kind of what, that's part of what . . . [overtalk].

Participant: I would, I would like to know that too . . .

Carl then asked about white males being the most likely gun owners in the U.S.: “Do you think it goes back to the fact that you know, up until the 60s I mean every, every war was basically fought by white males?” Following up on his thoughts about white males fighting in wars, Carl suggested it began with the “World War II generation,” which Carl suggested were comprised of “white males.” Being a soldier gets passed down to each new generation, and as Carl put it, gun ownership “starts to drift down.” For some of the participants, gun ownership fulfills their role as protectors, which is a responsibility for men. Women were considered as weaker and needing protection. If women were not in the company of a male protector, a gun could help “level the playing field.” Although masculinity was not explicitly discussed by many participants, there is an underlying perception that a gun owner is a man, particularly a white man. This perspective is better informed by exploring how participants connected race and guns.

Race and Guns

As with gender, race was rarely discussed overtly or in detail. This theme accounted for 6.97 percent of theme occurrences within the *Gun Ownership* frame, and 3.07 percent of all theme occurrences in entire project. Subthemes that emerged included:

diversity of gun owners, relevance of race and gun ownership, and victimization of white males. Some participants occasionally used racialized language, or “coded words” (Omi and Winant 2015: 192-194), especially in reference to those who possess guns illegally.

When asked about the historical violence that has been committed against nonwhite groups, some participants steered the discussion toward expressing the idea that all groups equally need protection. Some participants expressed frustration with nonwhites expressing their “identity.” The relationship between white supremacist groups and mass shootings was occasionally discussed. Irwin acknowledged race in the context of feeling threatened. Another participant, Dennis, discussed how gun ownership could be used to benefit African Americans.

While discussing whether gun ownership had a meaning for him, Glen included a comment on those who own guns illegally:

Some people who own guns illegally; I can definitely tell you drug dealers, gang bangers, thugs. And I don't use those as kind of derogatory, towards any social group. It's just, you know, we think of a certain type of person that commits crimes and falls into a certain type of lifestyle. I think, they think that's more of a power trip--a gun is power.

Glen made a distinction between those who illegally own guns—“drug dealers, gang bangers, thugs” and legal owners. While Glen made sure to say those descriptions were not meant to be “derogatory, towards any social group,” there is a history of terms like “gang bangers” or “thugs” being used as code words by whites who are threatened by nonwhite males, particularly black men (Stroud 2017:98).

Irwin shared an incident in which he felt threatened by a group of black men—Irwin hinted at a connection between their being black and his discomfort, but it was not

clear to what extent racial bias informed his concern. Here is Irwin's response to a question about feeling threatened:

Interviewer: Have you ever felt threatened personally, or that you needed to protect someone because of being a white male, that you may have been a target, by, like a different group? Be it someone who wasn't white, or you knew had a different background or different political . . .

Irwin: I don't know, that's a tough question. It's hard to; well the instant that I mentioned to you was, those young men were all black and there were some racial comments coming from them that night which disturbed me. And I've been in a couple of situations that were similar to that in the past. But, none of it ever came to the point of me actually having to unholster my weapon. . . . But there are times when I've felt uncomfortable.

Irwin freely acknowledged being threatened by a group of men who also happened to be black. There is no coded language, but it is difficult to gauge what role any implicit bias played in Irwin's feelings of discomfort (Stroud 2015:144).

When asked about nonwhite or minority groups who might need guns for protection, some participants declined to acknowledge that there are any differences in the level of potential danger among different groups. Glen acknowledged the violence committed against various minority groups, but he also doesn't think any demographic differences should be considered in determining who needs protection:

So like the two mosques in New Zealand that just got shot up today. Honestly, forget the race, forget the politics, forget sex, religion. Forget all that. What it all boils down to no matter what situation it is: human beings, we have someone morally wrong trying to wrong others by injuring them severely for any number of piss-poor reasons.

Glen used colorblind rhetoric, that race nor the racializing of Muslims matters for why a mass shooting took place (Selod 2015:78), when he suggests that the only aspect of the mosque shootings that matters is the morally wrong act of murder. Glen may truly value all human life equally, but by shifting the tragedy away from its white nationalist context,

it obscures its relationship to whiteness. Irwin responded in a similar way: “There've been some black churches that were attacked and there've been some white churches. And there've been; I don't think there's any religion that hasn't been attacked somewhere, sometime. It's hard to understand the reasoning behind that.” For Irwin, any racial group or religious group has the same risk of being attacked, and demographic characteristics of the victim and attacker are not important.

White supremacist groups were acknowledged by some of the participants when discussing mass shootings. Hugh described going to see a movie with his family:

And we were seeing *Black Panther*. And I was like, man, this is [the] perfect kind of movie for some dumbass to you know, come in, seemingly thinking he's going to shoot a bunch of black people. Some white supremacist or something. That was the; but I hadn't felt that in many other theaters. I think it had to do with that movie, why I felt that way.

It can be inferred that Hugh was aware of the national discussion surrounding *Black Panther's* success with a majority black cast, and he may have imagined a white supremacist wanting to target a viewing audience. The discussion of race around *Black Panther*, and the precedent for mass shootings of event audiences may have been on Hugh's mind in the movie theater. Irwin expressed frustration with how he felt the news media lumps mass shooters and law-abiding gun owners like himself:

The media, as far as the media is concerned there's no difference between a person like me and a person that goes in and shoots up a school. We're both gun owners, That's it. And usually white. So, yeah those are exactly the same, type, of, the same group of people.

Irwin used satire to critique the news media's negative portrayal of gun owners (Downs 2002:45, 53). Anthony, the mid 40s creative freelancer, also expressed frustration with rhetoric around the national discussion of gun ownership:

Well we're not having the hard, it's harder to have with the tough debates, the tough talks about guns, about real issues with guns without it going to, where, 'you're just anti-gun, you're not American.' And then, 'oh no you're just a gun-toting racist.' It's like, when did race come into owning a gun, you know?

Anthony was discouraged by the generalizations that are used to frame the gun debate as a binary. On one side, "not American" and on the other side, "gun-toting racist."

While some participants felt stigmatized as white gun owners, Dennis suggested that guns could benefit African Americans in the same ways as whites:

What I really wish, as a white gun owner, is for, you know, the black community [unclear] [had] more acceptance of gun ownership. And a lot of them, when I hear them talk at anti-gun events, it's always because, somebody in their family has been affected by gang violence. Be it their, a person they knew was involved in the gang, or was a stray, like at [name of city] there was a woman who said her son was shot at a park--[unclear] a stray bullet hit him. A tragedy, but, if you live in a dangerous area, all the more reason for you to, you know, realize that you need to have a gun yourself because criminals aren't going to abide by that. . . . So the bottom line is, the criminals are going to get guns and they're gonna do bad things with them. And, I just wish that poor communities which tend to be more African-American in cities, would realize the value of, if more of their people were armed. And, accepted the responsibilities that came with it, like: being responsible for your house, being responsible for your yard, being responsible for your community, and [unclear] their mindset would change with the gun ownership, that they would [unclear] report crime, report, hey I saw this gun deal go down. I think their communities would ultimately suffer less gun violence.

Dennis described gun ownership as transformative. For Dennis, guns had an immediate effect as protection against criminals, and the long-term effect of guns is that they help instill a previously missing set of positive qualities: "being responsible for your house, being responsible for your yard, being responsible for your community." Dennis's language hints at cultural theories of race that propose that inequalities between racial groups are a result of racial group culture (Moynihan 1965; Patterson 2006). Gun ownership as a solution to inequality removes responsibility for addressing social problems from those who have power. There is no need for doing the work of addressing

embedded structural factors when the solution is as simple as encouraging people to become gun owners.

As with gender, discussions of race were brief. In the cases it did come up, the threats to nonwhite or minority groups were often viewed as no more concerning than whites or Christians. Some of the participants felt stigmatized because they were white gun owners, expressing a perception of being lumped in with white nationalists. Only one participant expressed an experience of discomfort with nonwhites. Another singular exchange centered on a participant's suggestion that blacks were missing out on the benefits that gun ownership provides. One benefit that whites enjoy is they historically have had less complications when carrying a gun in public.

Carrying a Gun in the World

Of all the general topics that came up during the interviews, gun carrying was the second-most frequent theme within the project. "Carrying a Gun in the World" accounted for 28.69 percent of the *Gun Ownership* frame, and 12.70 percent of all themes. At the time of the interviews, the state in which many of the participants resided passed a bill that removed the requirement for a concealed carry permit. When a permit is not required to carry a concealed gun, it is referred to as "constitutional carry" (National Rifle Association 2020)." Subthemes of *Carrying a Gun in the World* cover open carrying, concealed carrying, the virtue of carriers, distinguishing "official" carriers from "nonofficial" carriers, and tension between open and concealed carriers.

Of the eleven participants, four shared that they have openly carried a gun or currently openly carry a gun. Dennis described his act of openly carrying as a way to communicate to other citizens that it is legal if they choose to do so: "Like I said, I do it

as a, as an intentional act to show people that we can have openly carry firearms. People can be gun owners and carry guns. You just don't always see it, and I'm letting you see it, 'cause it's the more polite thing to do.” Dennis viewed open carry as a way to desensitize the general public to the open display of guns by an ordinary citizen. As a white male, it is possible that Dennis feels more comfortable than a person of color might. For the most part, Dennis shared that he received little resistance to his open carrying inside of businesses:

And then there was [a local café chain]. I think I was, I was there an hour before someone noticed, and I'm like, all right can I get a refill on my coffee and left. But other than that like, you know like [chain restaurant], corporate policy--no guns, they don't care. I walked in there with an AR15 one time, and they did not [unclear].

Dennis felt confident enough to walk into a restaurant openly carrying an AR15, which is a gun that resembles a military or law enforcement rifle, even though the restaurant, as Dennis stated, had a “corporate policy” of “no guns.” According to Fred, the I.T. manager in his late 40s, his experiences openly carrying in public have all been positive:

I have not had one single negative interaction with the public or with law enforcement. There's a restaurant, . . . several guys convinced me, we need to go to lunch and try this new restaurant. And the only table available in that restaurant was right next to three uniformed state troopers. I could literally extend my right arm, and touch one of them on the shoulder. They didn't, they didn't say a single word. They didn't ask me for identification, they didn't ask me to move. . . . We sat down, we ate, they finished their meal, went back to their cruisers, went back on duty.

Not all the participants thought open carrying was a good idea. Jordan was matter of fact with his opinion:

But no, I do not, as a general rule, do not open carry. I know it's legal. You're just asking for trouble. And, defeats the whole purpose of having one to protect yourself. Because, if somebody's intentionally thinking of doing harm, my guess is, the first person they're going after is the one's with weapons.

Open carrying provides someone like Irwin a sense of safety, while for Jordan, it makes him feel less safe. The opposing sides among some of the participants will be further discussed below.

Many of the participants have expressed the sentiment that carrying a concealed gun has made them more cautious and alert, as well as increased their sense of safety and confidence. None of the participants seemed to take the responsibility and risk of concealed carrying lightly, as Carl expressed:

The old saying is "an armed society should be a polite society," and, you know hopefully if a person is carrying legally concealed they've been through the class, they know the ramifications and the implications of using that firearm and that firearm is not a first option, it is the last line of defense.

Before the recent change to the carrying law in the state that many of the participants reside, if someone wanted to legally carry a gun concealed, they needed to take a class.

For Brad, those who have gone through the training process can be trusted. Brad contrasts these responsible carriers with those who are carrying illegally:

Responsible carrying is a sign that, that person has likely been trained has gone through stuff. Criminal elements, you typically you see will do, they will, it's called 'Mexican carry.' And [unclear] the street, but like, they'll carry in the waistband of their pants without a holster. Which is incredibly stupid, [unclear] shot himself in the junk recently. They, they'll tend to brandish it. Brandishing is, not having it in the holster, having it slung, it's waving it around, pointing it at people, shooting it like this [makes a gesture].

Brad described a stark difference between those who carried legally and those who did not. While it is a reasonable assumption that someone who carries their gun in a reckless fashion—"Mexican carry" or "in the waistband of their pants," was less likely to have gone through an official training process, there is no way to know for sure that someone who was carrying in a more traditionally acceptable fashion was doing so legally. Brad's use of "Mexican carry" may be problematic in that it references a nationality that is often

criminalized because they are considered nonwhite (Hiemstra 2010). The gesture referred to in Brad's quote is that of holding a gun in a sideways fashion. This way of holding a gun has been shown in popular culture depictions of criminals using guns.

An unexpected theme arose near the end of the interviews: tension between some concealed carriers and some open carriers. This was first brought up by Irwin, who was the third to last participant interviewed: "I've never seen a bunch of people so determined to make enemies out of their friends. They; the people that open carry hate people that carry concealed." I first contacted Irwin on a gun ownership forum. Irwin replied to a post I made recruiting participants for the project. When we met for the interview, he apologized for some of the users on the forum who he thought were being inappropriate. In a sarcastic tone, Irwin described how each side talks about the other. He began by acting out how open carriers talk about concealed carriers: "Oh sure. Those sell outs, they're all sell outs. They're, they bought into the government's scheme." Irwin then switched to acting out how the concealed carriers speak about open carriers: "And the people that open carry are all rude bastards, that don't care about people's feelings. That's the way that most concealed carry people feel about 'em. And, they don't have enough training, they don't [unclear]." Most of the participants either carried concealed or openly, but generally did not express the animosity toward other carrying types that Irwin described. There was general consensus carrying a gun is a positive act, when done legally. Overall, this section has addressed how the participants understand their personal experience as gun owners. These experiences also inform their relationship with the larger gun-owning culture and those who are not gun owners, which I turn to in the next section.

