

---

1-24-2021

## Safety in Numbers? A Qualitative Analysis of the 1999 National Firearms Survey

Zachary T. Carlisle

Midland University, [carlisle@midlandu.edu](mailto:carlisle@midlandu.edu)

Michelle L. Estes

Oklahoma State University, [michelle.estes@okstate.edu](mailto:michelle.estes@okstate.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>



Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Sociology of Culture Commons](#)

---

### Recommended APA Citation

Carlisle, Z. T., & Estes, M. L. (2021). Safety in Numbers? A Qualitative Analysis of the 1999 National Firearms Survey. *The Qualitative Report*, 26(1), 262-273. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2021.4438>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact [nsuworks@nova.edu](mailto:nsuworks@nova.edu).

---



## Safety in Numbers? A Qualitative Analysis of the 1999 National Firearms Survey

### Abstract

Firearms and their place in American society have been under heavy scrutiny for the past several decades. Previous academic research typically focused on the firearm as a weapon that needs to be regulated, controlled, and the relative fight between various parties concerning second amendment and constitutional rights. However, inadequate scholarly research focuses on the firearm as an abstract, symbolic entity in American culture, and what the firearm represents to Americans in a more complex, abstruse way. This research utilizes the National Firearms Survey (NFS), conducted in 1999, as a mechanism of secondary qualitative analysis to examine the ways in which Americans view their firearms conceptually. After employing qualitative content analysis using data provided by the NFS, we found that Americans seemed to be more concerned about safety and training regarding firearms, as opposed to traditional notions of the firearm as an American symbol of liberty and freedom.

### Keywords

firearms, symbolism, qualitative, culture

### Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

### Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Tammy Mix and Adam Straub for reviewing earlier drafts of this paper.

# **Safety in Numbers? A Qualitative Analysis of the 1999 National Firearms Survey**

Zachary T. Carlisle  
Midland University, Fremont, Nebraska, USA

Michelle L. Estes  
Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma, USA

---

Firearms and their place in American society have been under heavy scrutiny for the past several decades. Previous academic research typically focused on the firearm as a weapon that needs to be regulated, controlled, and the relative fight between various parties concerning second amendment and constitutional rights. However, inadequate scholarly research focuses on the firearm as an abstract, symbolic entity in American culture, and what the firearm represents to Americans in a more complex, abstruse way. This research utilizes the National Firearms Survey (NFS), conducted in 1999, as a mechanism of secondary qualitative analysis to examine the ways in which Americans view their firearms conceptually. After employing qualitative content analysis using data provided by the NFS, we found that Americans seemed to be more concerned about safety and training regarding firearms, as opposed to traditional notions of the firearm as an American symbol of liberty and freedom.

*Keywords:* firearms, symbolism, qualitative research, culture

---

## **Background**

Firearms and their use in contemporary society is a hotly contested issue, and that contestation has only grown recently due to several high-profile public shootings in the United States. As such, the overarching goal of this project is to elucidate the different ways in which Americans conceptualize and relate to firearms from a personal, intrinsic perspective. Firearms and their regulation are an integral part of American history and culture (Bellesiles, 1996), and their use and acceptability in a variety of different social situations is a commonly debated topic within contemporary American society. Millions of individuals own firearms in the United States, and by most current estimates, there are more firearms in the United States than there are people (Bureau of Alcohol, Firearms, and Tobacco, 2010). The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has processed over 222 million background checks for firearms purchases since 1993 (FBI, 2016). According to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF), over 10 million firearms were manufactured in the United States in 2013, and over four hundred thousand were exported to nations and governments outside of the United States. Recent estimates assert that Americans own nearly one third of the 1 billion firearms throughout the world (Horsley, 2016; Small Arms Survey, 2018).

Despite Americans' desire to purchase and own firearms, the Second Amendment has come under scrutiny in recent years, as politicians, activists, and lobbyist groups have vastly different, and in some cases, extremely polarizing views concerning the nature of firearm ownership and use in the United States (Lynch, Logan, & Jackson, 2018). Several sociological studies have been conducted throughout the latter part of the twentieth century that examine

the relationship between firearms and the American public in a myriad of ways, including the relationships between firearms and legislation, public advocacy groups, public disarmament groups, and the interplay between mental health and firearm ownership (Baker, Teret, & Dietz, 1980; Munz, 1934; Polsby, 1995; Rakove, 2002; Zimring, 2008).

