

Public Perspectives

EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

The final two articles in this journal issue, called “Public Perspectives,” focus on aspects of the public debate surrounding youth access to guns. Rarely does a children’s issue generate as much controversy as this one does. Few Americans are neutral when it comes to young people and gun violence—and their opinions are strongly held. Indeed, the United States often seems split into two intractable camps on the issue.

Although both of these camps condemn youth gun violence—whether in the form of homicide, suicide, or unintentional shootings—they differ dramatically in their approaches to the problem. One camp feels that most children and youth cannot be trusted around guns without strict supervision and that restrictions on youth access to guns are justified as a way to prevent youth gun violence, even if these restrictions make guns more difficult for adults to obtain and use. The other camp believes that after a certain age, youth can be trained to use guns responsibly; that the broader culture, not the availability of guns, is the major cause of

youth gun violence; and that restrictions on gun purchases threaten what they view as constitutionally guaranteed freedoms. The two camps are polarized and hostile. As a result, many public policies with the potential to reduce youth gun violence remain stalled in Congress, in state legislatures, and at the local level.

The articles in this section of the journal shed some light on the deeply held beliefs of Americans on both sides of the debate about youth gun violence. The first article, by Smith, reviews trends in public opinion regarding gun control, particularly policies that restrict youth access to guns.

The author finds that public support for most forms of gun control is strong, deep, and widespread. This support has not wavered over the past 30 years. Also unchanged during this time period, however, is the presence of a significant minority of Americans who oppose most gun-control measures. The author argues that opinions on gun control, both for and against, are so deeply entrenched that they are unlikely to change in the near future.

The second article, by Forman, examines the opinions of advocacy groups working on both sides of the guns issue. The author interviewed 29 gun control and pro-gun advocates to determine how they view youth gun violence and how they believe it can be prevented. The article vividly illustrates how polarized the debate around youth gun violence has become. Even on issues where some advocates on both sides agree, such as safe storage of guns and increased investment in youth at risk of gun violence, common ground has been nearly impossible to find.

These articles illustrate the contentious atmosphere that pervades any discussion of youth gun violence in the United States. No one is in favor of youth gun violence, but neither can Americans seem to find consensus on what to do about it. Hopefully, by casting light on dimensions of the public debate about this issue, these articles can at least provoke discussion of areas where consensus might be achieved and progress made in preventing the more than 20,000 youth gun deaths and injuries that occur in the United States each year.

Public Opinion about Gun Policies

Tom W. Smith

On contentious issues such as gun control, where advocacy groups on both sides claim to have the weight of public opinion behind them, polling can help clarify what Americans really think. Three decades of polling have painted a clear picture of public opinion about gun control. These polls show that public support for the regulation of firearms is strong, deep, and widespread.¹ Large majorities back most policies to control the manufacture and sale of guns, increase gun safety, and restrict criminals from acquiring firearms. This general support for gun control extends to policies specifically intended to prevent children's access to guns and reduce youth gun violence.

This article outlines the level of public support for gun control measures. It begins with a description of Americans' broad-based support for virtually every type of firearms regulation and an assessment of how strongly gun control supporters feel about the issue. The next section of this article focuses on Americans' attitudes toward firearms regulation to protect children and youth. The article concludes with an examination of historical trends in public opinion about guns—mak-

ing the point that American public opinion about gun control is fixed and unlikely to change much over time.

The article relies primarily on public opinion polling data from the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago.² The NORC General Social Survey currently polls 3,000 Americans biennially regarding their attitudes on social issues. Since 1972, it has assessed Americans' attitudes toward firearms regulation. From 1996 to 1999, NORC also conducted the annual National Gun Policy Survey. Taken together, the NORC data provide the most complete picture available of American public opinion about guns and of how public opinion has evolved over time.³

Support for Gun Control Measures

From 1996 to 1999, NORC conducted four National Gun Policy Surveys, each of which asked a representative sample of 1,200 Americans their views on three types of gun control policies: general gun control, gun safety, and restriction of criminals' access to guns.

General gun control consists of policies to regulate the manufacture and sale of guns. Such measures include requiring police permits, background checks, waiting periods, or licensing and registration for all gun owners.