GUN CULTURE AND CONFLICT

How the participants understand gun ownership's relationship to the larger society and the non-gun owning populace forms the basis of this frame. The main themes explored are: (1) "Social and Political Issues," (2) "World is Dangerous," (3) "Gun Violence," (4) "Gun Ownership's Influence," (5) "Gun Ownership and Authority," (6) "Guns as Protection," (7) "Who Gets to Own," and (8) "Assault-Style Rifles." The *Gun Culture and Conflict* frame contains 38.98% of the theme occurrences across the entire project. The most discussed of the broad themes was "World is Dangerous," which accounted for 25.59 percent of the occurrences in the frame. "Gun Violence" was the least occurring theme within the *Gun Culture and Conflict* frame, with 7.82 percent of the occurrences. Overt mentions of race and gender were rare, however many of the themes can be placed in the "racial formation" framework.

Social and Political Issues

This theme brings together subthemes related to the participant's thoughts on broad social and political topics: polarization, police shootings, immigration, and the danger posed by the Left. "Social and Political Issues" occurred 39 times, which is 9.24 percent of the *Gun Culture and Conflict* frame, and 3.44 percent of themes project wide. The participants were conscious of the polarized national political climate. Gun ownership was described as a responsibility that transformed the owner into a more responsible citizen; in contrast to those who do not own guns and by extension, rely on others instead of themselves. The "Left," generally, was a threat to the nation and gun ownership.

The increasingly polarized political climate cannot be avoided when discussing guns, as the gun control debate has divided much of the nation (Melzer 2009). This is illustrated in the heightened emotion of a classmate of Dennis, who Dennis claims threatened him with physical violence:

Yeah, a fellow law student [threatened] to stab me. I've had law students tell me that they wanted me to, they wanted to deck me and kick my ass. They've called me racist and homophobic and all sorts of things. Just based on me being a gun owner.

In such a deeply polarized climate, there is no middle ground. As Anthony lamented previously, the gun discussion has been reduced to: non-owners are “not American” and owners are “gun-toting racist[s].” When the public discourse is reduced to a binary, it becomes easy for one side to demonize the other (McCaffrey and Keys 2000). While convenient for those who can use this polarization to their benefit, gun ownership is not limited to conservatives or republicans, and not all non-owners are liberals or democrats. From Dennis’s point of view, gun ownership is in line with “conservative value[s];” once someone owns a gun, they shift toward conservatism:

And it's really conservative and not democrat or republican, because most, like in Kentucky, were democrats. Up until recently all the gun laws passed were by democrats. Um, but yeah, it goes back to [unclear], when you have a gun, and you realize it's a tool, and you're responsible for its maintenance, proper use, and that's been the way for centuries in Kentucky, it really changes your mindset on other things, like I'm responsible for feeding my family. I'm responsible for maintaining my house. Unlike people who are given something by the government. Uh, like, “oh, well if the government's gonna do it for me.” Or, I'm in [section 8] housing, the government's gonna pay for it. The gun ownership mentality, was primarily a conservative value, because of that mindset of, I'm responsible for myself.

While discussing gun ownership as more nuanced than a Republican versus Democrat binary, Dennis contrasted “responsible” gun owners with “people who are given something by the government,” effectively creating a new binary. This type of language

has historically been used as a dog whistle for whites, as a strategy to limit social assistance, which is perceived to unfairly help people of color (Haney López 2014).

There was a range of reactions to what could generally be called the “Left.” I asked Evan about the concern that Barack Obama would implement a new wave of gun control measures (MacLellan 2014:70). Evan expressed concern, but not panic:

I ain't gonna say I was like losing sleep over it. I mean I probably was maybe more engaged in stuff, just just to kind of keep up on what was happening, just so. I could you know, call a congressman and speak my mind type deal. So, I wouldn't say I was more concerned, I was probably just more engaged and aware of what was out there type deal. And not that I'm, don't now. I still keep up, cause you know, you never; it's always, I won't say a threat, there's always changes and you just want to keep up with, out there and make your voice heard, type deal. I wasn't, I wasn't losing any sleep.

A group that is on the more radical end of the liberal spectrum—“antifa,” a collection of anti-fascist groups, came up in some of the discussions as a threat to gun ownership. Fred said, “You know, . . . what is the group? Antifa. You know, Antifa every so often, they jump up like, . . . we're going to build a red army. Come on. Let's stop talking about it, come on, do it.”

For Kurt, the threat of socialism spreading through academia was a major concern: “I think, majority of professors, you know, they're socialists, Marxists. I think they're polluting the minds.” Kurt was expressing concerns that socialism will endanger citizens’ “ability to function independently” because, “the government wants to subsidize everything, so that everybody becomes dependent” in a socialist system. Independence was a recurring theme with many of the participants. Kurt expressed a strong reaction against anything that might challenge his sense of independence.

While the Left was often viewed with a range of skepticism to animosity, there was a wider range of attitudes toward police. The few instances when police shootings of

citizens came up, they were condemned. Brad mentioned police shooting cases in which the victims had guns that were not lethal weapons. Brad did not excuse the police in these cases, and then he pivoted to other aspects of policing that troubled him, like “The whole militarization; moving away from community policing to force policing.” Brad also condemned the Philando Castile shooting:

Philando Castile was, was a fairly clear-cut example in my opinion, of police overstepping their reactions. He was a licensed concealed carry holder. He said, "Hey I have a firearm. He's not tucked in his waistband he's not wavin' it around, he's not brandishing it. It's in a holster, and it's a travesty that, what happened to him and what did not happen as a result of it.

Brad took offense that a gun owner, who was following the law and behaving in a way that would be considered reasonable to many gun owners, would be killed by a police officer. Brad did not mention that Philando Castile was black, but did discuss Castile’s gun carrying behavior in detail. It should be noted that this does not mean that Brad was not concerned about the racial disparity of police shooting victims. But the race component was not mentioned at all, in contrast to Brad’s more detailed comments about carrying.

In 2018, Emantic F. Bradford Jr. was killed by a police officer. Bradford Jr. was trying to protect others during a shooting in an Alabama mall (Haag 2018; Fausset 2019). Bradford Jr., a black man, had a concealed carry permit and had pulled his gun for defense during the shooting (Haag 2018; Fausset 2019). Fred brought up the Bradford Jr. shooting when asked about the extent of a gun carrier’s responsibility to protect others:

He made a mistake. You know, the one thing you do anytime you have to draw that weapon, is you shelter in place. He ran. He ran with a firearm in his hand. . . . law enforcement assumed he was trying to escape versus trying to pursue, yeah. And it was a mistake. A very unfortunate mistake. But, you know, rule of thumb is you shelter in place. You protect those immediately around you. And you wait for law enforcement, arriving forces to take the bad guy out.

Fred's perspective was that even though the victim was carrying a gun legally, he made other poor decisions, and is partially to blame for his own death. Like Brad, Fred focused on elements related to the victim's behavior or carrying technique. Neither mentioned the fact that the victims were yet another black victim of a police shooting.

In order to gain insight into how white gun owners might feel about nonwhite gun owners, the participants were asked to share their thoughts about immigrants owning guns. Whites may assume immigrants to be dangerous, especially if they are perceived to be nonwhite (Hiemstra 2010). Five of the seven participants who addressed immigrants and gun ownership felt that gun ownership should be reserved for U.S. citizens. Irwin was comfortable with legal noncitizens owning guns. Dennis, himself an immigrant and U.S. citizen, was open to immigrants (documented or undocumented) owning guns.

Evan was concerned with the ability of a background check to catch something in a noncitizen's history: "I don't know how, how in-depth those background checks could be, because you don't know what they did, from where they've come from." Like Evan, Dennis also had concerns: "I think if you're here illegally, you shouldn't [own guns];" however, later on in the exchange, Dennis expressed an internal conflict: "I haven't thought about it that much, but, I said, it's a god given right, not a government given right." After going back and forth out loud, Dennis settled on: "So yeah, I guess so yes, illegals should, because it's a God-given [right]." For Dennis, who came to the U.S. as a child, the "God-given" right to own a gun supersedes federal immigration law.

Citizenship was a barrier that Glen believed was necessary for an immigrant to clear before legally owning a gun:

Boils down to citizenship. I think if you're here, and you're not a citizen, then that's one amendment that should not apply. . . . there is a difference between

being a citizen and not being a citizen. You come to this country; it's kind of like, we need you to prove yourself.

Irwin did not share the sentiment requiring gun owners to be citizens, “As long as they’re here legally.” For Irwin, “legal” residents “should be able to defend themselves just like the rest of us can. I have no objections to that.”

Most of the participants indicated that being a citizen should be necessary for gun ownership. Due to the long history of citizenship being synonymous with whiteness (Frankenberg 1994; Haney-Lopez 2006; Hughey 2010), some of the participants may be suggesting the citizenship requirement to withhold the privilege of gun ownership from nonwhites. It is important to note that the participants did not explicitly mention race, and they may not relate race and citizenship.

World is Dangerous

This theme was the most discussed within the *Gun Culture and Conflict* frame, accounting for 25.59 percent of the occurrences within the frame and 9.52 percent of all themes project wide. This section covers discussion of various personal and national threats. These threats were expressed as these subthemes: survivalism, existential threats to nation, guns for protection, the threat of other people, and the imagining of personal threats.

Some of the participants mentioned large-scale threats to the nation, but none of the participants mentioned taking any precautions that would be categorized as “prepping.” Fred understands that life can be unpredictable, and a catastrophic event is not impossible:

I'm actually very optimistic of the way the country is going. Does that mean that something is going, or something may happen? It's possible. . . . If an if an EMP (electromagnetic pulse) ever fires over the United States, you know, there's likely

they're gonna be 70 percent of the population of the United States that's not going to survive it, because people don't have the [rural] skills they had 60 years ago. If Yellowstone ever blows its stack. You know, the ash cloud will literally shut down the United States. So, so there's all kinds of events.

Threats can also be personal. As discussed earlier, many of the participants described being more aware of a stranger's presence and behavior. This awareness seemed to be a result of carrying a gun, or the knowledge that others might be carrying a gun. Sometimes the outward appearance of an individual could raise suspicions. Evan described being at a restaurant with his wife, when, "I noticed a guy walking into [restaurant name], in July with a big black trench coat on. And it [just was] kind of weird. I told my wife, I said, 'finish up and let's go.'" According to Evan, he "kinda always look[s] for that kind of stuff whether I have it [his gun] or don't have it, you know. So, I don't know, it's my mentality or thought process, I guess. I'm just more observant maybe, I don't know, so." Regardless of whether Evan is carrying a gun or not, he is often assessing if a stranger might be a threat.

Some of the participants recalled instances where they wished they had been armed. This is the case for Glen, who shared a story of being harassed by two men while he was walking in the downtown area of a city:

And I'm, you know, wondering in the back of my head, okay, I'm going to have to take my metal thermos, and use it as a weapon, 'cause that's the best I've got. So, I think, definitely having a weapon on me would have made me feel safer. But it's not to say I would have [unclear] pulled it on them. Just to make myself feel safe, so.

Perhaps if he had been carrying a gun, Glen might have experienced a higher level of comfort in the situation, as described previously by Fred and Irwin. Another participant shared a story from when he was younger, when his father "pulled a gun out," on a stranger that was harassing them, "and he left." This experience showed Hugh that guns

could be used as a form of protection against a threatening individual. “Man is inherently you know, like, is inherently bad for the most part. You know, like, people for the most part, are, are bad,” was Hugh’s sentiment. When asked to elaborate, Hugh said, “Like, everybody can be succumbed by passion for the most part and are dangerous. You know, I mean, whether or not they do anything, that's another matter, but.” This view of people as inherently dangerous is validated, in Hugh’s opinion, by, “literature and in oral histories and the Bible and everything man is inherently bad. Because we are flawed. A flawed being.”

In a world full of people with unknown intentions, it may be that some gun owners are more likely than non-gun owners to imagine scenarios where they may be threatened or attacked by another person. Glen described what he has imagined could during one of his classes:

So I look at the law school, and I'm like, okay, in some ways with all these open doors everywhere, they don't require an I.D, and someone can just come into my classroom willy-nilly, and start shooting up the place. None of us are gonna have anything to shoot back with. The best thing we're going to have is to throw our laptops or books. And in today's culture I don't know how many of the men in the room, are going to man-up and charge this guy, and take him down. So.”

As a student, school and university shootings may frequently be on his mind. When he imagines an attack in the classroom, not having his gun may be frustrating, as the students will have to resort to throwing “laptops or books.” Glen also expressed doubt that his fellow students would risk their life to “man-up and charge this guy, and take him down.” Regardless if a threat was real or imagined, many of the participants expressed being glad they were carrying a gun, or wished they had been.

Gun Violence

All the participants valued guns as a form of protection. They also understood that guns have been used to commit horrible acts of violence. This section will explore the participants' thoughts on gun violence. Subthemes include: the effect of gun control on gun violence, how gun violence is framed by others, and causes of gun violence. "Gun Violence" accounted for 7.82 percent of the *Gun Culture and Conflict* frame, and 2.91 percent of themes across the entire project.

Many participants suggested that mass shooters target "gun-free zones" because the shooters assume that no one will be able to stop them. We have previously heard Glen's concern about an attacker in a classroom. Another student, Brad, provided his critique of "gun-free zones":

You know, if you were, if your goal is to get famous or pick up the largest body count possible, you're not going to want to go somewhere, where someone may have the chance to stop you. You're gonna want to go somewhere, where the likelihood of someone being able to do anything is relatively poor, and you're going to see a large number of people.

For Brad, the goal of preventing violence is negated by the concentration of would-be victims in a gun-free zone. Brad's sentiment implies that the more people who are armed, the less likely a shooter will commit an act of violence.