In spite of past scholarly research related to this broad topic, there is an inadequate amount of relevant academic literature related to the different ways in which citizens think about the firearm as it relates to American values (Yamane, 2017), particularly from a secondary data analysis vantage point. Often, we see sociological research that examines and analyzes firearms and their relationship to American citizens from a very tangible, pragmatic perspective that deals with notions of firearm control, firearm regulation, as well as public health perspectives related to firearms and firearm ownership (Baker et al., 1980, Yamane, 2017). However, there is a paucity of literature that qualitatively examines and addresses the firearm as a transcendent symbol that encapsulates a variety of ingrained traditional American values (Celinska, 2007; Esposito & Finley, 2014; Mencken & Froese, 2019). In this instance, “traditional American values” can be understood by employing the work of historian Joseph J. Ellis, “...the belief in an American Athens was linked to the emergence of a liberal mentality that exalted the untapped power that would be generated within individuals and society at large when traditional impediments to thought and action were obliterated” (Ellis, 1979, pp. 176-177). Ellis’ conceptualization of American liberty and its emphasis on the individual, in lieu of the collective, will be the primary lens through which this analysis gestates “traditional American values and ideals.” We theorize that firearms represent what Ellis is asserting; American values represent personal autonomy, emphasizing individual rights over collective regulation, and the liberty to protect oneself through the use of force when necessary. It is important to understand how Americans view gun ownership through this lens, as firearm regulation and legislature is often seen as a microcosm of these aforementioned American values; for many Americans, the firearm is a *physical representation* of their individual rights.

This research examines and analyzes the different ways that Americans view firearms in connection with their historically constructed, intrinsic sense of liberty. In order to accomplish this, we qualitatively examine several aspects of the 1999 National Firearm Survey conducted by David Hemenway, a professor at Harvard’s School of Public Health.

The present study utilizes previously collected phone interview data to determine the latent and manifest themes associated with firearm owners and non-owners, as well as those who are for or against the ability to carry and conceal firearms in public domains. This study focuses on addressing the following: How is firearm ownership related to notions of American ideals regarding “freedom” and “liberty”? How can the answers to the aforementioned research question influence contemporary discussions related to firearm safety, firearm control, and firearm regulations? These questions and the subsequent analysis that seeks to shed light on them are important, as the risk of being killed by a firearm in the United States is higher than in any other high-income nation in the world (Lynch et al., 2018). A more nuanced investigation of the deep, cultural ties that Americans have to the firearm can aid in addressing this issue. This study reviews pertinent literature that addresses relevant data collection techniques that are being implemented, and then provides a detailed analysis of the findings, as well as offers directions for future scholarly work.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Health and Public Policy**

Sociology has long been concerned with the relationship that American society has with firearms, and the degree to which they influence and affect social life (Celinska, 2007; Esposito

& Finley, 2014; Mencken & Froese, 2019; Stroud, 2012; Utter & True, 2000; Wright, 1995). Hemenway (1997) has engaged in several research endeavors that addressed the notions of and relationships pertaining to firearm control and the ways in which the American public frequently overestimates how often guns are actually used for self-defense, in addition to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms' relationship to firearm control and perception of firearms in the United States (Hemenway, 2001). Furthermore, Hemenway (2001) has spent considerable time and effort researching the ways that firearms have been responsible for countless injuries in the United States, as well as use of the National Firearm Survey research that this study is using to conduct new qualitative work. Hemenway's (2001) work, like that of other social scientists, illustrates the vast number of ways that firearms are studied and examined from a tangible, concrete perspective, but this further illustrates the need to study the relationships that firearms have from a more abstract, symbolic perspective to broader American culture.

Additional studies have been conducted that illustrate the need for qualitative research to examine firearms from this symbolic, abstract vantage point. Previously, studies have generally focused on firearms and their overall relationship to public health (Baker et al., 1980; Yamane, 2017), to the ways in which firearms have become another consumer product that exists in a vast capitalistic system (Carlson, 2015; Esposito & Finley, 2014; Kopel, 2000; Stroud, 2012), to the myriad ways that social scientists as well as policy makers and legislators have discussed and argued over the different ways that firearms should be regulated and controlled (Faria, 2012; Munz, 1934; Polsby, 1995; Raknove, 2002; Utter & True, 2000; Zimring, 2008).

