Wintemute et al tackle a timely question: what is the link between gun ownership and support for political violence under conditions of social instability? Much has been written on political extremism and violence in the United States in recent years, but detailed data on specific forms of political violence and type of gun ownership are lacking. Filling this gap, the authors designed a large and nationally representative survey in the spring of 2022 to assess whether firearm owners are more supportive of and willing to engage in political violence compared with nonowners. Perhaps surprisingly, the differences are muted even though they run in expected directions. Firearm owners are more likely than nonowners to agree that violence is needed for social change and to imagine a coming civil war, but as the authors emphasize, the differences are modest overall. For example, owners were approximately 7 percentage points (or roughly a third) more likely to consider violence justified to achieve at least 1 of 17 specified political objectives compared with nonowners. However, the base rates for each objective were generally quite low (most under 10%), and owners were only more likely to endorse 5 specific objectives. Additionally, there were no differences between owners and nonowners in reported willingness to engage in types of violence such as damaging property or killing people.

While these results are somewhat reassuring, more decisive differences were seen for types of gun ownership and the timing of gun purchases. Owners who recently purchased firearms, frequently carry loaded firearms, and own assault-type rifles reported greater support for political violence than comparison owners. Sometimes these differences are notable; for example, gun carriers were from 11 to 19 percentage points more likely to report that the use of force or violence is justified to advance a political objective compared with noncarriers. Compared with other owners, recent purchasers and those who carry loaded guns in public are also more willing to kill or injure someone in situations where they deem force is justified to advance important political objectives. These findings converge with other trends to portend potentially troubling implications for the future. Indeed, gun purchases and firearm violence increased sharply in the period 2015 to 2021 and during COVID-19. The civil turmoil surrounding January 6, 2021, and increasing political polarization add to the combustible mix.

Limitations of the study include its cross-sectional design, potential nonresponse bias, and measures with unknown reliability and validity. Selection into web-based surveys may induce potential unknown biases, for example, and it is not possible to know with certainty whether those supportive of political violence were more or less likely to respond. Weighting is used to adjust for nonresponse and selection, but response rates are relatively low, and the weighting procedures require assumptions. Furthermore, as is typical in these kinds of designs, even though important demographic factors were adjusted, support for political violence could be influenced by unmeasured factors (eg, mental health, extremist beliefs). The authors forthrightly recognize these limitations, which are endemic to contemporary survey research, and they do not make causal claims. This is a careful descriptive study and a much needed one.

The findings should prompt further research. One question is whether gun ownership and the subgroup differences that the article found among owners vary by key features of social stratification in the United States, such as race and socioeconomic status. Some research indicates that race and gun ownership interact in predicting political attitudes toward violence, with White gun owners outliers in viewing the insurrection of January 6, 2021, most favorably. Black gun owners, on the
contrary, viewed it most negatively. Evidence on gun purchases during the pandemic further motivates disaggregation by race, class, sex, and urban vs rural residence.

Another need is for researchers to probe more deeply into the cultural meanings attributed to gun ownership and carrying in public under changing social conditions. Before the Trump presidency and before COVID-19, ethnographic research showed how gun carrying is subjectively perceived as a means of being a good citizen in the face of the inability of police to guarantee safety. If armed citizens are cynical of the law and view themselves as reluctant “citizen protectors,” this may explain some of the upsurge in firearms purchase during the turbulent period of the pandemic and the rise in violence, especially if driven by fear of uncertainty and fear of crime. Yet research has long shown that fear of crime is only tenuously linked to variations in crime rates. Something deeper is at work.

A consistent theme across qualitative work with gun owners and carriers is that guns provide a means to reclaim feelings of security amid perceived economic, social, and political decline. The large-scale changes circa 2020 to 2021 exacerbated multiple insecurities by isolating people from each other, stoking fears of oppressive government, and reducing faith in the police. These insecurities are reflected in the situations that the gun owners in Wintemute et al were more likely to consider violence justified: preserving the “American way of life,” stopping illegal immigration, preventing the government from taking private land for public uses, and reinforcing police.

It follows from these patterns that we need to study more directly the effects of rapid social change on gun ownership and citizens’ willingness to carry loaded guns in public, including how such changes interact with culture and social inequality. Cross-sectional surveys confound aging and cohort effects, and longitudinal studies confound period effects with aging. We need more studies that can separate changes in gun use over the life course from social changes. Who carries, when, and why? Does adult gun use arise from the same processes as juvenile gun carrying? And under what changing conditions and for which subgroups as defined by race and class? These are essential questions for the future.

ARTICLE INFORMATION
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