Following a similar line of thought, Dennis considered attempts to regulate different aspects of guns, like limiting magazine capacity, as ineffective for preventing gun violence: "And I'm like, all right I can change out a magazine real quick. It's not hard." Dennis was also critical of banning assault-style rifles like the AR15: "People on that Parkland shooting were saying, 'oh [unclear] used an AR15.' I'm like, great, he used one of the worst guns possible to kill as many people as he could. 'Cause the gun is designed to wound, not kill. And in that hallway, a shotgun would've been much more

efficient.” Any restrictions on guns were viewed as ineffective and counterproductive to minimizing gun violence. According to Dennis, regulations only end up hurting the innocent, because a shooter has no reason to follow any laws, especially if the shooter plans on killing themselves after they have committed the attack.

When gun violence came up in the interviews, it was often framed as partially or directly related to gun regulation or restrictions. For many of the participants, any preventative good that came from gun regulations was negated by shooters who ignored the regulations. Gun violence was often understood to be a result of mental illness by many of the participants. Kurt was wary of the mental states of strangers: “I mean there's a lot of psycho people out there. You know, so. [unclear] You never know what state of mind of somebody is.” Jordan attributed mass shootings to mental illness: “I hate generalizations, but generally speaking, people who do the kind of shootings like the Pittsburgh temple, or the church in Texas, . . . They're nuts. I mean, they're mentally ill.” Anthony also expressed that mental illness was a primary component of gun violence in the United States: “America's problem is, is the mental illness, mental health, SSRA's (selective serotonin releasing agents)—put people on medication that don't need to be on medication. Serious problem. Gun's ain't it.”

The Influence of Gun Ownership

This theme accounts for 14.45 percent of the *Gun Culture and Conflict* frame, and 2.91 percent of themes project wide. Gun ownership's effects are experienced by non-gun owners. Some examples of this are: the militarization of daily life, gun rights movements, and the gun as a symbol. How these and other subthemes are understood by the

participants, as well as any connections to whiteness and masculinity are discussed below.

There is a strong military influence on gun culture and the physical properties of guns and related equipment. The most obvious example is the AR15, which is a military-style rifle. In recent years, the AR15 has become one of the most popular guns in the United States. The AR15 is a symbol of extreme violence for some, or a symbol of individual freedom for others. For many of the participants I interviewed, the AR15 is not controversial at all. Dennis preemptively brought up the AR15 while answering a seemingly unrelated question:

Dennis: You wanna talk about black rifles?

Interviewer: I'm sorry?

Dennis: Black rifles? AR-15s? You focused more on carrying guns. So it's, the scary black rifle as, it's a, it's a bit of humor on the guns that the government wants to ban. You know, they don't really go after the guns that are hunting rifles which are wooden stocks. But they do want to go after all these features that are on guns that you should have [unclear]. 'Cause that's tactical. I don't know. You know, these guns also come in various [colors] like green, beige.

Criticism of the AR15 was ridiculous to Dennis, because he saw the AR15 as no different than any other type of gun. For Dennis, the appearance of the AR15 should not be a reason for its increased regulation. However, to someone unfamiliar with guns, an AR15 is indistinguishable from a gun they might see carried by a soldier or SWAT team member. This similarity to a military rifle may be one reason the AR15 is so popular, apart from its relative affordability and ability to be easily customized. Having attended a gun show, and visited shooting ranges, I have noticed an emphasis on military-style guns and accessories, as well as military imagery. During World War II, the concept of the “civilian shooter,” arose as a way for non-enlisted, mostly white males to defend the

country and express patriotism (Burbick 2006:50-52). Some gun owners may be attracted to militarized guns as an expression of patriotism. There is also a “paramilitary culture of hypermasculinity that arose in the 1980s and has stayed with us to the present” (Burbick 2006:136 cited Gibson:1994 and Jeffords:1994).

Hugh was blunt in his rationale for owning an assault-style rifle. The ammunition these guns use often “break up upon entry, into matter and they'll shatter into a bunch of pieces and they're, they're meant for killing people, you know. That's about it. They're not meant for hunting.” Hugh was the only participant who directly acknowledged that assault-style guns are designed to cause harm or death. Other participants did not address the relationship between the use of assault-style rifles in a military setting and a civilian setting.

Fred mentioned earlier that “Armed citizens, armed, armed people are citizens. Disarmed people are subjects.” If other gun owners agree with Fred, this could be related to the militarization of daily life. If a gun owner sees themselves as part of a resistance to, in Fred’s words, an “oppressive government,” they may gravitate toward military culture and cultural objects because they symbolize defending freedom or resisting an “oppressive government.” This association of guns and freedom is echoed by Dennis.

When asked to talk about his primary reason for owning a gun, Dennis said:

I would say to ensure for my freedom. And that's a very broad statement. My freedom to life, you know, so that I don't get mugged, deprived of my property. [unclear] try to kill me, rape my wife, things like that. And freedom in terms of this free state as a countermeasure to a tyrannical government.

By owning a gun, Dennis is fulfilling a civic duty to protect against “a tyrannical government.” Many of the participants didn’t consider gun ownership as part of a social or political movement. When they did describe gun ownership in terms of its relationship

to society or the nation, it was often described as defending a right or a way “to ensure for my freedom” as Dennis said. Evan also expressed gun owners as less “vocal” because “most of them are probably more conservative.” Evan described conservatives as not wanting to “go out and demonstrate.” Jordan was more open to considering gun ownership as a movement: “Maybe we, maybe we are becoming a movement of sorts. Not a bad thing. You have to protect your rights, or they will go away.” What constituted a social movement was subjective for many of the participants. There were a few participants that identified as gun advocates. After a local grocery store chain was being criticized by a gun control advocacy group, Fred was motivated to become “engaged and became more and more adamant about: ‘no, if you don't like it, then don't shop there.’” Fred thought of his gun ownership in terms of being an “originalist.” For Fred, this meant “trying to be a part of a large swath of America, and a large swath of [name of state of residence] that's trying to keep our society rooted in the original overarching values is still [unclear] today.” Jordan didn't consider himself part of a movement. Like Fred, Jordan thought of gun ownership as a barrier to a “chipping away” of rights in general. Jordan acknowledged that there may be other gun owners who consider themselves as part of a movement: “But it's a, you know, I'm, I'm not aware of a direct movement in, from gun owners. In that way. Could be, just not, I'm just not there.”

Brad described himself as “heavily involved in political advocacy for it [gun rights].” The polarized nature of the gun topic is not lost on Brad, but he sees gun ownership as a non-partisan issue:

I don't think it alone should define somebody or it alone should define somebody's feelings on the matter. You can be a Democrat and carry a, and be strong supporters. I could point you out to probably six people to top my head that I know that are like, super staunch Democrats that are you know, what they would

call themselves a democratic socialists or progressives, but they're very staunch supporters of the Second Amendment. And then I can point you out the people who are Far right, like full-on Libertarian who don't like guns. So I don't think it, I think it's sadly become seen as a symbol of one sort of political affiliation. And I recognize that it is a political issue. I don't think it's ever not going to be a political issue going forward.

Even though the participants deeply value their guns for self-defense, recreation, and a “countermeasure to a tyrannical government,” many of the participants view the gun as void of symbolic meaning. Nine of the ten participants described a gun as a “tool.” Glen: “It's, it's a tool . . . It's just a tool;” Brad: “It's just another tool;” Carl: “It was just a tool;” Dennis: “I plan to change eventually, but so far for me guns are, still a tool. Versus a collection, or a fun thing;” Fred: “You know, to me, to me they're a tool;” Hugh: “They have a purpose;” Irwin: “It's just a tool like hammer or a saw, and it can, it'll do whatever I want it to do.”

While Carl associated guns as something purely functional, or a “tool,” he did share that he knows other gun owners who thought their guns “represented ownership and being a citizen, not a subject.” None of the participants explicitly described their guns as symbols or representing something beyond a utilitarian purpose. Here's how Hugh understood his guns: “They're not a big deal to me, really. I mean like, I mean, I like to shoot, you know. I don't think they're, I don't think they're bad. They have a purpose.”

Gun Ownership and Authority

The participants had varied opinions on authority. Opinions on government ranged from ambivalence to hostility. “Gun Ownership and Authority” occurred at a rate of 18.72 percent within the *Gun Culture and Conflict* frame, and 6.97 percent across all themes.

We have already heard from Dennis about gun ownership as a check on an abusive government. Dennis also expressed bitterness toward attempts by governments to regulate guns:

Now it's something you have to fight for to ask permission. Like, may it please The Crown, for me to carry a way to defend myself in case, I get mugged on the street of the city which I already pay taxes for you to patrol with police. I think what people, thinking about life that way that, you've got to take care of things, that includes yourself. It moves the whole country into a better place.”

That emphasis on the individual is seen when Dennis says, “you’ve got to take care of things, that includes yourself.” And when Dennis says, “It moves the whole country into a better place,” it references his argument that when people own guns, people start to become more responsible. Evan expressed the most negative attitude toward authority. For Evan, the less government in his life, the better. This is evident in statements like “control over your freedoms,” and, “I just see our liberties being taken away from us,” to, “I don't like the government being in my life.”

The limitations of policing came up as both a critique of those who rely on police for protection, and as a justification for owning guns. Carl asked, “If someone breaks into their house or something happens, who are they ‘gonna call?” Carl noted that people call police because, “They're calling a good guy with a gun.” As a former parole officer, Carl believes that police response times are too long, resulting in police “usually” arriving “after the fact.” Carl then shared a saying: “I carry a gun because a cop is too heavy to carry on my hip.” For Carl, an institution cannot be relied upon to protect the populace, so it is up to the individual to protect themselves. Therefore, a logical technique for protection is a gun. According to Fred, “Law enforcement is, has no duty whatsoever to protect the individual. That protection is the individual's responsibility.” So not only are

police officers often unable to logistically provide protection, they are also not legally obligated to protect civilians.

Because those with authority have access to guns, Hugh believes that he as a citizen has the same right: “I don't think the cops should have guns and I shouldn't. If they want to get rid of guns, get rid of the cops' guns, get rid of the government's, get rid of all the guns in the world.” For Hugh, both official institutions and individuals should have equal access to guns. Hugh wanted the option of having a gun, partly because Hugh may have seen the government as being in opposition to the individual. For many of the participants, governments should not be involved in the purchasing of guns by citizens. Furthermore, if an individual wants a gun, the government should not aid them. It is the responsibility of the individual, as Glen expressed:

That it puts us in a hairy situation, where we're subsidizing firearms. What are the limits you place on [that]? Is it, the government's going to subsidize you for one handgun per person when you turn 18, after you take a class? No, I think there are other ways to defend yourself.

Glen's sentiment was a common one for the participants. Hugh, who expressed his desire to be armed because the government is, was demonstrably adamant in his opposition to government subsidies for gun ownership: “Oh no. No. I don't think that the government should subsidize guns for anybody. Like, if you can't; that would be insane. Everybody, would just like, hey I can't afford a gun, I want one. Here you go.” Hugh connected the right to have a gun with a certain amount of financial standing:

I think it's part of the responsibility of being a gun owner, is you've got to be able to pay for your gun. You've got to be able to pay for your classes. You have to be able to maintain it. You know, because it is a big responsibility, so. I mean, I guess that sums it all up.

This requirement that someone be able to pay for their own gun is reinforced by Jordan, who also expressed a strong negative reaction to subsidies for gun ownership:

Go get a job. Get another job. No.[laughs] No subsidies to buy a gun. You know, work it out, you know. . . . You want a weapon, save your money. That's what I did for my first one. I saved my money up. No subsidies, particularly not *government* [participant emphasis on "government"] subsidies.

Jordan's comment that someone, "Go get a job. Get another job," is reminiscent of neoliberal rhetoric that obscures structural reasons for low economic status (Stroud 2015:115). For Jordan, a financial barrier to gun ownership may add an element of exclusivity, as gun ownership becomes a right for those with enough economic means. As white men, the participants have the most economic flexibility to purchase guns as well as historical access to guns.

Guns as Protection

This theme is comprised of the participant's thoughts on who was worthy of having guns for protection, what guns protect against, and the importance of the individual for protecting themselves and family. This theme accounts for 11.37 percent of the *Gun Culture and Conflict* frame, and 4.23 percent of all theme occurrences.

When asked if there are people who would benefit from guns as protection more than others, the most common response was women, often in the context of domestic abuse. Here is part of Evan's thoughts on women and protection with guns:

But I mean, I can definitely see where women would feel a little more at ease having something like that. Just because, you know, obviously, I'm kind of fortunate, I'm 6' 5", and not that I'm a fighter, but I could probably; I could handle myself a little bit better than a 5' 3" female. So I could definitely see where they would feel more comfortable having one within grasp, you know.

Glen echoed Evan's thoughts on women: "The first thing, women. Biologically, I'm not sexist in any way. I just look at the facts. Biologically, more often than not, a man is

stronger than a woman. And a firearm, especially in abusive relationships, levels the playing field.”

People who live in high crime areas was another common suggestion for a group that might have a greater need of guns. This was the only criteria Anthony thought could be used to determine who is more in need of the protection of guns: “Based on neighborhood and crime statistics, sure. I don't know what else that would be based on.” Sometimes the participants brought up an area that they were unfamiliar with and concerns about the area to be more prone to crime. According to Evan,

You know, I try not to, you know, go someplace in the bad side of town after dark. . . . But, you know, I just try to avoid places where there might be an issue, you know? I don't go to Ferguson in the middle of a riot. But I mean, if I got stuck in a place like that, would I feel better if I had my gun on me? I would.

