

Gun owners aren't happier, don't sleep better at night

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Despite claims that owning a gun makes a person feel safer and sleep easier, gun owners don't actually sleep any better than non-gun owners, according to a new study by University of Arizona researcher Terrence Hill.

Gun owners also aren't any happier than those who don't own guns, Hill found in a second study. That's surprising, he says, given that gun owners often say that their guns make them feel safe, secure and protected, and those feelings are generally associated with [happiness](#).

The findings help researchers better understand the relationship between [gun ownership](#) and personal well-being, an area where research is currently lacking, said Hill, an associate professor of sociology in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences.

"We want to understand gun owners' subjective experiences," Hill said. "We're trying to understand when guns promote individual well-being, if at all, and that will add to the discussion of the role of guns in our society."

Hill is quick to acknowledge that certain individuals may indeed experience [greater happiness](#) or better sleep as the result of owning a gun. However, that doesn't seem to hold true for the general population of gun owners.

"It's possible that an individual can be comforted by their weapon and that their weapon can make them happier and less afraid, but we're finding that that's not so common that it can be observable at a [population level](#)," Hill said. "We're not saying there's anything wrong with guns. We're just saying that they may not be benefiting people's [personal lives](#) in the way some people claim."

Happiness Findings Span Nearly Three Decades

The happiness study, published in the journal *SSM—Population Health*, is based on an analysis of 27 years of data from the National Opinion Research Center's General Social Survey, collected between 1973 and 2018.

While the data initially seemed to point to a positive relationship between gun ownership and happiness, that relationship disappeared when researchers factored respondents' marital status into their analysis. It turned out gun owners were more likely to be married, and being married—not gun ownership—was driving happiness.

When the researchers considered marital status and other variables such as race, religion and education in their analysis, gun owners and non-gun owners exhibited similar levels of happiness.

"Gun owners will often tell you that guns help them to feel safe, secure and protected. They will also tell you that guns empower them and make them feel independent and strong. They also talk about how just holding and handling guns is pleasurable," Hill said. "If guns do make people feel safe, secure and protected, if they are empowering, if they are

contributing to feelings of pleasure, then they should promote happiness, but we don't find any evidence of that. That calls into question whether or not these are real feelings that gun owners have, or are they just part of the culture of owning a gun?"

There was one sub-group of gun owners that did show greater happiness. Hill found that gun ownership was associated with greater happiness among people who identified as Democrats, but not among people who identified as Republican or Independent, although that trend has been declining over time.

One possible explanation for the difference could be that Democrats and Republicans may own guns for different reasons, Hill said.

"Some people use guns to enhance a recreational lifestyle—for activities like target shooting—and this might promote happiness because it enhances a lifestyle," Hill said. "Gun owners who identify as more liberal or democratic may be more likely to use guns for that reason as opposed to emphasizing self-defense. There is previous research that shows Democrats are less likely than Republicans to own a gun for protection."

Commercial Products Promise Gun Owners Better Sleep

The sleep study, published in the journal *Preventive Medicine*, was based on four years of data collected for the General Social Survey between 2010 and 2018. The data showed no difference between gun owners and non-gun owners in terms of their level of sleep disturbance.

The researchers also looked at how participants felt about the safety of their neighborhoods. When they compared sleep disturbance in gun owners and non-gun owners who lived in dangerous neighborhoods, they again saw no difference.

"We found that gun ownership was no consolation for living in a dangerous neighborhood in terms of the sleep disturbance outcome," Hill said.

Hill said the idea that guns can help people sleep better at night is often presented by interest groups,

popular culture and even commercial products, such as bedside gun holsters or special pillows with gun compartments that allow people to sleep with or near their weapon. As a medical sociologist, Hill said it's his job to question those types of claims through research.

"Whenever people start to promote a certain type of lifestyle—like a type of exercise or a diet—[public health](#) is there to test it," he said. "We think if anybody makes a claim about how guns are good for people's health and wellbeing, those claims should be formally tested with empirical data. We need to test those claims like we would test any dietary or exercise recommendation."

Hill says he hopes his continued research on guns and personal well-being will encourage greater public conversation about the role of guns in society.

"Public health research has shown that guns are associated with thousands of preventable injuries and premature deaths, and the health care costs of those injuries and deaths can reach into the billions. Nobody questions that anymore," Hill said. "But there's not much research out there on the personal well-being side of owning guns. We want people to start talking more about the role of guns in people's personal lives, and, ultimately, this is a broader question for society about the value of guns in our lives. The question really is: Do guns make our personal lives better?"

More information: Terrence D. Hill et al, Gun ownership and sleep disturbance, *Preventive Medicine* (2020). DOI: [10.1016/j.ypmed.2020.105996](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2020.105996)

Terrence D. Hill et al. Happiness is a warm gun? Gun ownership and happiness in the United States (1973–2018), *SSM - Population Health* (2020). DOI: [10.1016/j.ssmph.2020.100536](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmph.2020.100536)

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