Black Women & Gun Ownership in America: an exploratory study of motivations and strategy

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**Abstract:**

This exploratory work studies the motivations and strategies adopted by Black females in the United States who own at least one firearm. Research shows that Black females as a demographic group have been trending upwards in gun ownership in the last two years. We interviewed seventeen females, with a median age of 37, across the country, for 45-60 minutes to gather insight on what might be motivating Black females to acquire a firearm when research shows that they are the least likely demographic to desire gun ownership, least likely to find protection value from them, and most often harmed by them. Personal protection tends to be the most popular reason for acquiring a weapon amongst gun owners. Our qualitative research suggests that Black females may be choosing to purchase a weapon for personal protection both inside and outside the home from both intruder threats and race-based mass gun violence and racial/sexual harassment threats in the community at large. We also examined the strategies our participants adopted as part of their gun ownership. These strategies included masking the gun from view when in public, keeping the gun at a distance when in a vehicle, and preemptively de-escalating police interaction in a traffic stop. Finally, participants reflected on whether gun ownership met their motivations for originally acquiring a gun. Participants regretted gun ownership but felt somewhat safer in certain situations for possessing one. Research should be conducted on a larger sample to examine geographical, age, SES, political and urban/rural setting differences.

Keywords: firearm ownership, violence, gun safety, women, black women

(Word count: 3000)

**Introduction**

Evidence suggests that gun ownership in the United States increased by 58% among Black females in 2020 compared with 2019 (Williams 2021; Elinson 2021; Ott 2021). Understanding this increase is important since females who are Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (“BIPOC”) are least likely to own a gun—5.4% as a proportion of all gunowners; to want firearms in their household; and to view them as useful in keeping safe compared with all gun owners (Parker, et al., 2017; Raj 2020). Black individuals were twice as likely to support gun restrictions than White people (Filindra 2017). Although recent research shows that Black gun owners, while more likely to support certain gun restriction policies at a higher rate than White gun owners, align on more policies with White gun owners than they don’t. (Crifasi et al. 2021).

Many gun studies on motivations examine gender and race separately (Hunter-Pazzara 2020) but one study suggests that motivations for gun ownership amongst diverse “nontraditional” gun owners such as racial, ethnic and sexual minorities is born from heterogeneous personal experiences (Thomas et al. 2022) Personal/family protection remains the most popular reason for gun ownership amongst all groups, and for females, *self*-protection is a driving force (Boine et al. 2022). Little is known regarding the motivations and strategies specifically for Black female gun ownership (Schaefer 2021).

Few studies exist on the motivations and strategies for gun ownership from an intersectional angle of race *and* gender (Lynch 2020). Anecdotal evidence suggests that Black individuals purchase a firearm for self-protection (Clayton 2021). However, for Black individuals, gun ownership requires calculating the risk of being Black, and the danger of possessing a gun while being Black in America (Silva 2020; Dembsey & Escobar 2020). The complicated nature of gun ownership is exacerbated for Black females. They operate in a White world that devalues their victimization risk and views them with criminal suspicion (O’Brien, et al 2013; Epstein & Blake 2020; Arnold 1990; Jacobs 2017; Long & Ullman 2013; Hillson 2020; Gross 2015).

Recent research shows that Whites who hold anti-Black racist views support gun rights less for Blacks, such as concealed carry permits, when they perceive that Blacks are more likely to use that right, suggesting a continuation of the legacy of White gun owners controlling or preventing Black gun ownership in order to maintain power over them (Higgenbotham 2022). Black females are at a higher risk for homicide victimization, intimate partner violence, and sexual violence than most groups of females except Native American females (DuMonthier et al. 2017). In fact, Black women experienced the largest increase in firearm homicide from 2019-2020 compared with all other female groups (Kegler et al. 2022). Black females are stopped by police and incarcerated at higher rates than any other groups of females (Prisoner Series, BJS 2019; Prison Policy Initiative 2019). Black females are under-protected and over-policed; gun ownership in this context has not been well-researched. Yet, a long tradition of “stand your ground” and armed self-defense exists in Black history because the “prevailing system of white supremacy in the South was enforced by violence, and black people sometimes use the threat of an armed response to survive (Cobb 2014.)