Some participants felt that everyone is equally in need of the protection that guns provide regardless of factors like race, gender, and so on. For Fred, “Rights extend across every aspect that you could mention. It's only when somebody attempts to abuse. To inflict harm, or you know, on another group, then then we have an issue, and that's an individual issue to deal with.” Glen echoed Fred's statement: “So I think that it doesn't matter what characteristics define a person. They have the right to defend themselves whether they're Muslim, Jew, Christian, White, Black, Latino. You know, LGBT, straight, Christian, atheist, I don't care.” Dennis seemed unaware that racial, religious, and other minority groups have been targets of violence: “I haven't seen where people are attacked for their ethnic minority, or any group they belong to.” I brought up a shooting at a synagogue, and Dennis expressed that Christians are in greater danger than other groups:

Interviewer: “Like for instance, like there was that synagogue shooting, um, in Pittsburgh.

Participant: “Well, that was one shooting, I think we've had one church shooting, more than five [unclear] every year.”

Interviewer: “Right, but like a group like, . . . for lack of a term, uh, problems with different groups. Like, I guess you could say like any group might feel threatened, and feel the need to be . . .”

Participant: “Yeah, I would say Christians. Because you have a group in the Middle East--ISIS, and others who have [unclear] to wage a war on America. America's primarily Christian. And you've had more church shootings at Protestant churches than you have anywhere else.”

Other participants did suggest that racial or religious minority groups had a greater need for a gun's protection. Jordan answered that, “And I think the biggest group of them are black people.” Jordan continued: “And, I think there's other marginalized communities. Jewish people have been targets for thousands of years. I think, I think the gay community in its whole totalitarian [totality] area. I think that's an area that, that is, another one that is targeted and could do more for protection and stuff.” Fred was particularly concerned with threats to Jews:

Whether it's African Americans, Jews, there's going to be somebody out there that hates them. And, you know we can look at the rhetoric coming out now, about Israel. You know, one of the, one of our oldest allies, for fifty years, you know, . . . Folks, they're people, just like us.

Kurt could only consider himself, in terms of who needs a gun for protection: “I don't know about other people. I only know about me.”

Some of the participants mentioned not being able to depend on others, especially authorities or law enforcement, for protection. Being responsible for one's protection gave Carl “a source of independence,” that he equated with the American Revolution: “When the British told us, you know, to give up our guns, we didn't. We didn't fight them with words, we shot back at them. So there's kind of that mentality there, so. Good, bad, or otherwise that's, you know we're the patriots.”

Many of the participants discussed protecting themselves and their families in the context of an unpredictable and potentially crime-filled daily world. As previously mentioned by Anthony, concerns about crime were mentioned multiple times when we discussed who should have guns for protection. Part of this concern was framed in terms of not knowing when someone might attack or who might be a threat. This concern was expressed by Dennis: “You know uh, it's uh, it's the reason I carry a gun, 'cause if I knew the exact time and place, that I needed to use it I just wouldn't be there. So uh, but that's, that's the reason a lot of people carry guns, because you never know.” Hugh connected crime and urban areas: “Like, I mean, certainly if you live in a high crime area. Especially in the inner cities or something, certainly. Any time there is a big, impoverished, you know, group of people, you know, there's going to be crime,” therefore, “everybody should be able to protect themselves. And, and, you know, high crime area you certainly, certainly be more like, should carry a, have a firearm.”

Most of the participants mentioned that people who live in high crime areas and / or women would be candidates for needing guns for protection more than others. The unpredictable nature of one's surrounding was also a common concern. Ultimately, for many of the participants, each individual is responsible for their own protection. The participants were not comfortable with authority groups or law enforcement as protectors, and a gun allowed them to protect themselves and their families.

Who Gets to be an Owner?

This theme accounted for 8.06 percent of occurrences in the *Gun Culture and Conflict* frame, and 2.10 percent of all theme occurrences. For the most part, the participants expressed similar thoughts regarding who could own a gun in a legal sense.

There was consensus that children and individuals with serious psychological disorders should not have guns. There was near consensus that felons and noncitizens should not have guns. No overt mentions of race or gender were expressed as a barrier to owning a gun. However, the use of incarceration and the criminalization of immigrants have been historically used to maintain white supremacy (Hiemstra 2010; also Alexander 2012). It could be that attitudes on the part of white men regarding who can own a gun are echoes of these barriers.

There was near consensus among the participants that violent felons and individuals with mental illness should not be allowed to own guns. Many of the participants, like Jordan, were open to non-violent felons being able to own guns: “Violent felons should never ever get a gun again. . . . Somebody that, embezzled fifty thousand dollars from their lawyer, or something to gamble with; because they have a debt, illness. I'm not sure that they shouldn't be able to petition a court, have that, denial removed.” There was also some sentiment that it might be worth reconsidering preventing violent felons from owning guns after they have served their time in prison.

Dennis had a wide tolerance for who should be allowed to own a gun: “I think most people should. You know, self-defense is a God- given right. It's not a right that people should be asking permission for.” When asked about undocumented immigrants owning guns, Dennis (who immigrated to the U.S. as a child) struggled with reconciling a universal right with federal law:

It's something I haven't given a lot of thought to, and I want to say no, but the [rational] part [unclear] saying, you know, single mother with kids. Even if she's here illegally she should have a right to defend herself. That's why I think, you know, again I'm against illegal immigration to a great extent. But I'm so for the fundamental right to defend yourself, that I would say, okay, there shouldn't be a

law, that said you can't. So yeah, I guess so yes, illegals should, because it's a god-given [right].

Glen, on the other hand, sees no dilemma: “You come to this country; it's kind of like, we need you to prove yourself. Go through the legitimate citizenship route, methods, to become a citizen.” Jordan shared Glen’s opposition to noncitizens owning guns: “Nah, you know, get your citizenship and then we'll talk.” For Glen and Jordan, gun ownership is only guaranteed for citizens. As previously mentioned, the participants were largely opposed to government subsidization of gun ownership for those who might need assistance purchasing guns. Like the immigrant discussion, the right to protect oneself with a gun had limitations for the participants, even for those who are supportive of gun ownership as a universal right.

Assault-Style Rifles

One of the most controversial elements of the gun debate has been assault-style rifles like the AR15. The notoriety of these guns stems from their use in several mass shootings such as the El Paso Wal-Mart shooting, the Parkland school shooting, and the Sandy Hook school shooting (Chivers et al. 2018; Canipe and Gamio 2019). Gun control advocates focus on guns like the AR15, while gun rights advocates and a wide range of gun owners have become enthusiasts of these guns. After mass shootings, sales of these guns often spike (Studdert et al. 2017).

This theme accounted for occurred 4.74 percent of the *Gun Culture and Conflict* frame, and 1.76 percent of all theme occurrences. The participant’s comments regarding assault style guns were positive, and the participants were aware of the controversial status of the AR15 and other military or assault style rifles. For some of the participants, the AR15 was an easy scapegoat, as Brad noted: “Everyone wants to focus on, on the

AR15 assault rifles, and it's just, it's just a straw man. It's, . . . it's a scapegoat. There's maybe 300 deaths related to those a year. You know, more people were killed by hands and feet [than] by those.” As mentioned earlier, Dennis discussed how some of his gun owning acquaintances sarcastically referred to the AR15 as “the scary black rifle,” because of the gun’s negative media attention. Evan spoke of the AR15 as being “fun to shoot, but I don't have time for fun shooting.” Irwin enjoyed shooting guns like the AR 15 because they were easy for him to fire despite his arthritis: “AR15s, . . . they're light enough and, enough that I enjoy shooting them.”

Hugh, who owns an AR15, was the only participant who discussed the AR15’s potentially lethal ammunition: “The velocity. Caliber. You know, how fast it travels. And, like, a lot of them will break up upon entry, into matter and they'll shatter into a bunch of pieces and they're, they're meant for killing people, you know. That's about it. They're not meant for hunting. So.” Overall, the participants were supportive of the ownership of military style rifles like the AR15, and many participants expressed the idea that guns like the AR15 were unfairly targeted by the media and gun control groups.

GUN RIGHTS AND HISTORY

This frame collects the broad themes of “U.S. Gun Culture,” “Guns and Geography,” “Rights,” and “Individuals.” This frame accounts for 13.76 percent of all theme occurrences across the project. The most common theme within the *Gun Rights and History* frame was “Individuals,” which occurred at a rate of 33.97 percent within the frame. The history of gun ownership as well as the role of geography provide a broad context that relates to whiteness and masculinity.

U.S. Gun Culture

This theme accounts for 24.36 percent of the *Gun Rights and History* frame and 3.35 percent of all theme occurrences. “U.S. Gun Culture” relates to the history of guns in the U.S. as well as the impact of the National Rifle Association (NRA) on gun ownership.

Some participants expressed the importance of U.S. gun history to current gun culture. Dennis compared how this history of guns has given Americans the ability to “understand how different guns work in different situations,” compared to “the Vietcong, Iraq,” because, “those are people who guns were not a culture, that was literally somebody gave them a gun and said, here pull the trigger and here's how you do it. As opposed to Americans where you have a vast majority, guns are part of the culture.”

Fred referenced the role of guns during times of social unrest:

As we see, you know, violence from Ferguson, Missouri, from Baltimore. And the type of rioting and looting. One of my favorite, favorite photographs--is to go back to the, the riots in Los Angeles in the late 1990s. And one of the photographs available is, four or five Korean guys, standing on top of the roof, with rifles to protect their business from; we saw the same thing in Ferguson. You know, barbershop, you know, had three or four guys. And that was out in front of the Barbershop, with twelve-gauge shotguns. Nothing happened to that business.

Brad expressed a perceived decrease in the present “importance” of gun ownership, contrasted with the past: “It probably meant a lot more back in the early days of the country [unclear] less people owned. You know, you have one rifle and it was passed down through generations.” Glen expressed his thoughts on the utilitarian aspect of guns and history: “I think civil war, you think Western culture. Firearms have always been there. Not necessarily as a gun cult, but just seen as a tool.”

Much of the discussion around gun culture was related to the NRA. The participants had a favorable, if complicated, opinion of the NRA, with a few exceptions. The support that many of the participants expressed was not without hesitation. Carl

might not like everything the NRA does, but, “I like everything, or not everything that they do, but I’m going to stand behind them.” Like Carl, Evan didn’t consider the NRA to be faultless, “But, if it wasn’t for them, we, we probably wouldn’t have what we have now as gun owners.” The benefits that the NRA provided for Evan, made up for any negatives. Carl and Evan were vague in their problems with the NRA, while Jordan provided more clarity. For Jordan, the NRA had “lost focus from what it was when I was growing up. When it was an educator on gun safety and gun use, and that kind of stuff. And it’s become more politics.” Jordan appreciated the lobbying work the NRA does, but he expressed wishing that “They take their lobbying arm and make it a separate group and put the NRA back on track to what it used to be, I would be a member.” Brad was also critical of the NRA’s political operation: “Um, again I think money ultimately corrupts politics. And I’d be a hypocrite if I supported organizations [unclear] they do, with as much pull as they do.” Brad was also the only participant who criticized the NRA’s response to the police shooting of Philando Castile, who was shot by a police officer, in spite of disclosing to the officer that he had a licensed gun in his car (Smith 2017): “I was not too pleased the NRA wasn’t saying anything about it.” Brad did however express support for the NRA “putting out gun safety stuff.”

While most of the participants expressed mixed feelings about the NRA, Kurt did not express any conflict. After attending the NRA’s national convention in Indiana, Kurt was impressed, and he described the NRA as “a good thing.” When asked about his experience at the convention, he said:

Just it, it was massive. And, you know, during the leadership forum prior to the vice president and the president speaking; and I don’t know exactly how many people were there. Might be twenty-five, thirty thousand. There was a minister that opened the session with a prayer. And everybody in the place was standing.

They also did the Pledge of Allegiance. Everybody in the place is standing. Nobody taking a knee. So, it was, it was emotional.

This was a very profound experience for Kurt, who was impressed with the large crowd sharing in an experience of solidarity around patriotism and Christianity, through the context of guns; and as Kurt said, “protecting our rights. Our second amendment.”

Guns and Geography

The participant’s thoughts on geography and gun ownership included: comparing urban gun owners with rural gun owners, regional differences in gun culture, and what they considered as dangerous parts of cities. This theme accounted for 20.51 percent of occurrences in the *Gun Rights and History* frame, and 2.82 percent of occurrences across all themes.

The comparison of urban and rural culture was a large subtheme. As Brad put it, “what people don't realize about the gun debate, is you're arguing an urban vs. rural debate.” Glen expressed that, “To a large degree, in this country, especially in your urban cores, guns I think, get a negative stigma.” The metropolitan region where the participants resided is generally liberal when compared to the rest of the state. Here was how Glen described his thoughts on this difference: “When you come to [name of city] . . . You do hit a wall ideologically. But, I don't know. Some people are more accepting. Some people, just not so much.” Jordan expressed his thoughts on the differences in gun culture between urban and rural gun owners: “A lot more people had weapons when I was growing up. There was a lot more hunting and things like that. Than there is in the city area of [name of a state].” Dennis expressed the urban versus rural contrast in terms of crime: “It's like, you got a lot of drugs in rural parts of America, like especially in the

Appalachian Mountains. But you don't have these homicides that you have happening out there because everybody has a gun.”

The participants generally associated gun ownership with rural areas. “Nobody grows up in [name of state] completely isolated from guns,” was how Irwin expressed gun ownership where he resides, which is further outside the metropolitan area. Irwin continued, “There was somebody in their family or somebody that they knew that owned a gun. If, if they didn't learn about guns it was because they didn't want to. You couldn't avoid guns. At least nowhere that I know of.”

Jordan grew up in a neighboring state, and like Irwin's experience, guns were very present. We previously heard Jordan's experience of students bringing their guns to school so they could go hunting when school let out for the day. While both Jordan and Irwin grew up in places where guns were ubiquitous, Jordan suggested that his hometown city had a different gun culture than his current city of residence: “When you ask those kinds of things, I have to think. And the reason is this: we're in the middle of a major metropolitan area in the United States, okay?” Jordan didn't provide further explanation; however, the city where he grew up is roughly 1/10 of the population of his current city of residence, which is the metropolitan area most of the participants live in. Another difference between the two cities is that his hometown city has a population that is about twenty percent whiter than his current city.

