

PASSION AND POLICY:

AS FACTS REPLACE FEELINGS IN THE HANDGUN DEBATE, MORE VOTERS SUPPORT EFFORTS TO REDUCE ACCESS TO HANDGUNS

SANTA CLARA COUNTY

Report

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The debate over handgun policy elicits strong feelings on both sides. But the more factual information people have about existing handgun laws and handgun-related crimes, the more likely they are to support change -- and to vote for politicians who feel the same way.

While few Santa Clara County residents are undecided about handgun issues, most have more feelings than facts upon which to base their attitudes. A majority of the public is unaware of basic handgun laws -- such as the right to sell handguns directly from the home in the majority of communities in California -- and basic gun violence statistics -- such as the leading role played by handguns in California's adolescent mortality. But when people find out about these facts, they are more motivated to change handgun laws to reduce their accessibility and to encourage lawmakers and elected officials to do the same.

These are the basic findings of a telephone survey of 300 registered voters in Santa Clara County, conducted by EDK Associates, a New York City based research firm. The poll was sponsored by the Violence Prevention Initiative of The California Wellness Foundation. The interviews were conducted between September 11 - 15, 1996. The margin of error for the poll is 5.6%. All percentage differences discussed in this report are statistically significant at the 95% confidence interval.

INFORMATION SHAPES ATTITUDES

While most Santa Clara County residents have a general understanding of handgun policy issues, few are so well-informed that their attitudes cannot be influenced by learning more information about specific handgun laws or statistics. [See Table 1]

Education Fosters Support for Changes in Handgun Policy

The study reveals that six in ten (60%) Santa Clara County voters say they are likely to call or write an elected official when told that more California kids are killed by handguns than by car crashes, diseases or drugs. The same percentage would also contact a public official when told there are 13 gun dealers for every McDonald's Restaurant in California (59%) or that firearm injuries cost California taxpayers over $177 million dollars annually (60%).

Information about the impact of handgun-related laws is just as likely to provoke citizen response as information about the impact of handgun-related crimes. When people learn, for example, that several California cities have enacted zoning ordinances banning the selling of firearms in residential neighborhoods, and as a result the number of gun dealers has dropped dramatically, more than four in ten voters (43%) said they would be more likely to call or write an elected official.

Facts About Handgun Violence Move All Demographic Groups

Six in ten people in a wide range of demographic groups say that factual information about handgun violence and the impact of handgun regulation frames policy options in ways that make them want to get involved. These different messages are salient to almost every group. Santa Clara County

voters are motivated to contact an elected official because of the danger posed to kids, the cost factor, and the impact of gun dealers on communities and neighborhoods.

There are no significant differences in priorities based on age; however, there are differences based on education and partisanship. Those with some college education (71%) are more motivated to contact an elected official when learning how many kids are killed by handguns than those with high school diplomas or less (64%) or college graduates (53%). Santa Clara County Republicans are less likely to take action than Democrats when they learn that handguns are the leading killers of kids (56% to 68% Democrats), gun dealers are more accessible than McDonald's (49% to 68%), and that firearms injuries are costly to taxpayers (48% to 70%).

Most people who do not own guns are motivated to get involved when they learn the facts about the accessibility of gun dealers (67%), the cost to taxpayers (66%) and the danger to kids (65%). More than four in ten people who live in gun-owning households in Santa Clara County also want to contact their elected official in response to this information.

Women are most impassioned about handgun policies. Women are more likely than men to say they will contact an elected official when they learn that handguns are the leading killers of kids (71% to 48% men), there are 13 times more gun dealers than McDonald's (71% to 47%), that firearm injuries cost taxpayers $177 million (73% to 47%) and that zoning laws reduce the number of gun dealers (55% to 32%).

CURRENT LEVELS OF PUBLIC AWARENESS

The potential of information to provoke greater interest about handgun policies and related issues is underscored by the rather large information vacuum that exists within the electorate. There are widespread gaps in public awareness about both handgun-related crime and violence statistics, and about existing handgun policies and laws.