This qualitative study has three aims: to examine why some Black females chose to own a firearm; to investigate strategy for ownership; and explore whether gun ownership satisfied their goals (Edward et al. 2019; Shendy 2021).

**Methods**

This exploratory study used snowball sampling to interview seventeen females. We confirmed our screening criteria before beginning interviews to ensure that the participant was someone who identified as Black and female and owned at least one firearm at the time of the interview. The sampling strategy used social networks to reach Black females such as sororities, gun clubs, churches, friends, and former students to recruit subjects for the study nationwide. Interviews were conducted using a computer or cell phone. They lasted from 60-75 minutes. They were not recorded but were live transcribed using Otter.ai, with the participants’ consent. Participants received a $25 gift card. Interviews occurred between February and June 2021. UW IRB granted this study 00011855 exempt status on 12/14/20.

 The PI (DB) conducted all the semi-structured interview questions focused on the participants’ history with gun ownership, motivation for ownership, strategy when carrying the gun, and whether possessing a gun satisfied their reasons for purchasing one. We developed the instrument by reviewing the literature on interviews about gun ownership and Black female victimization (Runyan 2007; Long & Ullman 2013; Stroud 2012.) The instrument was further refined after two Black female gun owners with whom we consulted.

 We concluded each interview once the participants introduced no new themes. (Leech 2002). Further, we concluded the study once the sample recruited held sufficient information power (Malterud 2016). In qualitative studies, the size of a sample with sufficient information power depends on four factors that we considered: the aim of the study, sample specificity, quality of dialogue, and analysis strategy. In other words, the more depth of knowledge a subject possesses on the topic of study, the fewer subjects needed. This method is used instead of saturation because confusion and misapplication often occur with the use of the term (Malterud 2016; LaDonna 2021).

We employed an inductive contextual approach known as Applied Thematic Analysis (Guest 2019). This methodology uses a manual multi-step approach specific to exploratory research. The senior researcher (DB) and our two consultants read each transcript multiple times to identify potential ideas or themes for coding without any preset notions. We then returned to the text repeatedly to develop a codebook and coding chart, using an iterative process to refine both the chart that served to identify structures and connections among the themes and subthemes, and the codebook, as new themes emerged from our extraction in the text. Next, we looked for ways in which themes worked with other themes, explicitly or implicitly, and how they might affect each other. In doing so, we further revised the themes for analysis. Finally, we mapped the themes and subthemes to situate them within the context of the data we collected from the subjects’ perceptions of Black Lives Matter protests, the Chauvin trial, and police brutality against Black communities (Srivastive & Hopwood 2009). As essential with thematic analysis, we sought to continually engage the transcripts’ text as we analyzed how each theme appeared and interacted with other themes to identifies structures that may play out differently based on a subjects’ feelings about the BLM protests, the Chauvin trial and police brutality.

**Results**

*Part I. Motivations for Gun Ownership*

1. *Initial motivation*

 All participants stated that their first motivation for gun ownership was home safety. They were concerned about protecting themselves and/or their children. The sense of urgency for self-protection was foremost because they had either been a crime victim, had a close call, or knew someone who had been a crime victim.

The vast majority expressed concern about a night-time intruder and their need to immediately defend themselves. Those participants who lived alone in a rural location also stated the need to have the weapon during the day because of the vulnerability that comes with isolation. The participants were concerned about the time it would take for police to arrive relative to the time it would take for an intruder to cause harm. A participant explained,

There is no one to protect me. I am completely alone in this apartment. Anything could happen in an instant, you know. I must be prepared and the only way I can see that happening so I can truly defend myself if I’m surprised by someone in the night is to have my gun in my bedside table.

Participants stated that they did not want to use their firearm but felt it was a necessary for self-protection. Many said they took some time to reflect whether they were prepared to use it.

