Guns, Southernness, and Gun Control

Pauline Gasdow Brennan, Alan J. Lizotte, and David McDowall

Southerners have been found to have higher levels of gun ownership than persons who reside elsewhere. This may be due to cultural factors peculiar to the Southern region. If so, this would have interesting implications for gun control initiatives. Although the differential in gun ownership has been linked to varying support or opposition to gun control, the relationship between this variable and specific types of gun control has not been examined. With this in mind, we investigate how specific types of gun ownership interact with Southernness, controlling for the effects of other variables, to determine preferences for three different types of gun control. We use 1975 data collected by DMI on a stratified random sample of 1538 noninstitutionalized adults in the United States. An analysis of several logistic regression equations indicates that a cultural component, related to Southernness, affects attitudes toward gun control. Southerners, in general, were the most opposed to permits and handgun bans. Southern shotgun owners, in particular, were found to be the most opposed to gun registration. These findings point to the need to consider region, culture, and gun type when addressing the issue of gun control.

KEY WORDS: gun control; attitudes; Southern culture; guns.

1. INTRODUCTION

Culture has consequences; it imparts meaning to objects and ideas. For instance, culture attaches meaning to guns, to their use, and to the implications related to their control. For cultural and structural reasons, gun control means many things to many people. To some it means stricter...
sentences for criminals who commit offenses with guns; to others it means the requirement of a permit in order to purchase a gun. Some forms of gun control are more likely to be supported than others. In part, this is because attitudes toward this social policy are a consequence of history and, therefore, culture.

Southerners are more likely to own guns, specifically shotguns. A variety of explanations has been offered to account for this differential, and there is debate as to whether it reflects cultural elements unique to the region or structural factors. If culture differentially explains types of Southern gun ownership, it should have consequences which are independent of structural factors. To test this hypothesis, we examine the interaction of Southern region of residence and type of gun owned to determine support or opposition toward gun control. The measures examined include (1) permits, (2) registration, and (3) the banning of handguns.

1.1. Southerners and Culture

It has consistently been found that “weapons ownership is disproportionate in the South” (Wright and Marston, 1975, p. 95; see also Hackney, 1969; Reed, 1972; Dixon and Lizotte, 1987). Stated more simply, Southerners are more likely to own guns than are people who reside in other regions of the country. For instance, Toch and Lizotte (1992, p. 23) note that Northeast firearms ownership is confined to one-third of the households, whereas 60% of the households in the South have guns. It has further been found that the South to non-South differences remain even after city size is controlled (Wright and Marston, 1975, p. 98). Although Southerners are more likely than those in other regions to own guns, the distinction is most pronounced for shotgun ownership (Erskine, 1972; Newton and Zimring, 1969; Tonso, 1982).

The high rate of Southern gun ownership has been attributed to both cultural and structural factors (i.e., demographic and economic variables). Advocates of the cultural explanation argue that the historical effects of culture in the southern region operate independently of structural variables, have a life-long effect on individuals, and determine the need or propensity for gun ownership. On the other hand, proponents of the structural thesis see the objective conditions of life as accounting for the differential in gun ownership.

There is a variety of cultural factors purported to exist in the South which may explain the high rate of Southern gun ownership, and shotgun ownership in particular. Southerners are more likely to own a shotgun than any other gun and are more likely to own a shotgun compared to those residing in other regions (Tonso, 1982, p. 221). The shotgun has histori-