Firearms have had a significant impact on sociological issues related to public health. Marks and Stokes (1976) were some of the first sociologists who examined and analyzed the impacts that widespread firearm access has had on issues related to public health, in this particular case, suicide. Marks and Stokes (1976) argued that the "social and cultural availability of such means of self-destruction" (p. 622) have had significant impacts on suicide prevalence, particularly in the American South. Their scholarly work illustrates one of the several ways in which sociologists have studied and examined how firearms are related to various public health outcomes, such as Baker et al. (1980) work, but it also further illustrates the ways in which the firearm, as an abstract example of American values, is understudied in several academic disciplines, particularly sociology.

### **Religiosity and Idealism**

Social scientists have examined the use and ownership of firearms from various academic perspectives, including the ways in which religious affiliations and relative levels of religiosity are correlated with firearms use and ownership. Young (1989) examined this relationship and found that previous research seems to indicate that Protestant individuals are more likely to own firearms. As a result of this past research, Young (1989) utilized GSS data and found that this penchant for gun ownership by Protestants seemed to be more culturally and geographically based, rather than religiously based; Protestants are more likely to live in the American South, and individuals who live in the American South are more likely to engage in hunting, therefore they are more likely to own firearms (Young, 1989). Young (1989) suggested that firearms have been examined from several different vantage points, including the relationship between firearms and religiosity, but there is a scholarly gap in the literature that still exists related to the firearm as an abstract symbol of traditional American ideals related to "liberty" and "freedom."

Related to the work that Young (1989) engaged in concerning the ties between religiosity and firearm ownership is the scholarship of Richard Felson and Paul-Phillipe Pare.

In their 2010 work, Felson and Pare examined the geographic and racial tendencies for certain individuals to carry firearms for protection. In their analysis, they found that white individuals from the Western and Southern United States are much more likely to carry firearms than their Northern white counterparts, and that black individuals are more likely to carry knives as opposed to firearms for protection, as a means of protecting themselves from various “methods of victimization” (Felson & Pare, 2010).

More recently, Mencken & Froese (2019) argued that the symbolic meaning of guns is understudied within recent publications. They sought to remedy this shortcoming by examining data from the Baylor Religion Survey and focused on the ways in which guns empower gun owners emotionally and morally. Their findings highlighted the importance of considering social context when studying the symbolic meaning of guns, as social context largely impacts political opinions and practices of individuals.

One can observe from this preliminary yet encompassing treatment of the literature that social scientists as well as the American public at large have been framing and discussing firearms in the same ways for several decades. However, there is little academic research that frames firearms from a more symbolic perspective, and how that symbolic perspective informs and influences Americans’ conceptualization of “liberty” and “freedom.” This is the crux of the current research, and the aim of this contribution is to extrapolate the existing scholarly literature regarding the qualitative relationship between abstract notions of the firearm in the United States.

## **Theoretical Framework**

There is a general dearth of research that examines the symbolism of firearms among American citizens, specifically within qualitative research. Furthermore, qualitative content analysis exploring the symbolic nature of firearms among society is largely nonexistent. Therefore, given the understudied nature of this topic, we designed the study to be inductive. This indicates that the most appropriate theoretical framework would be grounded theory. Grounded theory is focused on “collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 10). We utilized tenants of grounded theory because it is predicated on the construction of new ideas *through* descriptive and interpretive data analysis (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004, 2011). The purpose of this study is to explore and discover the different ways in which firearms are conceptualized as a symbolic construct that represents American ideals such as liberty; data analysis techniques drawn from a grounded theory design enabled us to conduct this research unhindered by existing theoretical orientations and existing conceptual frameworks (Charmaz, 2006).

As qualitative researchers we acknowledge that we possess various positions that impact our research. Here, we reflect on those positions and note that they have the potential to shape data collection, analysis, and result dissemination. The majority of data collection and analysis was conducted by the first author who identifies as a gender-conforming, white, heterosexual, man academic. Largely, these characteristics align with what has been identified as the typical gun owner. The second author’s identity as a gender-conforming, white, heterosexual, woman academic also remained aware of her positionality and how that impacted her interpretation and assessment of the data and writing process. Each author has some experience and familiarity with firearms and supports citizens’ rights to legally own guns; however, we also acknowledge the need for laws and policies that keep all citizens safe. Furthermore, we believe providing a robust understanding of how citizens view firearms aides in the construction of knowledge that creates a safer society for all citizens.