Public in Information Vacuum About Handgun Crime and Violence

Awareness of handgun laws and handgun-related crime is low despite the fact that most people have an opinion on the issue of handgun regulation. When given a quick quiz to test their knowledge of two basic facts, most failed to score a passing grade. [See Table 2]

- Handguns are the leading killers of kids in California. Today only one in five (20%) Santa Clara County voters knows this.
- It is currently legal to sell guns out of homes in the vast majority of California residential neighborhoods, but only one in five (22%) people know this. Two-thirds (64%) thought it was illegal to sell guns out of homes and 14% did not know whether it was legal or illegal.

Overall, six in ten (61%) of Santa Clara County residents failed to get either of these answers right. A third (35%) got one answer right, but only 3% answered both questions correctly.

Knowledge of guns is low across most demographic groups. Age, education, and party affiliation make little difference in level of knowledge. People who do not own guns are less likely (18%) to know it is legal to sell guns out of homes

than people in gun owning households (32%), but even most gun owners thought this practice was illegal.

Women were as likely as men to know that handguns are the leading killer of California kids (21% to 19% of men) while men were more likely to know that you can sell guns from homes (29% to 15% of women). Overall, however, neither men (4%) nor women (3%) knew both of these basic facts about handguns.

PUBLIC READY TO EMBRACE POLICY OPTIONS

There is strong support among the Santa Clara County electorate to make basic changes in handgun laws and policies, particularly when they become aware of certain handgun activities -- such as the sale of guns from private homes in residential neighborhoods -- explicitly permitted under current law. [See Table 3]

Public Favors Banning "Saturday Night Specials" and Home Gun Dealers

Santa Clara County voters want to get "Saturday Night Specials" off the streets. A 63% majority favors a law banning the sale of these small, concealable handguns. Almost half (45%) strongly favor banning the sale of Saturday Night Specials.

People also said this issue would affect how they would vote. A candidate who favors banning the sale of Saturday Night Specials is more likely to get their vote (56%) than lose it (9%). A candidate's stand on this issue makes no difference as to how the remaining third plans to vote.

When Santa Clara County residents learn that 70% of Saturday Night Specials sold in the United States are manufactured in Southern California, they see an

even greater need to take action. Two out of three (66%) want to make it illegal to produce these handguns in this state. More than four in ten (43%) strongly favor banning the production.

Citizens of Santa Clara County also want local discretion in voting for these bans. Other California cities have banned the sale of Saturday Night Specials and 80% of Santa Clara County residents want their city to follow this lead and pass a local ban.

Although a majority of people in Santa Clara County are not aware that California law allows people to sell guns out of their homes, they want it stopped when they find out it is legal. Almost half (47%) favor outlawing the practice once they learn about it. Thirty-three percent (33%) strongly favor banning this practice.

Overall Public Support for Handgun Legislation

Santa Clara County residents want to explore alternative handgun legislation. Totalling their opinions on banning home gun dealers, banning the sale of Saturday Night Specials, and banning the manufacture of Saturday Night Specials reveals that few (20%) in this county are opposed to all of these efforts while more than half (59%) favor at least two of these three proposals. More than a third (37%) support all three. [See Table 4]

Gun Owners Open to Legislation that Reduces Access to Handguns

A large number of those in gun owning households (49%) see the need for at least two of the three handgun policy options, including banning the sale (53%) and the manufacture (53%) of Saturday Night Specials. Gun owners also favor passing a local ban on the sale of Saturday Night Specials (66%).

SUPPORT FOR NEW HANDGUN POLICIES: DEMOGRAPHICS AND PARTY AFFILIATION

There is a consistent trend among the electorate across the board to support political efforts for changes in handgun policies based on the facts presented in this study. Voters are more open to a policy debate on the issue of handguns that is based on facts than to one based on ideological passions.

