

64 The Latest Factoid: “Declir

By Paul Gallant, Alan Chwick and Joanne D. Eisen

Whenever there is a statistic that the firearm-prohibitionists can manipulate to their advantage and use against us, they jump at the opportunity. They haven't surprised us yet. This time it's the number of U.S. gun owners. The fewer we are, the more likely will spineless or anti-gun politicians vote for restrictive laws.

Paul Helmke, president of the Brady Campaign to Prevent Violence, has latched onto a figure reported by the General Social Survey, and is attempting to make the case that we are losing our political clout.

Helmke says “In 2010, less than a third of households reported having a gun in the home. That's better than a 20-point drop from 1977, when 54 percent of households reported having guns.” And then he goes on to gloat, “Significantly fewer [U.S.] households and individuals now have guns.”

Those figures may indeed have been found in the survey, but Helmke's interpretation of the survey finding is not necessarily correct. We will show how surveys dealing with firearm ownership might under-report possession by 30 percent or even more, rendering Helmke's interpretation utterly flawed. Helmke is leaving out the one factor that is easier to ignore than to take into account.

We know that existing survey estimates of the prevalence of firearms in U.S. homes are rife with inconsistencies. For example, a Research Network poll taken between February and April 1993 showed the number of gun-owning households in America to be 38 percent; just 6 months later, in October, a Gallup poll reported a figure of 51 percent.

These discrepancies reflect the many variables of surveys, such as differences of wording a question, and even the order in which questions are asked. But the phenomenon of deliberate false denial is the one that Helmke ignores.

Deliberate false denial throws a large monkey wrench into the accuracy of survey results that estimate how many guns are in civilian hands.

It is well known that any socially sensitive research is particularly susceptible to this problem. Firearm ownership, especially, and gun-owner attitudes, specifically, clearly fit the category of “socially sensitive” topics, in today's firearm-hostile climate.

Because the phenomenon is difficult to quantify, it is often simply ignored. But false-denial is problematic to the validity of many firearm-related surveys.

If a stranger asked you, in a phone call, personal interview, or using some other non-anonymous survey method, whether you owned a firearm, would you reply truthfully? Many of us would not.

As criminologists Don B. Kates and Daniel D. Polsby observed, “Much of the mass-media has indulged in the habit of stigmatizing firearms and firearms ownership, so that many gun owners might come to think of their weapons as a sort of guilty secret like a pornography collection or a cache of marijuana, to be denied and lied about rather than openly acknowledged.”

While some respondents may simply believe that it's nobody else's business about whether or not they own a gun, there are purely practical motivations for a respondent to deliberately conceal firearm ownership, such as the concern that the caller may be a potential burglar.

Reluctance to admit to firearm ownership may also be grounded in the fear of admitting to a criminal offense – or of not being quite certain of what constitutes a criminal offense.

With the proliferation of restrictive firearm laws in the U.S. during the last several decades, the magnitude of the problem of “ignorance of the law” has increased. A situation now exists where even well intentioned gun-owners are

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