## **Data and Methods**

### **Background**

The data comes from the National Firearms Survey, which is a 1999 mixed methods study conducted by David Hemenway of Harvard University's School of Public Health. The goal of this original study was exploratory in nature, in that its overall aim was to obtain information on a variety of topics related to firearms and their place in contemporary United States society. The goal of the present research is descriptive in nature, in that it is proposed that the data collected from these interviews can be used to further develop and extrapolate the raw qualitative data that was collected in 1999 concerning firearm ownership, and how this data tells a story about what guns mean to Americans within this time period. In addition, qualitatively analyzing Hemenway's 1999 National Firearms Survey as opposed to Hemenway's more recent 2015 National Firearms Survey elucidates individuals' conceptualizations regarding firearms as abstract entities before the 1999 Columbine high school shooting, which is generally seen as a seminal moment in the history of the firearms regulation debate; it is important to study Americans perspectives prior to this event, as these perspectives are reflected in this qualitative analysis. This research endeavor is focused on using secondary analysis as a primary tool of investigation. Specifically, qualitative content analysis (QCA) is being employed in order to critically analyze the data from a new and auxiliary perspective, in order to collect and determine whether any latent or manifest themes emerge that may help to understand the proposed research questions in a more thorough manner.

Data obtained from Hemenway's work was sorted and coded accordingly, in order to use qualitative content analysis as a valid means of secondary analysis. This process was accomplished by downloading the raw data from the University of Michigan's ICPSR data repository website, where the original data is stored. The use of this data is in the public domain and has been deidentified. After the data was downloaded and sorted chronologically as well as thematically, based on the research questions, it was analyzed using NVivo 11 Qualitative Data Analysis software. Responses were sorted thematically in accordance with the answers that the research is attempting to obtain; thematic notions include liberty and freedom, self-defense, and firearm control regulations as well as questions related to safety and firearm ownership, as these were the prominent themes that arose during data analysis.

Hemenway's original data was composed of 2,588 phone surveys, which were conducted using a random sampling technique, selected by random-digit dialing. This data is representative of all 50 United States based on 1990 census data, and is representative of the household, not individual level. The focus of this research is to examine Hemenway's data from a qualitative vantage point. This was accomplished by implementing and analyzing the qualitative responses to Hemenway's original data, which was slightly smaller than the quantitative data set; the qualitative data set consists of 2,521 total individual responses; all of which were included in this analysis (Hemenway 2001). This project is designed to obtain information on the characteristics of gun ownership, gun storage and carrying practices, and weapons-related incidents in the United States--specifically, the use of guns and other weapons in self-defense against other people.

### **Interview Particulars and Coding**

The present study consists of secondary data analysis, so more in-depth information is needed regarding Hemenway's original work. Data was collected using national random-digit dial telephone surveys in March 1999. Part 1, Survey Data, contains the coded data obtained

during the interviews, and Part 2, Open-Ended Verbatim Responses, consists of open-ended answers provided by both gun and non-gun owning respondents. Four qualifying questions were asked, dealing with: (1) gun ownership, (2) gun display against the respondent, (3) gun use in self-defense against another person, and (4) the use of a weapon other than a gun in self-defense against another person. A "yes" response to a qualifying question led to a series of additional questions on the same topic. Information was collected from all respondents based on their responses to interview questions that inquired as to the perceived safety of their neighborhood, whether they would feel safer if more people owned guns, whether guns should be allowed in public places, whether gun injuries were a problem in their community, whether they would favor or oppose a program to reduce gun injuries, and whether they had ever been shot with a gun. Respondents living in households that currently contained a gun were asked how many and what type of guns were present, the main reasons for owning a gun, whether any of the guns were loaded and unlocked, and whether they had received formal firearms training. Questions concerning incidents in which a gun was displayed in a hostile manner against the respondent included the number of times it took place, how long ago it had occurred, whether the respondent was in the military or police force at the time, the location of the incident, whether the individual displaying the gun was known to the respondent, whether the respondent had a gun, and whether the police were contacted. Respondents who had used a gun or other weapon in self-defense in the last five years were asked about the number of times it took place, the location of the incident, whether they were in the military or police force at the time, the type of weapon used, whether they knew the other person, whether this individual also had a weapon, whether the police were contacted, and arrests were made, and what crime was committed. Demographic variables include sex, age, race, educational level, household income, type of residential area (e.g., urban, rural, etc.), along with the age and number of children in the household, although one limitation of the qualitative aspect of this data set is that this demographic information was not included. Specific coding mechanisms include dimensions of "freedom" and "liberty," and how they relate to gun ownership and use, likelihood of gun usage for self-defense, as well as relationships between gun ownership and feelings of protection.