1. *Secondary motivations*

 Participants gave secondary reasons or expanded on their initial reason for gun ownership. Some participants stated that gun ownership was required for protection outside the home as well. They reported sexual harassment or feeling threatened by men as they carried on their daily business. One participant framed it this way:

I worry if I go to the Seven Eleven to fill up my car with gas. You know, you can find some man trying to be in my face, not respecting my boundaries or walking down the street you have a group of guys feeling aggressive. You don’t know when words are going to turn to action. It feels good to know I have a gun.

Almost all participants (14) reflected that their need for protection outside their home had evolved because their sense of vulnerability had increased. Almost everywhere they went during the day, regardless of whether other people were around, presented a risk.

Participants noted three factors that had increased their fear. They perceived a threat that a racially motivated gun attack could occur while they were shopping, at church, at work, or out socializing. Recent events such as the mass shootings of Black and Brown people in 2015 in a Charleston church and 2019 in an El Paso Walmart, and multiple shootings in 2021 remained in their minds. A participant stated:

It seems one just spurs on another one. You don’t know the rhyme or reason, only that you have no idea when it could be you next. It just feels real in a way I didn’t feel it, you know, before.

Second, some Whites’ violent reactions to Black Lives Matter marches or protests increased fear. Participants who protested, or lived in neighborhoods where they occurred, observed more confrontation by and presence of White people at the events. Some drove through their neighborhood before or during the protest in trucks to intimidate protesters through their words, displaying flags or brandishing weapons.

One subject noted:

We had the marches and protests. Some small. Like a vigil and some bigger. They were peaceful, emotional events. We had community leaders speaking and they would warn us that some group of outsiders might show up. I had to really think should I have my weapon on me?

Third, in the last three years, some participants and their friends observed an uptick in racial confrontations in public settings. These threatening confrontations by mostly White males precipitated their decision to carry their weapon with them always. In the past, many of the respondents stated that they may have brought their firearm when they left the house but kept it locked in the car.

A participant described it this way:

It’s like somehow someone gave them I don’t know like permission to be outwardly hostile and racist. In your face racist. Like you’d leave a bar with your friends, and suddenly a group of White men on the street are openly taunting and threatening us. Making it very clear that, you know, they are coming for us because we are Black. And, clearly, they don’t care what anyone thinks. There is this newfound boldness. And, yes, I think Trump is to blame.

The respondents’ sense of risk of harm had expanded and so, concurrently, had their desire for self-protection. One participant summed it up like this:

It comes from all sides now. Vigilantes, police, criminals in the neighborhood, and racists looking for a reason to use a gun. No joke, I do take it seriously.

*Part II. Strategies for Gun Ownership*

 Participants were asked whether they had adopted any strategies for gun ownership and the rationale for these strategies. Three themes emerged.

1. *Training*

Participants agreed that after making the decision to acquire a weapon, getting proper training on how to use it was important. Every participant had gone to a shooting range or club to get training from an instructor, friend, family member, or gun club member. All participants stated that it was also important to continue to use the weapon in target practice to keep their skills sharp.

This statement reflected what most participants expressed:

What’s the point of having a weapon if you are not ready to use it? I have to be prepared to use it without hesitation and use it correctly. I know I don’t get no forgiveness, no benefit of the doubt if I make a mistake. It’s my responsibility. Black person with a gun equals criminal.

Participants adopted different strategies for training. Some participants were met with surprise when they entered a gun shop/range; they did not look like the stereotypical gun owner but found the members eager to talk firearms. One participant mused about the cognitive dissonance of getting invitations to go shoot guns in the woods:

These [White] guys just have no idea what it would mean for a me, a Black woman and especially my husband, a Black man to just go walking through the woods in the [rural West] to go shoot with them. Under no circumstances is that a safe option for us. Ever!We are ever mindful of context because of our Blackness. Add a weapon in the woods? Just no!

Another participant, a member of an all-Black female’s gun club, observed that her group had a different strategy for training; they felt unwelcome at local gun clubs/ranges. Instead, they rented land from a gun-friendly landowner in an isolated location where they practice shooting without the fear of being discovered and perceived as a threat.