Demographic Breakdowns:

Support for Handgun Laws is Strong Across-the-Board

There are no significant class or age differences on specific items of the handgun policy agenda. Although more than half of Republicans support most policy options, there are partisan differences. Republicans are less supportive than Democrats of banning home gun dealers (38% to 54% Democrat) and local ordinances to ban the use and sale of these guns in Santa Clara County (74% to 88%).

While a majority of men support most of the policy options, women are even more supportive of the local ban (87% of women favor, compared to 73% of men), banning the sale and use of Saturday Night Specials (68% to 57%), and banning the manufacture of Saturday Night Specials (71% to 61%).

CONCLUSION

As more information about current handgun laws and their effect on handgun-related violence reaches the public, more people will move toward active as well as philosophical support for policy changes that reduce access to handguns. As more information reaches Santa Clara County residents about the effect of particular policy changes on handgun-related violence in communities where

new policies have taken effect, more voters will support efforts to bring these policies to their own community.

Communities are learning that citizens can make a difference. Public officials need to learn that the public is looking for candidates and parties who embrace change and promote new policies which reduce access to handguns based on facts.

TABLE 1: LEARNING ABOUT GUNS & GETTING INVOLVED

	MORE KIDS KILLED BY GUNS THAN CAR CRASHES	13 TIMES MORE GUN DEALERS THAN MCDONALD'S	GUNS COST $177M	ZONING REDUCES GUN DEALERS
All	60%	59%	60%	43%
Age				
18-24	64	64	68	32
25-34	53	58	53	34
35-44	59	47	54	47
45-54	59	55	55	43
55-64	67	69	71	50
65 +	63	69	67	54
p=	*NS*	*NS*	*NS*	NS
Sex				
Men	48	47	47	32
Women	71	71	73	55
p=	*.00*	*.00*	*.00*	.00
Education				
HS or less	64	64	64	45
Some College	71	65	66	46
College Grad+	53	55	56	42
p=	*.02*	*NS*	*NS*	*NS*
Party ID				
Republican	56	49	48	37
Independent	53	60	60	42
Democrat	68	68	70	49
p=	*.06*	*.02*	*.01*	*NS*
Gun Owning Household				
Yes	47	41	46	32
No	65	67	66	48
p=	*.01*	*.00*	*.00*	*.06*

TABLE 2: GUN KNOWLEDGE LOW

	Handguns Leading Killer of Kids (% Know)	Legal to Sell Guns Out of Homes (% Yes)
All	20	22
Age		
18-24	27	27
25-34	29	19
35-44	14	15
45-54	20	27
55-64	17	26
65 +	19	24
p=	*NS*	*NS*
Sex		
Men	19	29
Women	21	15
p=	*NS*	*.00*
Education		
HS or less	14	21
Some College	20	16
College Grad +	21	25
p=	*NS*	*NS*
Party ID		
Republican	18	23
Independent	19	25
Democrat	22	18
p=	*NS*	*NS*
Gun Owning Household		
Yes	12	32
No	23	18
p=	*.04*	*.01*

TABLE 3:
GETTING GUNS OFF THE STREETS: SUPPORT FOR HANDGUN POLICY OPTIONS

	Ban Home Gun Dealers (% Favor)	Banning Sale "SNS" (% Favor)	Banning Manufacture of "SNS" (% Favor)	Local Ban (% Favor)
All	47%	63%	66%	80%
Age				
18-24	45	50	68	68
25-34	46	56	56	73
35-44	47	61	66	83
45-54	55	68	68	77
55-64	45	69	74	93
65 +	39	67	69	83
p=	*NS*	*NS*	*NS*	*NS*
Sex				
Men	45	57	61	73
Women	49	68	71	87
p=	*NS*	*.06*	*.06*	*.00*
Education				
HS or less	36	50	64	86
Some College	49	61	69	85
College Grad+	48	67	64	77
p=	*NS*	*NS*	*NS*	*NS*
Party ID				
Republican	38	58	59	74
Independent	49	60	72	77
Democrat	54	68	69	88
p=	*.04*	*NS*	*NS*	*.02*
Gun Owning Household				
Yes	37	53	53	66
No	51	67	72	87
p=	*.04*	*.03*	*.00*	*.00*