Qualitative content analysis was implemented using Hemenway's raw data, and each survey and/or qualitative response was treated as an independent piece of data that was coded. Data was sorted thematically in accordance with emergent themes during the transcription and analysis process. An initial open coding process took place, in which transcripts were read and reread several times to identify and code for overarching thematic elements that dominated participant discussions. Next, more focused coding took place to hone-in on and develop these initial open codes with more nuance and focus, by breaking down these initial open codes with subthemes that dominated the broad thematic elements of each section (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). From this multifaceted process, a variety of themes and subthemes emerged. The coding process was especially important, because this analysis sifted through the transcriptions to analyze relevant words, phrases, and notions that indicated how Americans conceptualize the firearm.

After coding, inter-coder reliability tests were performed by the PI in order to test code reliability; this was accomplished by sampling a subset of the data and implementing separate coding structures between different parties; intercoder similarities were roughly 70% in terms of similarities between coders and emergent thematic elements that arose (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). Very few discrepancies between coders arose; none of the small number of discrepancies that arose during the inter-coder reliability check facilitated any substantial doubt regarding the coding processes. These codes helped to examine and facilitate a qualitative discussion relating to the relationships between firearms and overall American perceptions of freedom, individuality, and government regulation. In this particular case, it was proposed that

the firearm acts as a symbolic entity that may represent a tangible aspect of freedom and/or liberty, and the goal of this project is to extrapolate that theoretical understanding, using facets of a grounded theory approach, in order to analyze facets related to firearms and abstract conceptualizations of American values. Results are sorted and discussed based on each prominent theme that arose during the coding process.

## Results

Each subsection yields pertinent data related to the ways in which these thematic elements intertwine with participants' discussion of the firearm as it relates to their own experiences.

### Safety and Protection

The respondents who were surveyed in the qualitative section of Hemenway's original work suggest, based on this research's qualitative data coding and analysis, to be much more interested in the firearm as a mechanism of safety and protection, in addition to using firearms for sporting purposes, as opposed to an overarching, broad symbol that is synonymous with American ideals of liberty and freedom.

*Home safety. I can be blunt. If someone comes into my house while I'm in bed, I'm not going to let them live to sue me for two reasons: Number one, I don't want to be a victim. Number two, I won't leave an intruder alive to see next week. I feel very adamant about that. (Participant # 2184)*

Results indicate that the emergent themes that dominated the respondents' answers were concerning notions of firearms as a symbol and practical application of the manifest theme of safety and security. Similar to Participant #2184's response, respondents' answers to Hemenway's various questions regarding firearms pertained in some way to the idea of safety, training, sport, or security, either by using the gun as an actual mechanism of self-defense, or that the ownership of a gun somehow symbolizes safety and security innately in the actual firearm's potential to render possible combatants or intruders immobile and non-threatening.

*The only reason I own a gun is because my wife was mugged, and our home broken into. Otherwise, I would never have one. (Participant #1666)*

Issues of protection seemed to dominate respondents' answers and thoughts on the nature of firearm ownership. This is further evident in Participant #1666's response, as this participant discusses the reasons why he owns a firearm. The dominant theme is centered on issues of protection and safety, as this participant purchased a firearm in response to a home invasion.

### Training and Security

While safety and security were a key theme among respondents, many respondents also seemed to be concerned with firearm safety as it pertained to training.

*The problem is not the guns. The problem is that people aren't trained. Training should be part of the school curriculum so children can understand what a gun can do to another human being. It should be taught like birth control and other topics in the curriculum... firearms training should be part of the school*

*program like drivers ed. If children learned what guns could do, they would never pick one up. (Participant #0708)*

Respondents discussed extensive training that either they themselves had received, or training that a friend, family member, or loved one had received prior to that individual purchasing and using a firearm. Respondents discussed this training in great detail, and received some sort of firearm training through military service, or some other sort of licensed firearm training entity.