A few of the participants shared stories of being out in the country and shooting guns for fun. Glen shared a story of going shooting with friends:

I pledged a fraternity. You know, going through the pledgship, and, one of my pledge brothers invites a bunch of us out. Brothers and pledge brothers, to his mom's house. I guess, acre, two-acre plot with a house. And behind it, was a field. And, what we all decided to do, was take a bunch of guns. So I had a, there was a

brother that built his own AK 47 [unclear]. He had an extensive gun collection. . . . We wound up shooting all of them into the dead clay targets in the back of his field. Willy-nilly, you know, free.

Hugh also shared a family tradition during holiday visits: “Thanksgiving, and we always called it like redneck Thanksgiving or redneck Christmas, and we'd go out and, have a few beers and then go out and, you know, shoot pumpkins or, or whatever.”

In contrast to rural areas, which were generally described as safe, cities were discussed in terms of being dangerous and having high crime, as expressed by Brad: “You can look at violent crime rates, you know, urban areas tend to be more than rural areas.” Dennis connected his thoughts on regional gun culture differences to differences in crime rates between urban and rural areas. Dennis used the term “Elmer Fudd” or “Fudd” to describe rural gun owners. The rural gun owner, or “Fudd,” does not appreciate gun ownership the same way someone in a city does, because:

You [rural gun owners] didn't need, you didn't live in a city where you know, you've got teenagers carrying guns and gunning people down after their honeymoon in [name of a neighborhood]. You don't live in a place where you got, you know crackheads breaking into houses and stealing stuff. You know, you lived in a place where the whole community was a lot more tight knit. And everybody had guns, and it was just part of life.

For Dennis, rural gun owners may be complacent regarding protecting their gun rights, compared to newer urban gun owners: “You got, you got those people who, oh I grew up with guns, we're perfectly fine with not allowing AR15's or some automatic rifles, we're okay with not allowing carrying handguns, because they grew up in a time when that wasn't commonplace.” Beyond the comparison between rural and urban gun owners, some participants commented on regional differences or differences between states. Carl grew up on the East Coast, and he is, “happier with the culture here, which uh, more lax in their gun laws and their ability to carry open or concealed. Yeah, I wouldn't ever want

to move back East again. Never want to go out West, certain places, just for that.” Carl’s sentiments align with common understanding that the coasts of the U.S. are more liberal, and hence less accepting of guns.

Geography’s relationship to the participants was expressed mostly as an urban vs rural dynamic: urban areas were perceived to be dangerous and less approving of guns, and rural areas were safer and accepting of guns. The urban versus rural subtheme was the bulk of the “Guns and Geography” theme.

Rights

General concepts of rights, freedom, the frontier, patriotism, and liberty arose many times, and have been grouped together as a theme of “Rights” in this section. The participants were all proud of their status as gun owners, and very protective of their right to own a gun. The “Rights” theme accounted for 21.15 percent of the *Guns Rights and History* frame, and 2.91 percent of all theme occurrences.

Dennis was one of the more outspoken participants, and he considered himself to be an advocate for the carrying of guns. For Dennis, “self-defense is a God-given right. It's not a right that people should be asking permission for.” His statement was clear—self-defense, and by extension guns, do not need to be codified in law, they are inherent rights. Hugh’s thoughts aligned with Dennis’s: “It's in the constitution. And, I think I'm a responsible gun owner and I have a right to carry, to have a gun and carry it if I want.” The second amendment reinforces what Dennis called a “God-given right.” Glenn echoed Dennis’s sentiment that gun rights are fundamental: “For a human being, it all boils down to: you have a simple right to defend yourself.”

Gun rights were expressed as Dennis's top priority, as, "really gun rights is what I've come to determine as a fundamental right to focus on, so that other ones can be protected." As mentioned earlier, Dennis became emotional when he talked about gun ownership as a right, which shows how important the right is to him. When Dennis encountered an Iraq War veteran who thanked Dennis for openly carrying his gun, "It was humbling." When asked how it would feel to not own a gun anymore, Hugh described how he would react to a hypothetical scenario: "Yeah, I'd be pissed. And if they told me I couldn't have my guns anymore; I would take the ones that the government doesn't know I have and bury them in the backyard."

For many of the participants, there was no reason for any tension between those who choose to own or carry a gun and those who choose not to own. Dennis framed his practice of open carrying as respectful, because, "There are people who don't want to interact with people who own guns. You should have that choice to know who you're interacting with, what you're doing, and you know [unclear] based on that. I'm not gonna hold it against you."

In addition to gun ownership as a tangible right, some participants also described gun ownership as representing freedom in general. Anthony described visceral feelings he associated with freedom: "I just enjoy freedom. Just like you have the freedom to drive a car, you can go across the state lines. That's pretty awesome." For Dennis, gun ownership in the U.S. represented the antithesis of less democratic societies: "And you know, in Russia, and in most socialist, communist governments the first thing they did was disarm the [populace] before they implemented their totalitarian rule." Anthony invoked North Korea: "It means I don't live in North Korea. It means I'm still free enough

to own it. That's great." This comparison between the U.S. and countries that are understood to be less democratic was also expressed by Carl: "The gun represented ownership and being a citizen, not a subject." Fred used the same terms: "Armed citizens, armed, armed people are citizens. Disarmed people are subjects. Literally, as the founding fathers intended." Gun ownership as a right was broadly expressed as something fundamental and "God-given." Gun ownership was expressed as symbolizing freedom and a way to distinguish the U.S. from less democratic countries. Some participants expressed that gun owners are performing the role of "citizen," while those who do not own guns are "subjects."

Individuals

This theme accounted for 33.97 percent of the *Gun Rights and History* frame, making it the most occurring theme in the frame. Across all themes, the "Individuals" theme accounted for 4.67 percent of occurrences. Gun owners, especially carriers, have a great deal of responsibility for the safety of themselves and others. For many of the participants, protection is only the responsibility of each individual. There was also a repeated idea that gun ownership is an expression of individuality, and if a society does not value individuality, freedom is lost.

"I don't know about other people. I only know about me." This was Kurt's blunt way of expressing his attitude on the responsibility of individuals toward the safety or protection of others. His sentiment appeared among other participants, albeit in a more nuanced fashion. Brad, who expressed awareness of gun ownership's effects on society, put it this way: "So, ultimately protection comes down to you." Relying on oneself is

both a component of displaying masculinity and neoliberal rhetoric (Melzer 2009; Carlson 2015; Stroud 2019).

Many of the participants expressed negative attitudes about relying on others in general. Kurt, as shown previously, equated personal independence as the antithesis of socialism: “But, the government wants to subsidize everything, so that everybody becomes dependent. And they don't have the ability to function independently.” Evan had a similar opinion to Kurt’s, in that the government was too involved in the life of an individual: “And you know, we're quite capable of making our own decisions. And, like I said, it's not just guns it's kind of, taxes, health care, it's everything, you know. Most of us are smart enough, we can make [our] own minds up.” Hugh said, “not everybody should be given free college tuition . . . You know, you've got to, you've got to earn that shit.” For Brad, a society in which each individual’s protection was up to that individual was “The ultimate situation, I mean the ultimate ideal.” As discussed previously, the individual as protector was a major theme for the participants.

While being assisted by the government for protection or services was often discussed negatively, conversely, being self-sufficient was framed as being beneficial for the individual and society; effectively moving “the whole country into a better place,” as expressed by Dennis. Dennis described his theory as applied to a hypothetical black community:

And, I just wish that poor communities which tend to be more African American in cities, would realize the value of, if more of their people were armed. And, accepted the responsibilities that came with it, like: being responsible for your house, being responsible for your yard, being responsible for your community, and [unclear] their mindset would change with the gun ownership, that they would [unclear] report crime, report, ‘hey I saw this gun deal go down.’ I think their communities would ultimately suffer less gun violence.

In Dennis's scenario, once an individual accepted the responsibility of being a gun owner, it would translate into being more self-sufficient, cascading into further benefits for society, or as Dennis added, "if more people would use guns, and would develop that mindset that I'm responsible for myself, okay I'm responsible for my community also." This idea of a larger sense of responsibility that grows out of gun ownership was echoed by Evan: "And so I think it does, maybe it, starts them [children] off; maybe something to build off of, type deal. Not that it magically makes them more responsible, but it definitely gets them thinking about how to be responsible about that kind of stuff."

For some of the participants, there seemed to be a sense that their guns allowed them to feel like they mattered more as an individual, and they had more agency. By carrying a gun, Irwin expressed that he has "the ability to de-escalate things that, that might start." The gun gives Irwin the sense of safety and confidence that he can step in and make a difference and "de-escalate" a potentially dangerous situation.

Maintaining their status as self-sufficient individuals was important to the participants. The importance of the individual was discussed in terms of being self-sufficient, accepting responsibility (especially the responsibility of owning a gun), being able to protect oneself and family, and not relying on others or governments for assistance or protection. Many participants discussed being independent and self-sufficient as beneficial for the individual and the larger society.

OTHER GUN THOUGHTS

The themes of "Gun as a Tool" and "Shooting Activities" are discussed in this section, which is broadly a discussion of the participants' thoughts on guns as objects and what it is like to shoot a gun. As a frame, *Other Gun Thoughts* accounted for 4.76 percent

of themes within the project. The two themes each roughly accounted for half of the theme occurrences within the *Other Gun Thoughts* frame. “Gun as a Tool” occurred at a rate of 51.85 percent and “Shooting Activities” had an occurrence rate of 48.15 percent. Across the entire project, “Gun as a Tool” accounted for 2.47 percent of occurrences and “Shooting Activities” accounted for 2.29 percent of occurrences. The only theme that occurred less frequently than “Gun as a Tool” or “Shooting Activities” was “Assault-Style Rifles.”

Gun as a Tool

Describing their guns as being just like any other tool was a common theme among the participants. The implication was that guns are as dangerous as any other physical object and guns do not function as a symbol. Previously, Dennis mentioned that “having a gun on my hip brings me the same amount of assurance as having a multi tool in my pocket.” Glen stated that being a gun owner was the equivalent to being a “fork owner.” Similarly, Irwin argued that a gun is no different than a hammer:

No, it's just, it's like a hammer. It's just a tool like [a] hammer or a saw, and it can, it'll do whatever I want it to do. And without human intervention, it has no function of its own. It just lays there. And that, and that itself makes you, makes the person who has control of it responsible for whatever it does.

The participants described gun owners like themselves as virtuous and rarely capable of using a gun in an improper way. The implications is that when someone commits and act of violence with a gun, they are outside of the gun owner group. Hugh expressed the idea that guns were, “not a big deal to me, really. I mean like, I mean, I like to shoot, you know. I don't think they're, I don't think they're bad. They have a purpose. I think people are bad, who carry them, so.” Only criminals, therefore, use guns to harm others.

Shooting Activities

The experience of shooting a gun was expressed in a variety of ways. Brad described shooting a gun for the first time as: “exhilarating, at least for most people. It was for me at basic. It’s that rush.” Brad also described shooting as “primal,” because, “you have the realization that what comes out of the end of that round could kill somebody. So there is that primal urge back to it.”

Jordan expressed shooting in terms of practice: “It's mechanical. Okay, I don't, it's no big thrill to me. It's just mechanical. It's practice. It's something it's like, it's like making biscuits. It's practice, Okay?” That doesn’t mean it wasn’t fun for Jordan: “Now is it fun? Yeah [participant exaggerated "Yeah"]! When you hit a bunch of holes right in the middle of a target, yeah that's pretty cool. Especially with a handgun.”

Kurt downplayed any pleasure he derived from shooting a gun: “I don't know, it's okay. I mean, I don't thrive on it, by any means.” Except for Kurt, all the participants expressed enjoying shooting their guns. Many described going to a gun range as a social event, and multiple participants invited me to go shooting. It was clear that they wanted to share the shooting experience.

The analysis of the interview transcripts generated nineteen themes and 648 subthemes that are organized into four frames: *Gun Ownership*, *Gun Culture and Conflict*, *Gun Rights and History*, and *Other Gun Thoughts*. The *Gun Ownership* and *Gun Culture and Conflict* frames accounted for eighty percent of the total themes. The next chapter will discuss how some of the emergent themes relate to gun ownership as a racial project.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The current project assessed the experiences and views of white men who were gun owners to explore the relationships between masculinity, Americanness, and white identity. These relationships were addressed in the context of white men's gun ownership choices and perspectives on gun culture and policies as well as other gun owners' behaviors. Interviewing eleven strangers and trying to discuss subjects like whiteness and masculinity proved challenging. Although the guiding research questions for this project asked how much race was a factor in white gun owners' thoughts and actions, and exploring whether "white backlash" related to gun owners' decisions and perspectives, rarely did the participants discuss race or gender directly in relation to gun ownership. Explicit expressions of white backlash as a motivation for gun ownership were rarely expressed, which is consistent with "colorblindness" (Omi and Winant [1986] 2015; Bonilla-Silva [2003] 2014). Overall, the discussions were consistent with existing theory and literature regarding race, gender, and gun ownership including racial formation theory (Omi and Winant [1986] 2015) and theories of masculinity and gender (Hughey 2010; Carlson 2014; Stroud 2015). To varying degrees, gun ownership by white males is a "racial project" (Omi and Winant 1986; 2015) that reinforces white male hegemony (Hughey 2010; Metz 2012, 2019; Stroud 2015).

White Gun Ownership as a Racial Project

I began this project with the conceptualization of white male gun ownership as a "racial project" (Omi and Winant 1986; 2015). While there is support for the perspective

that white men's gun ownership can fit the concept of a racial project, other theories were proposed to complement the broad framework of racial formation theory. Further, my findings highlight both the continual social construction of race and whiteness generally, and how white men's gun ownership reflects Mills' (1997) racial contract throughout history. This section discusses how, and to what degree, the findings align with the proposed theoretical framework.

