

Armed Self-Protection: New study looks at the morality

June 12, 2023



American consumers use their understanding of gun rights when judging the morality of civilians' use of guns to protect themselves from crime, and that assessment varies depending on specific scenarios, new research from Oregon State University shows.

The study's objective was to explore Americans' understanding of the Second Amendment, the only constitutional right that explicitly entitles individuals to a consumer product, and how that understanding guides which gun-related behaviors are deemed morally acceptable. The authors also examined how recent court rulings and legal and market changes have expanded consumers' rights to use guns for protection against crime.

Findings of the study indicate that individuals have very different ideas of what should and should not be allowed with guns, but their thinking is generally motivated by trying to do the right thing, such as ensuring

the safety of their loved ones or others, said Michelle Barnhart, an associate professor in OSU's College of Business and one of the paper's authors.

"We cannot just put people into categories of pro-gun or anti-gun," she said. "People are very complex in the way they think about gun rights and armed protection in America. When people think about whether or not it is moral to use a gun for protection, they make judgements based on specific factors and characteristics of the situation."

People will consider the place where the gun is being carried or used; the type of perceived threat; and the background and experience of the person carrying the gun, including whether they have a permit or have received training and whether they have a criminal history or history of mental illness, Barnhart said.

The findings, just published in the Journal of Consumer Research, offer new insights into Americans' complex views of gun rights.

Coauthors on the paper are Aimee Huff, associate professor in the OSU College of Business, and Inara Scott, associate professor and associate dean for teaching and learning excellence in the College of Business. Barnhart and Huff study American gun culture from a consumer perspective, while Scott is an attorney who specializes in constitutional law, business ethics and other topics.

Through one-on-one interviews and a large, professionally moderated online discussion group, the researchers sought to better understand how consumers view their gun rights and why some consumers assume the legally and morally complex responsibility of owning and using guns for protection, while others leave that responsibility to the state

Previous research has shown that the number of U.S. gun owners who keep guns for protection has risen over the last two decades, from 65% in 2000 to 88% in 2021. That shift has occurred while crime statistics indicate rates of violent crime, including assault and robbery, declined by 79% between 1993 and 2021.

Strategic messaging can shape how people understand large-scale problems and their own capacity to address those problems. The researchers found that in recent decades, messaging from pro-gun lobbying groups, politicians, some U.S. courts and others has presented protecting oneself, family and community from crime as an individual responsibility. Researchers call this shifting responsibility for addressing a social problem away from the state and to the individual "responsibilization," Barnhart said.

"The unique thing about responsibilization with regard to guns is the shift over time in what is considered responsible behavior," Barnhart said. "With the encouragement of lobbying groups and other market factors, behaviors such as carrying handguns in public for self-protection, which were once prohibited by law, are now considered by many to be something that responsible people do."

Understanding why people believe armed protection is necessary and responsible is important, the researchers say, because widespread use of guns to protect against perceived criminals can have negative consequences.

“We see some of the negative consequences of armed self-protection in the recent spate of shootings of people who mistakenly knocked on the wrong door, entered the wrong driveway or got into the wrong car by gun owners who ostensibly shot because they believed they were protecting themselves from criminal activity,” Barnhart said.

The researchers found that generally consumers view their rights under the Second Amendment as a bundle of rights, including the right to protect oneself and one’s family and the right to protect one’s property, but the makeup of that bundle can vary from person to person. In addition, some view Second Amendment rights as secular, and others as sacred, or divinely granted. Consumers also differed in whether they perceived the rights as timeless or outdated and as absolute or conditional.

“Using these categories, you can begin to see where Americans fall on the spectrum of gun rights and the Second Amendment,” Huff said. “A lot of polling questions just ask whether people support the Second Amendment or not, but that does not capture the nuance that comes with people’s understanding of the Second Amendment.”

The researchers also examined how people’s perceptions of the Second Amendment have been influenced by adoption of new laws around gun carry and ownership and court decisions that affirm acceptable uses of firearms for self-defense, such as “stand your ground” laws.

“Our understanding informs the law, but the law also informs our understanding,” Scott said. “This paper really gets to deep questions about how we interact with each other in society, and how that is shaped by influences around us.”

The researchers also found that consumers’ understanding of the Second Amendment may not always be supported by current law, which can put them in legal jeopardy. For example, some people in the study indicated that the Second Amendment gives them the right to use force to protect against property theft, but U.S. law generally does not recognize the right to use force in that scenario, Huff said.

“That speaks to the benefits of requiring some kind of training for gun owners; in states where training is required to carry a concealed handgun, gun owners gain understanding of the laws in their state, and perhaps an appreciation for differences in other states’ laws,” she said. “Training requirements could help to protect gun owners who want to abide by the laws in their state.”

Michelle Klampe is a writer-news researcher at Oregon State University Relations and Marketing. She may be reached at michelle.klampe@oregonstate.edu or at 541-737-0784.