In addition to individuals whose answers were dominated by sentiments of safety and proper training as related to firearm purchasing and ownership, an individual's right to own a firearm as reflected in the United States constitution, or some other similar sort of unalienable right as related to firearms, was rarely mentioned. Frequently, salient news stories could lead one to assume that Americans as a collective whole are very concerned with their constitutional rights to purchase and own firearms. Although there were respondents who did discuss this notion overtly, this overarching theme of "Individual Rights" was not nearly as pronounced as perhaps one would assume based on prior discourse. This is especially pertinent, as this data was sampled in 1999, and yet this discourse persists in 2020.

Individual rights and individual ownership were not as important to respondents, in terms of relating the firearm to notions of liberty and American values of personal freedoms, as were issues of gun safety and proper gun training.

*It was like he (the officer) had talked to me about "What if" and I said I really never thought about being robbed or my house broken into. The training only took a couple of days, so we went ahead and did it. First of all, if there was a break-in with me here and someone was trying to do bodily harm with me, a shotgun is not like a pistol, you don't really have to aim. So, that is why it only took a couple of days. The main reason, when he (the officer) said "What if." I thought about it, what would you do? I say for the material things in here that would be fine. I can replace them. But my life, I can't. So the "What if" was the reason. (Participant #1014)*

*The first training was a course given by the state of Kentucky. I took it when I was young because even though my grandfather was a gunsmith, I feel it is very important to know how to use guns and know gun safety. Kentucky is a state that has many guns, some hunting too. (Participant #0573)*

One can observe that issues of firearm safety and proper firearm training dominated many of the respondents' answers to the researcher's questions. The relative degree to which safety and training were seen as much more foundational and imperative to Americans, when discussing notions of firearms against a backdrop of notions of American "liberty," is striking; few of the respondents' answers to the researcher's questions were related to notions of "Individual Rights," and even issues of gun ownership. Issues of self-defense, issues of gun ownership, and especially issues of an individual's rights as they related to firearms were not nearly as prevalent, from a coding perspective, as issues of safety and training related to firearms seemed to be, based on Hemenway's data, as well as this secondary qualitative analysis.

## Discussion

Based on the collection and secondary analysis of Hemenway's original data, this qualitative content analysis seems to imply that Americans, while concerned with their individual, constitutional rights to own firearms, were instead generally more concerned with

issues of adequate firearm safety and proper training when it comes to firearm ownership and use in 1999. This assertion facilitates a considerable break from traditional conceptualizations regarding the relationship that Americans are thought to have with firearms, particular from a Neoliberal perspective (Esposito & Finley, 2014), and provides a salient gestation of this frequently discussed and debated issue. Surprisingly, firearms were not seen as an overt, broad symbol of American freedom or liberty, but notions of “freedom” could perhaps be understood as contingent upon the firearm’s ability to provide a sense of safety and protection that one could render autonomously.

In addition, the qualitative analysis of data that was predominately collected before the 1999 Columbine high school shooting would seem to suggest that public sentiment regarding firearm safety and training existed in a similar manner, compared to overt public discourse that dominated national debates regarding firearms regulation after the Columbine shooting. This qualitative analysis furthers the need to employ secondary data analysis more often, especially with readily available data, in order to draw conclusions regarding sociological topics that are underutilized in the particular ways that this study addresses. The conclusions that are drawn from this research project seem to illustrate this point.

This study is not without limitations. First, the data is from 1999, and although these interviews are indicative of an important time period within the US gun control debate (pre vs post Columbine), they are nonetheless dated. Second, while secondary data analysis is a useful methodological tool, it also possesses shortcomings, in that the current authors had no control over sampling frames, interview question facilitation, or participant recruitment. Third, the authors’ interpretations of participants’ interview responses are inherently subjective, and despite attempts to give voices to participants through careful data analysis, the interpretations belong to the authors. Finally, as with many qualitative studies, these results may be difficult to generalize to a larger population, as the time frame in which the data was collected may limit the generalizability of our results. Regardless of these limitations, this research has lasting implications for future scholars as well as potential policy implications. This qualitative analysis has the potential to impact larger conversations concerning the relationships that Americans have regarding firearms in drastic ways. So often, mainstream media outlets seem to dictate the narratives that exist in society by asserting that Americans are extremely concerned about their constitutional rights to own and bear firearms; this was one of the key catalysts for analyzing Hemenway’s 1999 data. When such assertions are discussed with increasing regularity, individuals can internalize those messages as a threat to their constitutional rights and may engage in certain actions that could be detrimental to society as a whole as a result of those internalizations. The somewhat contrary conclusions that the completion of this project seem to affirm may impact the ways in which society as a whole conceptualizes their collective relationship to firearms.