TABLE 4: SUPPORTING HANDGUN POLICY OPTIONS (# OF LAWS FAVOR)

	1 or Less	2	3
All	40%	23%	37%
18-24	50%	18%	32%
25-34	49%	15%	36%
35-44	44%	17%	39%
45-54	34%	23%	43%
55-64	29%	38%	33%
65 and over	39%	30%	31%
p=	*NS*		
Sex			
Male	46%	21%	33%
Female	35%	25%	40%
p=	*NS*		
Education			
High school or less	50%	19%	31%
Some college	40%	21%	39%
College or more	38%	25%	37%
p=	*NS*		
Party ID			
Republican	48%	23%	29%
Independent	39%	19%	42%
Democrat	35%	24%	41%
p=	*NS*		
Gun Owning Household			
Yes	51%	25%	24%
No	35%	23%	42%
p=	*.02*		

EDK POLL

Questionnaire

1. Are you a registered voter?

2. [IF NO ASK] Is there someone who is registered to vote at this number I may speak to? [IF NONE TERMINATE]

3. Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, an Independent, or something else?

   [IF REPUBLICAN OR DEMOCRAT ASK:] Do you consider yourself a strong (Republican/Democrat) or a not so strong (Republican/Democrat)?

   [IF INDEPENDENT ASK:] Would you say that you lean more toward the Republicans or more toward the Democrats?

4. Which of the following best describes you? [ETHNIC BACKGROUNDS]

5. If you had to guess, what do you think is the leading killer of teenagers in California?

6. Is it legal to sell guns out of homes in residential neighborhoods?

7. In most California communities, individuals who pass a criminal background check and pay a fee can obtain licenses that allow them to buy guns directly from manufacturers and sell them out of their homes instead of through a retail store. Do you favor or oppose banning home gun dealers? [Is that strongly favor/strongly oppose?]

8. Several California cities and counties have enacted zoning ordinances that ban the selling of firearms in residential neighborhoods. As a consequence of these new laws, the number of gun dealers have dropped dramatically. Does learning this make you more likely to call or write an elected official about doing something about handgun violence or does it make no difference?

9. Do you favor or oppose banning the sale and possession of small, concealable handguns known as "Saturday Night Specials." [Is that strongly favor/strongly oppose?]

10. Seventy percent of the "Saturday Night Specials" sold in this country are manufactured in Southern California. Would you favor or oppose a law that made it illegal to produce these small, concealable handguns in this state? [Is that strongly favor/strongly oppose?]

11. Several cities have banned the sale of "Saturday Night Specials." Would you be in favor of your city banning the sale and use of "Saturday Night Specials?"

12. If you were to learn that a candidate was in favor of banning "Saturday Night Specials," would that make you more likely or less likely to vote for him or her or would it make no difference?

13-15. I would like to read you some facts about handgun violence and kids. Please tell me if learning this information would make you call or write an elected official asking that something be done about handgun violence or would it make no difference?

13. More kids are killed by handguns in California than by car crashes, diseases or drugs. Does learning this make you more likely to call or write an elected official or does it make no difference?

14. There are 13 times more gun dealers than McDonald's in California. Does learning this make you more likely to call or write and elected official or does it make no difference?

15. Firearm injuries cost California taxpayers more than $177 million dollars. Does learning this make you more likely to call or write an elected official or does it male no difference?

16. Do you or someone in your household own a gun?

17. [IF OWN GUN] Is the gun you own a long gun (shotgun, rifle), handgun or both?

18. Are you or have you ever been a member of the National Rifle Association?

19. Have you or any close friends or family members been a victim of violence during the past 5 years?

20. Have you or any close friends or family members been a victim of gun violence during the past 5 years?

21. What is the highest level of schooling you achieved?

22. What is your age?

23. Finally, for statistical purposes only, which of the following categories best describes your annual household income?

24. CODE SEX