A racial project of whiteness does not require whites to be aware of how gun ownership can reinforce and signal white supremacy. It may be the case that when whites operate within this epistemology of ignorance (Mills 1997), the "smoother" the white supremacy project can function. Indeed, some participants seemed curious or confused when the interviews veered toward race and gender in relation to gun ownership. Regardless of the context, white men generally are less likely to be aware of their own race or gender, normalizing and centering whiteness and masculinity in everyday life (Hughey 2012). The participants' ambivalence toward the relationship between race, gender, and gun ownership is reasonable in terms of the racial contract (Mills 1997).

This process of openly carrying a gun to acclimate the general public may also reinforce common knowledge that carrying a gun in public is an aspect of whiteness. As Metzl (2019:27) noted, nonwhites are often threatened when in the presence of whites who are openly carrying guns, while nonwhite open carriers are often seen as dangerous by whites, and in turn, the broader society. If gun ownership is racialized as being a mostly white endeavor, then gun ownership may be reinforced and interpreted by society in general as one of many aspects of white supremacy.

Colorblindness and racial contract theories were two main aspects aligning with the racial formation framework that emerged from the interviews. Omi and Winant ([1986] 2015) argued that colorblind rhetoric is the current articulation of the white supremacist project. Colorblind rhetoric involves largely claiming that race does not and should not matter when contemporary problems of inequality are discussed. Therefore, when racism occurs, it is on the part of misguided or disturbed individuals, not a baked-in reality of U.S. society (Bonilla-Silva [2003] 2014). Many of the participants expressed colorblindness when they addressed hypothetical groups needing guns for protection. The participants understood that various racial and ethnic minority groups have been targeted in recent years, especially by attackers who have ties to white nationalist groups. Even so, the sentiment among most of the participants was that communities of color have no more claim to needing protection with guns than whites do. Thus, white gun owners utilized the minimization frame of colorblindness to dismiss the long history and current reality of gun violence toward communities of color (Bonilla-Silva [2003] 2014). Arguably, gun ownership among whites is one of many expressions of dominance, and it will continue to be a source of power if gun owners remain mostly white.

The racial contract remains in place because whites have agreed, both implicitly and explicitly, to ignore or avoid a reckoning with white supremacy as a system. Given this tacit support and whites' refusal to acknowledge white racial dominance, the U.S. is ossified in this racial project of white supremacy (Mills 1997). I argue that a symptom of the racial contract is resistance to a broadening expansion of gun ownership to nonwhites beyond general sentiment that gun ownership is an American right. In fact, all the participants expressed the general opinion that gun ownership is a fundamental right for

every individual. However, for most of the participants, economic hardship is not a valid reason for people to receive assistance from the government to own a gun. Because nonwhites historically have less wealth than whites, the ability to purchase guns is not equal. Resistance to subsidizing gun ownership is an expression of support for this gap in ownership and the racialized assumption of who would benefit from such an approach to increasing gun ownership.

Another related sentiment expressed by five of the eleven participants, was limiting gun ownership to U.S. citizens. This would mitigate a dilution of the white domination of gun ownership and builds on assumptions about how many people are immigrating to the U.S., who racially and ethnically those people are, and how the right to own a gun by citizens can restrict nonwhite gun ownership in general. The participants' reluctance to allow immigrants to own guns was framed in terms of the unknown of an immigrant's criminal record. The disproportionate incarceration of nonwhites in the U.S. (Hiemstra 2010; Alexander 2012) is also effective at maintaining a majority white ownership of guns, because "federal law bars gun ownership by felons" as well as "drug abusers" (New York Times 2019). Most of the participants clearly favored this restriction.

There is a long history in the U.S. of using guns to control nonwhites (Cottrol and Diamond 1991; Livingston 2018; Metzl 2019). Guns "telegraph subconscious histories of violence and condition embodied behaviors" (Livingston 2018:345). The participants may be knowingly or unknowingly channeling this history through their ownership or by carrying in public. The white gun owner continues enjoying the privilege of gun ownership and perpetuating its historical role in white domination. Gun ownership as a

project of whiteness functions through a combination of the historical evolution and entrenchment of the racial contract, usage of colorblind rhetoric, and the racialization of immigration to perpetuate gun ownership as a mostly white activity and a reminder of white dominance in the United States.

White Masculinity as Americanness

Not only is gun ownership mostly enjoyed by whites, it is a way to display one's "Americanness." For centuries, being American meant being white, and being white was a condition of citizenship (Haney-Lopez 2006). If we are no longer living in a time when being American is explicitly and legally defined by being white, continuing a practice of owning guns may be a way to signal that one is a "real" American because of gun ownership's historical relationship with white supremacy. Due to the interchangeability of whiteness and Americanness (Frankenberg 1994; Hughey 2010), I propose that the participants used colorblind ideology and the tenets of the racial contract to express gun ownership as being proof of being "real" Americans.

Some participants pointed to the large role guns played throughout U.S. history as an example of why guns are so revered across the country. The participants portrayed the mass scale of gun ownership in the U.S. as a virtue of Americanness and reflected U.S. history of full citizenship, status, and privileges. As with whiteness and Americanness, whiteness interacts with masculinity. When situated in a "matrix of domination" (Collins [1990] 2000), white men are in a dominant position relative to nonwhites and women. Owning guns may be a way for white men to further differentiate themselves from non-gun owning white men and men of color more generally by harnessing the implied masculinity that guns represent. Gun ownership becomes centered from the perspective

of white men due to their position of power (Crenshaw 1989:139). Because of their opposite position in terms of power, women of color are likely to experience more challenges than others within the sphere of gun ownership (Crenshaw 1989:140). The intersection of whiteness and maleness allowed the participants the advantage of not having to acknowledge their own race or gender when considering their place in the gun ownership world. Furthermore, many participants did not perceive a variation in a groups' protection needs based on race or other social identities. As white men, they do not experience discrimination based on race or gender, and considering race or gender to determine a groups' needs is not a familiar concept.

Another privilege that the intersection of whiteness and maleness allows is the ability for white men to face relatively little pushback when carrying guns openly or possibly using them. An intersectional framework shows how whiteness, masculinity, and gun ownership interact to create a way for white men to compound their position of dominance. The participants are free to purchase guns and take part in gun ownership without the stress of discrimination. They are also the least likely to be questioned about carrying their guns openly. Further, who is allowed to use "stand your ground" laws as protection from unlawful use of firearms is an extension of this structural position of power built into policies. The economic and legal barriers to gun ownership do not present the same difficulties to white men like they would to communities of color, particularly women. From an intersectional perspective, gun ownership, like a multitude of aspects of U.S. life, is experienced much differently depending on one's race, gender, and class position, among other group positions.

Who embodies the supposed right form of masculinity was notable in how white men construct a racial binary of white and nonwhite to position whiteness as superior; with black men portrayed as a threat to whiteness, and white women specifically (Hughey 2010, 2011, 2012). Rhetoric describing black men as criminals and dangerous reinforces the trope of the white man as a “good guy” and a “protector” who, by default, is considered an upstanding citizen and can be trusted with a gun (Melzer 2012; Stroud 2015; Metz 2019). Coded language describing urban areas and neighborhoods, as well as those who may not own their gun legally, were occasionally employed by the participants. Stroud (2017:18) notes how these phrases are frequently used as code for nonwhite neighborhoods and nonwhite men, respectively.

A related common theme was protection of family and women, which aligns with literature proposing that white men use rhetoric emphasizing men as protectors to legitimate owning and carrying guns (Stroud 2015; Metz 2015:23). Many participants discussed protection in terms of the individual and their family. Being able to protect one’s family without assistance from others is a way to demonstrate one’s masculinity (Melzer 2009; Carlson 2015; Stroud 2019). When a white man carries a gun openly, I propose that this is a display of being the “ultimate (white) masculine ideal” (Stroud 2015:33). This process of displaying masculinity, if a conscious act at all, is superseded by the concerns the participants had about gun rights. As a white man, it is much easier to openly carry a gun than a nonwhite person, so the very act of a white male openly carrying a gun is a reminder of the historical power imbalance (Metz 2019:27). Knowing and taking advantage of this position was arguably used in recent nearly all-white armed protests against shutdowns and other restrictions, during the COVID-19 pandemic in the

United States. An example was in the state of Michigan, where armed white men stormed the capitol building and threatened lawmakers. This act also reinforces perceptions that white masculinity and Americanness are intimately intertwined through gun ownership. Not only are white men in the U.S. likely to face less scrutiny than nonwhites when carrying a gun in public or less barriers to gun ownership, but gun ownership can be thought of as a material benefit of whiteness (Haney-López 2006).

The material benefits of whiteness can be framed as a form of property, as full citizenship status throughout American history has incorporated property ownership as a key component. As discussed previously, many of the participants expressed a reluctance to expand access to gun ownership in terms of the economic barriers. Also, most participants discussed gun ownership for protection as equally necessary for both nonwhites and whites, even though nonwhite groups continue to be targets of violence committed by whites. Not only is the open carrying of guns by white men a possible way to express the dominance of whiteness and masculinity, but it may also be considered an example of physical property generally harder for nonwhites and women to obtain. This conversion of the benefits of whiteness into property is what Harris (1993) called “modern property.” Moreover, connecting citizenship to ownership may be a way to limit the diversity of gun ownership, and therefore slowing the erosion of “modern property.”

White masculinity as Americanness complements the racial project of white male gun ownership. This is accomplished through the historical equivalence of whiteness and Americanness, and gun ownership being a privilege of (white) Americans. Rhetoric that positions white men as “good guys” allows them to claim to be “more” American and masculine than their nonwhite male counterparts when white men display their guns

openly in public. Finally, the historical equivalence of property ownership and whiteness is echoed in today's white gun ownership. Therefore, whiteness as Americanness perpetuates the understanding in the public imagination that gun ownership is reserved for white men and only enhances their ability to frame themselves as the "good guy" protector and gain its privilege in the U.S. This privilege is enjoyed at the individual level, operating in tandem with broader social structures.

Social Construction of Race and Neoliberal Connections

The social construction of race uses neoliberal rhetoric, governmentality, and the law to "articulate" (Omi and Winant [1986] 2015), or adapt and react to the current moment, maintaining the racial project of whiteness. I propose that neoliberalism, as a component of social control, results in neoliberal governmentality that functions as an extension of whiteness as a racial project, and reinforcing white supremacy. Neoliberal ideology encourages a shift of power from the state to the private sector and individuals (Carlson 2014:336). Carlson (2014) identified one example in "citizen protectors" — individuals who have assumed duties like policing due to a perceived lack of state power or believing the individual citizen should practice increased "personal responsibility" (Reiman and Leighton 2010; Stroud 2015). A citizen protector may feel empowered to openly carry, which four of the participants said they engaged in. Perhaps the lack of interference they received stems in part from the public's general understanding that protection is no longer provided solely by police. If a white man feels empowered to take on the role of citizen protector, they may perceive their whiteness as an additional "qualification" for the role.

Neoliberal rhetoric promotes “personal responsibility” (Reiman and Leighton 2010; Stroud 2015) instead of relying on the state for various types of assistance. Many participants echoed the benefits of personal responsibility and expressed that gun ownership was one path toward being a responsible individual and citizen. Furthermore, the participants leaned toward a negative opinion of institutions of authority like police or government. Some participants noted that police were not legally obligated to protect individuals. Others considered the police ineffective as a source of protection or unable to respond to a situation quickly. Not only are the authorities unreliable, they should have little involvement in the purchase of guns, be it regulation or financial assistance. In a neoliberal climate, gun ownership is an expression of “personal responsibility” and should be far removed from the state or official apparatus. In light of this reliance on personal responsibility narratives, gun ownership provided the participants with the means to protect themselves and their families. The protection offered by gun ownership was considered an element of personal responsibility and individuality. Being a self-sufficient individual was often framed as a form of resistance against a perceived socialist government and leading one to seek becoming a responsible citizen in aspects of life beyond gun ownership.

By employing neoliberal rhetoric and principles in governing, the U.S. maintains the power gap between whites and nonwhites. White gun owners who share neoliberal ideology may consider themselves as “citizen protectors” (Carlson 2014) who must fill a vacuum left by the state. Many of the participants used neoliberal rhetoric when discussing gun ownership. Again, this rhetoric was used especially regarding the role of the individual as being central to protecting themselves and their family. I conceive the

white gun owner as an agent of the “microphysics of power” (Foucault 1977; Walters 2012:13). Although, certainly concerned with acting as a citizen protector, they can police nonwhites through the potential harm a gun poses, and the power the gun symbolizes (Hiemstra 2010; Carlson 2015). For example, working in conjunction with neoliberalism, “illegality,” or the use of racialization and criminalization of immigrants (Hiemstra 2010), may provide the basis for whites acting as a privatized police force tasked with monitoring immigrants. If nonwhite immigrants are criminalized, white men’s status as an ideal protector is reinforced. Five of the 11 participants expressed that gun ownership be contingent on citizenship. Limiting gun ownership to U.S. citizens would work to maintain the existing white majority of gun owners. Gun ownership lets white men distinguish themselves from immigrants, who are often understood by whites to be nonwhite, and a tool to monitor people of color and immigrants who may be perceived as nonwhite.