*Weapon carrying*

 All the participants possessed concealed carry licenses even if they lived in a non-license open-carry state. They took precautions upon leaving their house with their weapon. Their weapon and license were always carried together. If they had the weapon on their person, they wore baggy clothing that hid the weapon. Every participant mentioned the importance of others not seeing the weapon. Seeing the outline of a weapon on their person could be viewed as threatening and elicit a dangerous reaction:

Do I see those White guys with their gun strapped to their leg as they walk in Walmart? Sure. Will I ever be able to do that? No. Do I want to? No.

In their car, participants kept the weapon a good distance away from them—either in their purse placed in the backseat, in the glove compartment locked, or in the car trunk. Keeping distance from their weapon was to ensure that others would not see the weapon and perceive a threat. Sometimes, weapon placement in the car depended on their driving location. For example, a few participants mentioned when driving in heavily white or isolated rural areas, they always put their gun in the car’s trunk. When asked if having the gun distanced from them might decrease their level of protection, participants noted:

That’s the calculation. No way to avoid it. Have a gun next to me. Someone sees gun. Immediately interprets it as danger. Then, I’m inviting trouble. I’m provoking. Better a delay than dead.

1. *Police interactions*

In their weapon trainings, instructors discussed police interaction during a traffic stop. The goal is to minimize the police threat perception. At the first interaction point, participants put their hands on the steering wheel, after displaying their conceal carry license, registration, and driver’s license on their dashboard. If the license doesn’t alert the officer, participants state the location of the firearm. Four of the participants have had traffic stops and found the procedure successful, although, they were still fearful in the moment.

*Part III. Does Weapon Ownership Achieve Intended Motivations?*

Participants reflected on whether gun ownership had met their motivations for acquiring a weapon originally. All the participants agreed that having a firearm in their house when they were alone made them feel safer; they could rely on themselves for protection. Yet, some wished they didn’t have to own a gun.

Participants doubted whether carrying a gun in public made them feel safer. None of them were confident that the gun could truly protect them, but it might possibly mitigate some damage. Participants noted that as Black females using a gun in public came with considerable risk. They were aware of how others might react. One participant articulated:

Like for me to do something in public, it would have to be like something extreme was going on. Like there can be no doubt that something violent happened first. I constantly weigh what am I willing to do here to protect myself, my son, my community. That’s the cost. My taking action will be presumed criminal. I don’t get to be the hero. But eventually, fear becomes too great, and the risk is too high *not* to have a gun. My hope is that announcing I have one would be enough.

Some participants also expressed ambivalence because they questioned whether bringing a gun out in public would increase harm to the community. They wondered, given the number of firearms, would they be adding to the problem?

Overwhelmingly, they supported gun regulations and regretted having to own a gun.

**Discussion**

This exploratory work sought to understand Black female gun ownership motivations and strategies. Their primary motivation, consistent with 67% of all gunowners, is self-protection. (Pew Research Center 2017) For Black females, however, this study suggests that their ownership motivations and strategies may be more complex and nuanced. They were acutely aware that they were not afforded the same privileges at White gun owners. (Moore 2018). Yet, the calculus involving the risk of *not* owning a gun seems to have shifted. It now outweighed the risk of gun ownership.

Specifically, the study seems to support Carlson’s assertions that racialized gun ownership privileges Whites whereas Blacks are viewed as a threat and firearm ownership only enhances that threat. Black women must navigate the spaces between gun militarism and gun populism in unique ways. The strategies that Black women must invoke when engaging with the police reflect their understanding that the police operate with State sanctioned legitimate violence—and that violence may be inflicted upon the perceived threat—namely members of the Black and Brown community who are deemed to commit illegitimate violence. Also problematic is that the State is equally enthusiastic about gun populism, but only for White gun owners. Whereas White gun owners are viewed as an asset, working in collaboration with the police to protect against illegitimate violence, Black women (and men) who own guns recognize that their lawful gun ownership will be viewed with suspicion as a source for illegitimate violence. Unlike White women, they are not entitled to protect themselves and others; their gun ownership only confirms the view that they are a threat to the larger (White) community (Carlson 2020; Hayes et al 2020; O’Brien et al 2013; ). Considering this paradigm of gun ownership, up until recently, Black women were the least likely to support gun ownership (Raj 2020). Things have shifted.