Although this project seems to yield relatively new and, in some cases, contradictory claims compared to past assertions by other social scientists and scholars (Faria, 2012), it is important to note that this is only one study, and future research is needed in order to make tangible, concrete claims as related to the connections between Americans and their perceptions of their relationships to firearms. Future scholars can look to analyzing more recent qualitative data concerning firearm ownership, as this data is not the most contemporary indicator of current public opinion, considering the mass shooting events over the past 20 years that could perhaps sway feelings regarding firearm ownership and regulation. In addition, Americans as a whole are not one monolithic group, and notions of gender, race, and socio-economic status may influence future findings. These results still yield pertinent information to us in 2020, in that this pre-Columbine data can act as a bridging mechanism that connects the current public climate regarding firearm regulation to a period in America in which mass-shootings were not yet so commonplace. This data can help social scientists to understand the complex

relationship that Americans have with firearms at a time when firearms legislation was not such a hotly contested issue; this data would suggest that Americans were just as concerned with safety and security related to firearms in 1999 as current discourse suggests that they are more than twenty years later.

## Conclusion

The goal of this study was to examine how firearm ownership may be related to American ideals such as freedom and liberty. Using Hemenway's 1999 National Firearms Survey, we performed secondary qualitative content analysis to explore this relationship between American ideals and firearm ownership. Our findings suggest that Americans viewed their firearms through two particular lenses; the first views firearms as tool to provide safety and protection for themselves and their loved ones. The second highlighted the importance of training and security when possessing and utilizing firearms. Although our results show that Americans viewed firearms as important for their safety and those who use them need proper training, gun-related injuries continue to be high within the United States. For example, more than 36,000 people died of a gun-related injury in the United States, approximately the same number of deaths that occurred due to motor vehicle accidents, in 2015 (Azrael et al., 2017). Results from this analysis indicate a seemingly salient juxtaposition; Americans assert that they purchase firearms primarily for safety purposes, and yet those very firearms are responsible for the same number of deaths as motor vehicle accidents in recent years.

## References

- Azrael, D., Hepburn, L., Hemenway, D., & Miller, M. (2017). The stock and flow of U.S. firearms: Results from the 2015 National Firearms Survey. *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 3(5), 38-57.
- Baker, S., Teret, S., & Dietz, P. (1980). Firearms and the public health. *Journal of Public Health Policy*, 1(3), 224-229. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3342086>
- Bellesiles, M. (1996). The origins of gun culture in the United States, 1760-1865. *The Journal of American History*, 83(2), 425-455. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2944942>
- Bureau of Alcohol, Firearms, and Tobacco. (2010). *Firearms Trace Data Report*. Author.
- Carlson, J. (2015). Mourning Mayberry: Guns, masculinity, and socioeconomic decline. *Gender & Society*, 29(3), 386-409. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243214554799>
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory*. Sage Publications.
- Celinska, K. (2007). Individualism and collectivism in America: The case of gun ownership and attitudes toward gun control. *Sociological Perspectives*, 50(2), 229-247. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sop.2007.50.2.229>
- Ellis, J. (1979). Culture and capitalism in pre-revolutionary America. *American Quarterly*, 31(2), 169-186. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2712306>
- Esposito, L., & Finley, L. L. (2014). Beyond gun control: Examining neoliberalism, pro-gun politics and gun violence in the United States. *Theory in Action*, 7(2), 74-103. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3798/tia.1937-0237.14011>
- Faria, M. A., Jr. (2012). America, guns, and freedom. Part I: A recapitulation of liberty. *Surgical Neurology International*, 3, 133. <http://www.surgicalneurologyint.com/text.asp?2012/3/1/133/102951>
- Federal Bureau of Investigation. (2016). *NICS firearm background checks longitudinal data composite as of October 31st, 2016*.