The use of neoliberal rhetoric encourages gun ownership on the part of whites, reinforces the existing racial hierarchy of whites at the top, and nonwhites below. White men can enjoy the status of citizen protectors as governmentality takes on neoliberal principles of small government and privatization, which distills down to placing a high value on the (white) individual (Reiman and Leighton 2010; Stroud 2015). Additionally, laws criminalizing immigration provide further legitimacy for white gun owners to comfortably police nonwhites (Hiemstra 2010). In general, the participants discussed gun ownership and its relationship to the individual and personal responsibility, echoing racialized, neoliberal rhetoric. The participants did not express overt anti-immigrant

sentiment. However, there were multiple participants who were not comfortable with non-citizens, and nonwhites generally, owning guns.

Overall, the effects of the social construction of race, along with neoliberal governmentality and rhetoric, are revealed in the participants' taking on the role of citizen protectors (Carlson 2015). By taking on this role, along with losing faith in authority and official institutions, white gun owners pose a potential threat to nonwhites. A white "citizen protector" may have embraced the construction of the illegalization of immigrants by the U.S. legal system (Hiemstra 2010). Thus, rhetoric that constructs nonwhites and immigrants as dangerous, combined with a neoliberal political environment, gives white gun owners further latitude to police people of color, with potentially deadly results. Additionally, neoliberal ideology discourages the government from providing social assistance. This is echoed by the participants' hesitancy to support subsidization of access to guns and gun training, and suggests another material consequence to the racialization of gun ownership through the social construction of race and neoliberal governmentality, as they work to maintain the established white dominance racial project.

Social Threat and White Backlash

Neoliberal ideology partially relies on anxieties of whites feeling threatened by challenges to the status quo. While the social construction of race reflects racial formation and the evolution of hegemonic whiteness as a racial project, there are "rearticulations" (Omi and Winant [1986] 2015) or shifts in strategy that are arguably short-term reactions. I argue that some white men own guns as an expression of "white backlash" (King 1967; Hughey 2014) to threats to white hegemony. I have organized the

possible examples of white backlash into three general manifestations that will be expanded below: (1) fear of victimization; (2) right-wing populism; and (3) compensating for lack of official social control. Each reinforce hegemonic whiteness, masculinity, and the need to limit gun ownership to white men in the U.S. and highlight how white backlash through gun ownership does not need to take explicitly noted forms.

While the limited findings related to explicit expressions of white backlash could mean that it was not a factor for the participants, in terms of being gun owners, it is also possible that expressions of white backlash were simply withheld. Furthermore, the racial contract, intersectionality, and colorblindness, are useful guides for addressing the absence of expressions of white backlash. Compared to other groups, white men are less likely to express an awareness or consideration of their own race or gender, resulting in difficulty expressing explicitly racialized sentiments (Hughey 2012). One of the few participants (Hugh) who directly expressed new right populist rhetoric, specifically the sentiment that white men were being unfairly criticized in today's political and cultural setting, said, "They're a victim of that [being white men]. I think it's a big problem and I think everybody needs to be, quit being so sensitive." Other participants skirted around this sentiment, but Hugh was the only participant who directly acknowledged his own status as a white male.

A fear of physical victimization may result in some white men becoming gun owners. While still holding more power than any other group in the U.S., the dominance of white men has declined over time. To limit further gains by nonwhites, owning guns may be a way to derive symbolic power as well as providing a way to prevent becoming a victim of physical violence and subsequently protecting the racial and gender

hierarchies (Steinhorn 2014; Metzl 2019:74; Metzl 2019:75 referencing Stroud 2015). The participants did not explicitly discuss protection with guns as a way to avoid becoming a victim, but focused on protecting family and women particularly. By emphasizing protecting family and women, men avoid having to consider themselves as victims. Self-reliance can also be a way to express masculinity in addition to neoliberal ideology (Melzer 2009; Carlson 2015; Stroud 2019). Guns may provide an extra layer of confidence to take on the role of a self-reliant ideal man, who has agency in a world that is increasingly challenging hegemonic masculinity. None of the participants directly expressed a fear of being a victim of physical violence. However, they did express thoughts regarding the protection of women and families and taking on that responsibility as an individual, consistent with existing research.

These protection perspectives are related to past eras, often triggering a yearning for eras when white men were even more dominant and reflects a component of right-wing populism (Omi and Winant 2015; Hughey 2013). The resurgence of right-wing populism as a backlash can be traced to the election of Barak Obama in 2008 (Omi and Winant [1986] 2015; Hughey 2013; Bobo 2017; Bonilla-Silva 2018). The election of a nonwhite president was a severe rejection of the racial order, triggering a white backlash that manifested in the promotion of rhetoric framing white men as victims of a radical push for racial equality “gone too far” (Hughey 2013:727). Most of the participants did not mention feeling stigmatized because they were white men. The few times it did emerge, the sentiment was that society was going too far with #MeToo rhetoric, and that white men were being unfairly targeted by an overly sensitive culture. Discussions of stigmatization due to being a white male rarely emerged in the context of gun ownership.

In the current study, it is unclear to what extent the participants own guns in relation to right-wing populist ideology. Right-wing ideology exists alongside a colorblind ideology that relies on coded language to maintain the project of white supremacy (Omi and Winant [1986] 2015). As a result, there may be a perception that the state is not overtly preventing nonwhites from closing the gap with whites.

The various levels of government no longer officially target nonwhite groups with codified laws, so the use of guns as a tool of control may be a way to fill that vacuum. This is not to say that the state does not still use the legal system and police to control nonwhites, but it is generally less direct and overtly signaled to the public. The participants did express a lack of confidence in authorities or the larger society to provide protection. It is unclear if any participants own guns as a result of a decline in the overt use of authority to control nonwhites. As previously discussed, there was a broad emphasis on individuals in terms of being self-reliant and protectors that suggests the decline of explicit government efforts to reinforce white supremacy may correspond to feeling like a victim and correspondingly needing guns to provide protection to family members and women in particular.

Explicit discussion of a white backlash through gun ownership rarely emerged in the interviews. This lack of direct conversation of whiteness and masculinity in relation to guns was a consistent feature of the interviews. However, the three manifestations of white backlash previously defined: fear of victimization; right-wing populism; and compensating for lack of official social control, emerged *implicitly*. Fear of victimization was deflected by emphasizing the protection of family and women. Right-wing populism appeared through colorblind language that racialized crime, economic hardship, and

immigration. Mistrust in authority and neoliberal rhetoric emphasizing the role of the individual as protector may be a signal that the participants are gun owners, in part, as a way to compensate for the decrease in the state's overt control of nonwhites.

The participants consistently upheld the racial contract through their hesitancy to support the expansion of the diversity of gun ownership (Mills 1997). Their status as Americans is reinforced by owning guns. Being gun owners allows the participants to display white male dominance symbolically through the gun's historical use in America. Additionally, the participants perform the role of citizen protectors (Carlson 2014), signaling to others that the participants are ideal masculine Americans. White masculinity was reinforced through creating distinctions between the participants and less qualified gun owners, and employing coded rhetoric attaching danger and criminality to urban areas that are often thought of as being nonwhite. Supporting barriers that disproportionately affect nonwhite gun ownership, allow the participants to reaffirm gun ownership as an extension of whiteness as property. The participants at the very least have the blessing to comfortably carry guns in public to display a privilege of whiteness, and they may have the leeway to monitor nonwhites in our current climate of neoliberal governmentality.

IMPLICATIONS

The goal of this project was to explore gun ownership as a racial project of whiteness and its relationship to masculinity. As previously discussed, the participants rarely engaged in overt expressions related to race or gender. This project functions as an extension of previous research on the relationship between race, gender, and guns. This project also provided an opportunity for the participants to share their experiences as gun

owners in their own words. Regardless of the extent that the participants reflected on race or gender as gun owners, their words were documented respectfully and are of value. In the role of interviewer, I tried to maintain as much critical distance as possible. I often reminded myself not to get distracted by the gun control debate—the focus of this project was not concerned with the morality of gun ownership. Throughout the interviews, the subtleties of race and gender emerged “between the lines,” if you will, thus suggesting how white masculinity and gun ownership intertwine in respondents’ perspectives about why being a gun owner is important to their lives.

The overarching framework of racial formation theory is useful for understanding gun ownership by white males. White male gun ownership acts as a “racial project” (Omi and Winant [1986] 2015) by aiding the continued unequal distribution of power in the U.S., to favor whites. Gun ownership is one of many racial projects. I am not accusing white men of intentionally owning guns in order to control nonwhites. Racism does not require malice on the part of an individual—it operates as a built-in part of our everyday lives (Delgado and Stefancic 2012). What matters is the effect of gun ownership on society, regardless of any individual gun owner’s intent.

White male gun ownership as a racial project endures with the cooperation of other components. First, the racial contract (Mills 1997) allows white men to comfortably own and carry their guns, which in turn is a reminder to any witnesses of the power differential between whites and nonwhites. Second, white men harness the symbolism of Americanness, masculinity, and whiteness that a gun embodies. As gun owners, white men represent the racialized essence of true Americanness (Frankenberg 1994; Hughey 2010), ideal masculinity (Melzer 2009; Carlson 2015; Stroud 2019), and construct

themselves in opposition to nonwhites (Melzer 2012; Stroud 2015; Metz 2019). Third, and relatedly, U.S. society constructs race in a way that benefits whites through neoliberal ideology, which is used in daily rhetoric and applied as governmentality, resulting in an increasing shift in power from the state to private individuals (Omi and Winant [1986] 2015; Reiman and Leighton 2010; Carlson 2014; Stroud 2015). A shift in power to individual (white) gun owners, who may consider themselves more qualified than non-gun owners, creates “citizen protectors” (Carlson 2014). When these “citizen protectors” are white men, their influence is amplified because of the sociohistorical contexts constructing white men gun owners as the purported epitome of American citizens. Finally, white backlash is a response to challenges to the racial project of whiteness (King 1967; Omi and Winant [1986] 2015; Hughey 2014). Explicit expressions of white backlash were limited, relative to the expression of themes related to the racial contract, whiteness as Americanness, and the social construction of race. To varying degrees, when white men own or carry guns, racial formation is a useful framework for understanding some of the underlying motivations that are more subtle features of everyday life.

Implications for Policy and Gun Ownership

I became interested in gun ownership in 2012, after the Trayvon Martin shooting. In 2013, The Black Lives Matter movement began. I noticed an increase in some of my family and other acquaintances’ expressing interest in gun ownership and obtaining concealed carry licenses. I wondered if there was a relationship between the shootings themselves and the protests around the shootings. In social media posts, by some of my white acquaintances at the time, they often made a point to let others know that they were

buying guns or were getting their concealed carry licenses. Many years later I became interested in how racism manifests in the physically built world through urban design, redlining, food deserts, and other features of our communities. It seemed to me that a gun might be another example of racism as both a symbol and material object. I wondered if whites who owned guns were consciously using gun ownership in a racialized manner, or if they were unaware of any “invisible” forces that were guiding their choices.

After talking with the eleven participants, it is obvious that being a gun owner is an important component of their identity, and they would probably be surprised or confused by a suggestion that there are aspects to their gun ownership that are part of larger processes. After I had completed the initial interviews, I wondered to what degree the participants were aware of their gun ownership in a broader context. It would be interesting to explore the degree of insight whites have into their own whiteness, and how it informs their choices. I am intrigued by the notion that the individual gun owner acts as the end-product of racial formation. How would the participants feel if their choices were possibly influenced by historical processes that have benefited whites at the expense of nonwhites? To what extent would they connect their current position to the process of the past, if at all? Ultimately, I left with the impression that the participants held very little or no outward malice toward nonwhites. Yet, racism does not require personal or intentional harm toward others to persist. Finding ways to help groups understand how their choices are racialized, and how these choices effect other racial groups, seems to be the logical way forward. Helping to shift the broad discussion around racism from a depiction of isolated fringe individuals to an understanding of a broad system that is

something we are all part of each day (Bonilla-Silva 2018) could help take away the stigma and threat that many whites feel when discussing race (DiAngelo 2018).

Future gun regulation should be undertaken with the consultation of gun owners. The participants expressed frustration at attempts by non-gun owners to affect a very important part of the participants' lives and identity. Including gun owners in policy creation may lessen the continued polarization surrounding the gun topic. From talking with the participants, I have learned that gun owners are willing to engage in a dialogue. As Carlson (2015) argues, the gun debate should shift from questions around whether the U.S. should be a country that allows guns, to understanding the factors and conditions that lead to gun ownership. Because gun ownership is arguably here to stay (Carlson 2015), we as a country need to have an open dialogue, at the very least, to limit the gun deaths in the United States. Policies that work toward creating a stable economic environment may limit the need for some white men to own guns as a way to feel like they still matter in a changing world (Carlson 2015). Perhaps a reduction in white gun ownership might result in less shooting deaths of nonwhites on the part of whites, as well as the epidemic of gun suicides among whites (Metzl 2019). One would hope that anyone who has been affected by gun violence would surely agree that any reduction in gun related deaths, no matter how slight, is a worthwhile endeavor.

It is also important to point out resistance in regard to who could own guns. Resistance to diversifying gun ownership manifested in the participants' reluctance to hypothetical programs that might help low income individuals afford a gun. Seemingly having less economic means corresponded to perceptions among respondents that they were less worthy or capable of being gun owners. These findings suggest how class

differentiation within whiteness is constructed around gun ownership, but also how it can extend to restrictions of gun ownership among nonwhites through stereotypical views that to be nonwhite is also to be poor. That said, arguably, gun ownership will continue to be a predominantly white phenomenon, in part if monetary obstacles are kept in place. Devising programs and subsidies for those who might normally want a gun, but who are unable to afford one, could lead to an expansion of gun ownership beyond a predominantly white group. This may lead to an even larger number of gun owners in the United States. A second scenario may emerge if monetary barriers to gun ownership were lessened, in which a diversification of gun owners may lead to some whites losing interest in being gun owners, if it is no longer associated with the status and material benefits of whiteness. However, the most likely scenario is that such approaches could also lead to arguments for increased restrictions, as guns are a symbol of white masculinity and Americanness not extended to nonwhites, as my interviews suggest. Furthermore, there are historical precedents showing that an expansion of nonwhite gun ownership would be met with resistance from whites. Throughout U.S. history, the use of law, police violence, and civilian violence have been used to limit nonwhite gun ownership. For example, when the Black Panthers stood on the capitol building steps in Sacramento, California, openly carrying guns in 1967, the National Rifle Association lobbied for the passage of the Mumford Act to restrict open carry and gun access because nonwhites were exercising their gun ownership rights (Morgan 2018). From a historical point of view, it is more likely that a diversification of gun ownership would be met with resistance, and white gun owners will remain in the majority, in terms of gun ownership. Needless to say, the debate about gun control and ownership policies and programs is far

from settled, and recent events suggest it may continue to remain so and possibly increase in tension.