Prior work revealed that a generalized concern about crime on a societal level tended to be associated with support for gun control for both White and Black individuals. (Colson 2020; Pierre 2019). However, a specific experience with victimization tended to correlate with favorable support for gun ownership amongst Black individuals (Filindra & Kaplan 2017). Likewise, Thomas et al.’s research showed that personal experience was a driving force behind gun ownership for ethnic and minority populations (Thomas et al. 2022) and also self-protection for women (Boine et al. 2022). These results also appeared in this study’s participant responses. Like the subjects in the research above, these Black female gun owners purchased a gun based on personal experience and the need for self-protection. Then, they adapted by joining specialized subgroups to get the support and training that they needed.

 Black females are disproportionately victims of intimate partner violence, homicides, and sexual violence (DuMonthier et al. 2017) and until recently, gun ownership was not seen as a useful protection tool (Raj 2020). This research suggests some evolution in thought may be at play as Black females experience both generalized and broader and more specific, direct threats of violence. (Craven 2017). The expansive threat of victimization outside of the home, combined with a belief that the police cannot or will not protect them and may even assault them, led to increased participants’ desire for firearm protection beyond an intruder breaching their household. These results are in line with work showing that a shared culture of fear combined with socio-cultural meanings of firearms affects cognitive biases that downplay or overestimate certain risks. (Pierre 2019). Yet, for Black individuals only, direct or familial experience with criminal victimization *and* generalized perceptions that crime is increasing nationally correlates with support for gun ownership for protection purposes *and also* gun control (Filindra & Kaplan 2017).

This study may offer some insight into gun ownership among Black females based on these two phenomena and one additional factor. The participants had an increased sense of threat of victimization permeating their daily lives that must be balanced against the fear of criminalization around their gun ownership. The current calculus of this equation appears to have shifted for the participants. They feel that the State cannot or will not protect them against harm and will view them with suspicion. This additional fear tips the balance in favor of gun ownership despite this risk. Unlike prior research though, this study suggests that the respondents have a much more rational calculation to their decision to own a gun rather than an emotional one found in prior work. (Pierre 2019). For example, they wished they did not have to own a gun, they understood the danger it presented to the community, and they did not necessarily feel safer with it. However, a cultural legacy of needing a gun for self-preservation seemed to take root given the larger socio-cultural-political circumstances at play (Craven 2017; Cobb 2014). Fear comes from a place of lack of control (Pierre 2019) and firearm ownership inspires taking back control—except for these respondents: it tended to suggest an expression of hopelessness. This study suggests that future gun policy may wish to consider the micro and macro level circumstances that the intersection of race and gender create that has inspired gun ownership despite its great risks.

 This research has limitations. It included a small, non-random sample that offered exploratory insights only. Future studies should examine Black female attitudes about gun ownership, crime victimization experience, generalized fear of crime, police interaction experience, and nature of overt racism/racial resentment encountered with a large sample of gun and non-gun owning Black females looking at geographical and urban/rural differences. Although this study did not find meaningful differences based on age, geographic location, education, or history with guns, it does not mean that such differences do not exist.

**Conclusion**

This study suggests that increased Black female gun ownership in America may be a result of a perfect storm of more threatening overt racism and racial resentment, generalized and specific fear of rising crime, and perceived failure of the polices’ ability to provide effective protection. Given the risks associated with gun ownership generally, compounded for Black females, specifically, this trend and the motivations behind it despite the palpable consequences are concerning. Future firearm policy should reflect and respond to the macro and micro level factors that Black women are experiencing which have resulted in increased gun ownership despite its significant risk for this group.

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