- Felson, R., & Pare, P. (2010). Gun cultures or honor cultures? Explaining regional and race differences in weapon carrying. *Social Forces* 88(3), 1357-1378. [www.jstor.org/stable/40645894](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40645894)
- Hemenway, D. (1997). Survey research and self-defense gun use: An explanation of extreme overestimates. *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, (1973)87(4),1430-1445. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1144020>
- Hemenway, D. (2001). The public health approach to motor vehicles, tobacco, and alcohol, with applications to firearms policy. *Journal of Public Health Policy*, 22(4), 381-402. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3343157>
- Hesse-Biber, S. N., & Leavy, P. (2004). *Approaches to qualitative research*. Oxford University Press.
- Hesse-Biber, S. N., & Leavy, P. (2011). *The practice of qualitative research*. Sage Publications
- Horsley, S. (2016, January 5). *Guns in America, by the numbers*. NPR. <https://www.npr.org/2016/01/05/462017461/guns-in-america-by-the-numbers>
- Kopel, D. (2000). Treating guns like consumer products. *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 148(4), 1213-1246.
- Lynch, K. R., Logan, T. K., & Jackson, D. B. (2018). "People will bury their guns before they surrender them": Implementing domestic violence gun control in rural, Appalachian versus urban communities. *Rural Sociology*, 83(2), 315-346.
- Marks, A., & Stokes, C. (1976). Socialization, firearms, and suicide. *Social Problems*, 23(5), 622-629. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/800483>
- Mencken, F. C., & Froese, P. (2019). Gun culture in action. *Social Problems*, 66, 3-27. <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spx040>
- Munz, E. (1934). A plan for control of firearms. *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology (1931-1951)*, 25(3), 445-453. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1136231>
- Polsby, D. (1995). Firearms costs, firearms benefits and the limits of knowledge. *The Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 86(1), 207-220. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1144007>
- Rakove, J. (2002). Words, deeds, and guns: 'Arming America' and the second amendment. *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 59(1), 205-210. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3491652>
- Stroud, A. (2012). Good guys with guns: Hegemonic masculinity and concealed handguns. *Gender and Society*, 26(2), 216-238. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243211434612>
- The Small Arms Survey 2007: Guns and the city*. (2007). Cambridge University Press.
- Utter, G. H., & True, J. L. (2000). The evolving gun culture in America. *Journal of American and Comparative Cultures*, 23(2), 67-79. [https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1542-734X.2000.2302\\_67.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1542-734X.2000.2302_67.x)
- Wright, J. D. (1995). Ten essential observations on guns in America. *Society*, 32(3), 63-68.
- Yamane, D. (2017). The sociology of U.S. gun culture. *Sociology Compass*, 11, 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12497>
- Young, R. (1989). The Protestant heritage and the spirit of gun ownership. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 28(3), 300-309. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1386741>
- Zimring, F. (2008). Handgun control, the second amendment, and judicial legislation in the D.C. Circuit: A note on *Parker v. District of Columbia*. *New Criminal Law Review: An International and Interdisciplinary Journal*, 11(2), 312-322. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/nclr.2008.11.2.312>

### Author Note

Zachary T. Carlisle, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor at Midland University in Fremont, NE. His main teaching and research interests include qualitative research methods, gender, social psychology, culture, and sexual violence. Please direct correspondence to [carlisle@midlandu.edu](mailto:carlisle@midlandu.edu).

Michelle L. Estes is a Ph.D. candidate at Oklahoma State University. She recently earned her M.A. from Middle Tennessee State University. Her research and teaching interests broadly include gender, sexuality, race, inequality, crime, deviance, and qualitative methods. Please direct correspondence to [michelle.estes@okstate.edu](mailto:michelle.estes@okstate.edu).

**Acknowledgements:** We would like to thank Tammy Mix and Adam Straub for reviewing earlier drafts of this paper.

Copyright 2021: Zachary T. Carlisle, Michelle L. Estes, and Nova Southeastern University.

### Article Citation

Carlisle, Z. T., & Estes, M. L. (2021). Safety in numbers? A qualitative analysis of the 1999 National Firearms Survey. *The Qualitative Report*, 26(1), 262-273. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2021.4338>

---