Future Research

Future work around whiteness and gun ownership should explore several areas including (1) generational differences among white male gun owners; (2) the extent of a personal toll of being a “citizen protector” (Carlson 2014); (3) how socioeconomic circumstances impact white male gun owners; (4) geographical differences between white male gun owners; (5) intragroup conflicts between open carriers and concealed carriers; and (6) the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the white gun owner experience. These would all be fruitful expansions of the current project to explore the many connections between whiteness, masculinity, and Americanness encircling gun ownership noted here. Additionally, the interviews were completed before the COVID-19 pandemic and the national uprisings against police brutality and racism sparked by the brutal murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer. The pandemic has disrupted lives and resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths worldwide. Moreover, COVID-19 has exacerbated inequality in the U.S., as nonwhites have shouldered a disproportionate amount of COVID-19 contractions and deaths (Chotiner 2020). The economic toll is only likely to increase for nonwhites, given the historical economic disparity between whites and nonwhites (Massey and Denton 1993; Jones 2009; Hout and Cumberworth 2012).

In April of 2020, protests against stay at home orders and other recommendations for mitigating the spread of the coronavirus largely comprised of whites emerged in many U.S. states. Some of the protestors expressed concern that the state-level “shutdowns”

were an attempt to undercut Donald Trump’s chances of winning reelection (Bailey 2020). Apprehension about economic damage and encroachment on individual freedom were also expressed (Bailey 2020). Donald Trump supported these protests and made it a point to not wear a protective mask when appearing in public, contradicting CDC recommendations, as well as offering contradictory or dismissive opinions on the severity of the pandemic and the benefits of social distancing and wearing masks. Considering the disproportionate toll the coronavirus has taken on nonwhites, it is possible some whites are protesting because they feel they are being unnecessarily “punished” by the shutdowns. Trump’s refusal to wear a protective mask may be a symbol of supposed strength, masculinity, and whiteness, while projecting confidence and simultaneously removing a visual reminder of the crises (Elving 2020; North 2020). I propose the anti-shutdown protests contain aspects reminiscent of white male gun ownership: (1) expressing concerns related to protecting the importance of the individual (Reiman and Leighton 2010; Stroud 2015); (2) displaying white masculinity through eschewing social distancing and masks, and the open carrying of guns at the protests (Carlson 2014; Melzer 2009; Stroud 2019); (3) constructing a white / nonwhite binary by protesting restrictions that are not “necessary” for whites (Melzer 2012; Metz 2019; Stroud 2015); and (4) displaying benefits of whiteness by openly carrying guns during the protests, thereby fulfilling the role of citizen protectors (Carlson 2015; Harris 1993; Haney-López 2006).

As a stark contrast, the protests sparked by the murder of George Floyd have received a radically different response from law enforcement and the state. While the anti-shutdown protesters were largely left alone by law enforcement, the police and

National Guard have used physical violence, in multiple cases, against George Floyd / Black Lives Matter (BLM) protesters in cities across the United States (Ismail 2020). While there has been property damage and theft from businesses, the George Floyd / BLM protesters have been largely peaceful and unarmed (Garber 2020). Those who openly carried guns during the anti-shutdown protests were not met with violence by law enforcement (Ismail 2020). A message is being sent when force is used to clamp down on protests opposed to white supremacy and is made up of a large component of nonwhite protestors. By not reacting in kind to a mostly white protest, another message is sent. Mass challenges to white supremacy thus far have been met with force and calls for “law and order” by the state. Moreover, neoliberal coded discourse that employs terms like “looting,” “riots,” and “thugs” has been used by the state and media to describe the protests and those who protest (Omi and Winant [1986] 2015; Haney-López 2014). It is likely that gun ownership on the part of whites has been affected by the pandemic and the rapid societal changes sparked by the George Floyd / BLM protests. For example, during the early stage of the virus’s confirmed presence in the U.S., there was a spike in gun purchasing (Beckett 2020). If whites are motivated by the uncertainty generated by the coronavirus pandemic and the protests against white supremacy, white domination of gun ownership may become further entrenched.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Introduction

Thank you for your participation in this study.

The purpose of this interview is to learn about gun ownership by listening to the perspective and experiences of someone who own guns.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Questions

- 1. How many guns do you own?**
- 2. What type of guns do you have?**
- 3. How long have you owned guns?**
- 4. What would you say is your primary reason for owning gun(s)?**

Prompts:

-Do you have other reasons for owning gun(s)?

- 5. Does anyone else in your home own guns?**

Prompts:

-What types of guns do they own?

-What is their primary reason for owning guns?

- 6. Do you have other acquaintances, friends, or family that own guns?**

Prompts:

What reasons do they have for owning guns?

- 7. Do you have a concealed carry permit?**
- 8. Do any of your friends, family members, or other acquaintances have a concealed carry permit?**

9. What age range do you fall into?

- 18-29
- 30-49
- 50-69
- 70 and over

10. Are you currently employed?

Prompt- What is your occupation?

11. How would you describe your race or ethnicity?

12. Did you grow up with guns?

Probe- If so, what was that like?

13. Are you from this part of the country?

Probe- If not, did anything stand out to you that is different from where you are from?

Probe- Did anything about living here make you interested in owning a gun?

14. Can you talk about what initially interested you about guns or how you decided to own a gun?

Prompts:

- How did your friends, family, or other acquaintances impact your decision?
- Can you talk about a specific reason or event that helped you make a decision to buy a gun?
- How did your family and friends react to your decision?
- What is it like to talk to other people about owning a gun?
- Why is it important that you own a gun?
- How do you feel when you are around other gun owners?

15. Can you describe your guns?

Prompts:

- Can you talk about what it's like to clean, and maintain a gun?
- What is it like to fire your guns?

16. What kinds of activities or behaviors are necessary to be a gun owner?

Prompts:

- Do you have to practice shooting it or take classes?

-Is shooting a gun something that needs to be practiced, or you'll lose the skill?

17. In your own words, what does it mean to be a gun owner?

Prompts:

- How does owning a gun make you feel?
- How does owning a gun effect your sense of safety?
- How does owning a gun effect the way you perceive strangers?
- Have you ever thought about what it would be like to stop owning guns?
- Has anything made you question owning a gun?
- How has owning a gun affected your day-to-day experience?

18. A. (for participants with a concealed carry permit) Can you talk a little about how you decided that you wanted to get a concealed carry permit?

Prompts:

- Was there something specific that made you want to get a concealed carry permit? Can you talk a little about that reason?
- Do you actively use the concealed carry permit?
- How does owning a concealed carry permit affect your sense of safety?
- How does owning a concealed carry permit effect your perception of strangers?
- If you carry your gun in public, what is it like to carry a gun concealed in public?

B. From your experience, what are your thoughts on concealed guns?

Prompts:

- Are there reasons an individual should not have a concealed gun?
- If you know someone you are with or encounter in public has a concealed gun on their person, how does that make you feel?

19. What's it like when you approach a business or building and you see a sign prohibiting guns inside the building?

Prompts:

- How do these signs make you feel?
- Do the signs bother you, or are you okay with them?

20. Besides the obvious fact of gun ownership, how does being a gun owner make you different than a non-gun owner?

Prompts:

- Do you have a specific duty or responsibility toward your community or the larger society?
- Are there people or groups that should not have access to guns?
- Does owning a gun have an impact on the direction the country is moving?

21. Can you talk about your connections to other gun owners?

Prompts:

- Do you feel a strong connection to other gun owners?
- Do you think the country as a whole has changed as far as the importance of owning a gun, since you first became a gun owner?
- What do other gun owners say about “gun culture” in general?

22. How would you describe the races or ethnicities of your friends/family/acquaintances that own guns?

Prompts:

- Do you know any gun owners who you would describe as non-white?
- How would you describe their race or ethnicity?

23. Should everyone be allowed to own guns?

24. Should gun ownership be subsidized for those who cannot afford a gun?

25. Do you think some people have a greater need for guns as a form of protection, than other people do?

26. Have you ever felt threatened by or felt the need to protect you or others from a specific group of people?

-Prompts:

- Perhaps people who practice a different religion, or speak a different language?
- Or people with different customs, or who may be more liberal or conservative than you?
- Or people who of a different race or ethnicity?

27. Is there anything that you would like to discuss related to our topics that I should have asked about?

Closing

Is there anything you would like to ask me, or anything you would like to discuss?

I appreciate your time. If you would like a copy of my final paper, I would be glad to send you one.

Thanks again for your time and participation.

APPENDIX B: RESEARCH CONSENT

Subject Informed Consent Document

Gun Ownership

IRB assigned number: 18.0961

Investigator(s) name & address: Ryan D Schroeder, PhD, Department of Sociology, Lutz Hall 103, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky 40292

Michael Daugherty, Department of Sociology, Lutz Hall 103, University of Louisville, Louisville, Kentucky 40292

Site(s) where study is to be conducted: neutral public sites such as libraries, and cafes. Telephone interviews will also be conducted when necessary.

Phone number for subjects to call for questions: (216) 659-6059

Introduction and Background Information

You are invited to participate in a research study about gun ownership. The study is being conducted by Ryan D Schroeder, PhD and Michael Daugherty. The study is sponsored by the University of Louisville, Department of Sociology. The study will take place at neutral public spaces like libraries, cafes, or over the phone. Approximately 10-15 subjects will be invited to participate.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to learn about gun ownership from the personal experiences and perspectives of white males.

Procedures

In this study, you will be asked to participate in an in-depth interview, either in-person or over the phone. The interview will be recorded using a digital audio recorder. In the case of a phone interview, a smart phone app will be used to record the conversation. Each interview will last 60 to 90 minutes. The duration of the study is seven months. You may decline to answer any questions that you find uncomfortable.

Potential Risks

There are no foreseeable risks other than possible discomfort in answering personal questions.

Benefits

The possible benefits of this study include a more nuanced understanding of gun ownership and a platform for gun owners to represent themselves in their own words. The information collected may not benefit you directly. The information learned in this study may be helpful to others.

Payment

You will not be compensated for your time, inconvenience, or expenses while you are in this study.

Confidentiality

Total privacy cannot be guaranteed. We will protect your privacy to the extent permitted by law. If the results from this study are published, your name will not be made public. Once your information leaves our institution, we cannot promise that others will keep it private.

Your information may be shared with the following:

- The University of Louisville Institutional Review Board, Human Subjects Protection Program Office, Privacy Office, others involved in research administration and compliance at the University, and others contracted by the University for ensuring human subjects safety or research compliance
- The local research team
- research, compliance and HIPAA oversight at the institutions where the research is conducted for
- Government agencies, such as:
 - Office for Human Research Protections

Security

Your information will be kept private by securing physical data in a locked cabinet. Any digital data will be stored on a password protected computer.

Voluntary Participation

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to be in this study you may stop taking part at any time. If you decide not to be in this study or if you stop taking part at any time, you will not lose any benefits for which you may qualify.

Contact Persons

If you have any questions, concerns, or complaints about the research study, please contact Michael at 216-659-6059, or medaug03@louisville.edu. Or Ryan Schroeder, PhD at 502-852-8010.

Research Subject's Rights

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may call the Human Subjects Protection Program Office at (502) 852-5188. You may discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject, in private, with a member of the Institutional Review Board (IRB). You may also call this number if you have other questions about the research, and you cannot reach the study doctor, or want to talk to someone else. The IRB is an independent committee made up of people from the University community, staff of the institutions, as well as people from the community not connected with these institutions. The IRB has approved the participation of human subjects in this research study.

Concerns and Complaints

If you have concerns or complaints about the research or research staff and you do not wish to give your name, you may call the toll free number 1-877-852-1167. This is a 24 hour hot line answered by people who do not work at the University of Louisville.

Acknowledgment

This informed consent document is not a contract. This document tells you what will happen during the study if you choose to take part. By answering interview questions, you are agreeing to participate.

List of Investigators:
Ryan D. Schroeder, PhD
Michael Daugherty

Phone Numbers:
(502) 852-8010
(216) 659-6059

CURRICULUM VITAE

Michael Daugherty

University of Louisville (216)659-6059
Department of Sociology medaug03@louisville.edu
Lutz Hall
Louisville, Kentucky 40292

Education

2015-present M.A. Candidate, Sociology, University of Louisville, Expected completion date: Summer 2020

2003 B.F.A., Photography, Cleveland Institute of Art, Concentrations: Photography, Video, Painting, and Printmaking

Research Interests

Media and society, race and ethnicity, social change, technology and society, urban sociology, visual sociology

Professional Memberships

American Sociological Association

Professional Experience

2014-2015 Library Page, Louisville Free Public Library

2012-2013 Visual Data Specialist, Google (contractor with Aerotek)

2011-2012 Photographer / Photo Editor, Super Supplements

2011 Photographer / Photo Editor, Creative Circle (Bartell Drugs client)

2009-2011 Photo Editor, School Outfitters

2006-2008 Photographer, New Creative Enterprises

2003-2006 Assistant Lab Supervisor, Cord Camera

2002

Photography Assistant, TRG Studios