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Table 1

Support for General Gun Control Measures^a

Gun Control Measure	% in Support
Tamper-resistant serial numbers on guns (97–98)	89.6
Police permit needed before gun may be purchased (GSS)	82.0
Mandatory background check and five-day waiting period for gun purchases	80.7
Mandatory registration of handguns	80.0
Must be 21 to buy handgun	79.9
Require background check for private sales of guns	78.6
Restrict sales of handgun ammunition like handguns themselves	73.4
Willing to pay \$25 in taxes to reduce gun injuries (97–98)	71.4
Keep guns from criminals, even if that makes it harder for law-abiding citizens to obtain guns	69.8
Prohibit gun imports not allowed in country of origin (98)	69.2
Ban high-capacity ammunition magazines	66.6
Handgun owners must at least be licensed and trained ^b	65.7
Mandatory registration of rifles/shotguns	61.3
Concealed carrying only for those with special needs	55.9
Prohibit importing of guns (98)	55.1
Ban “Saturday night specials” (98) ^c	54.2–58.2
General concealed-carrying laws make communities less safe	45.2
Ban possession of handguns, except by police or authorized persons (98)	38.5
Total ban on handguns	12.8

Source: Smith, T.W. 1999 *National gun policy survey of the National Opinion Research Center: Research findings*. Chicago, IL: NORC, 2000.

^a Results are from the 1999 national gun policy survey, except as marked otherwise. For question wording, see Smith, 2000.

^b 12.8% wanted a “total ban of handgun ownership,” and 52.9% said that “handgun owners should be licensed by the government and complete mandatory training.” Therefore, 65.7% favored licensing or a more stringent measure.

^c See alternative wording in Smith, 2000. For the meaning and use of the term “Saturday night special,” see Oliver, C. A new way to control crime? “Saturday night specials” bans haven’t worked. *Investor’s Business Daily*, February 6, 1996, at A1.

As Table 1 indicates, large majorities of respondents to the NORC National Gun Policy Surveys support this type of gun control, particularly when it comes to handguns. In the 1999 poll, for example, nearly 81% of respondents supported a background check and a five-day waiting period before a handgun could be purchased; 80% endorsed mandatory registration of handguns; and some 54% to 58% wanted to ban domestic manufacture of “small, easily concealed, and inexpensive handguns.”⁴ Of the 11 general gun control measures that NORC asked about in 1999, the average respondent supported 7.⁵

Women, residents of large cities and their suburbs, liberals, and Democrats are most likely to support general gun control measures, whereas men, residents of rural areas, conservatives, and Republicans are least likely to support such measures. People with higher levels of educational attainment also are more likely to support general gun control measures. Support does not vary by marital status, age, or income.

The second type of gun control measure, gun safety, consists of policies designed to make guns safer and less accessible to unauthorized users such as children. These measures include establishing federal consumer product

safety standards for guns, requiring that guns be childproof, and requiring gun owners to store their guns safely (that is, locked and unloaded). As Table 2 shows, support for safety-related gun control measures is even stronger than support for measures to regulate the sale of guns. Substantial majorities consistently support most safety-related policies, especially federal safety standards for handguns and requirements that guns be childproof. (See the article by Teret and Culross in this journal issue.) Of the 11 gun safety measures that NORC polled in 1999, the average respondent supported 8.⁶

As with general gun control measures, women, residents of large cities and their suburbs, liberals, and Democrats are most likely to support gun safety measures, whereas men, residents of rural areas, con-

servatives, and Republicans are least likely to support them. Support does not vary by income or education, but younger adults are more likely to support gun safety measures than are people over age 50.

Finally, the NORC surveys asked about policies aimed at restricting criminals' access to guns. Such measures include prohibiting gun purchases by people convicted of certain crimes and increasing sentences for those convicted of using guns in crime. As Table 3 shows, most Americans want to keep guns out of the hands of criminals—even those convicted of misdemeanors—and to punish the criminal misuse of guns. In the 1999 poll, as Table 1 indicates, nearly 70% of the respondents agreed that “the government should do everything it can to keep handguns out of the hands

Table 2

Support for Gun Safety Measures^a

Gun Safety Measure	% in Support
Require federal handgun safety standards	94.1
Federal handgun safety standards even if it makes guns more expensive	86.3
Require that all new handguns be childproof	85.6
Gun buyers must take gun safety course	84.7
Require that new handguns have magazine safety (97–98) ^b	81.9
Make manufacturers liable for injuries from defects in guns (97–98)	79.3
Make owners liable for injuries if gun not stored to prevent misuse by children	76.2
Guns must be stored in locked box or cabinet	74.1
Guns must be stored unloaded	73.9
Require that all new handguns have load indicator (97–98) ^c	73.2
Guns must be stored with trigger lock	72.8
Current gun owners must take gun safety course	68.3
Require federal safety regulations for gun design	66.2
Require that all new handguns be personalized ^d	63.4
Current gun owners who will not take gun safety course should be required to turn in their guns	49.3
Willing to pay \$50 in taxes to enforce personalized handgun law	34.4

Source: Smith, T.W. 1999 *National gun policy survey of the National Opinion Research Center: Research findings*. Chicago, IL: NORC, 2000.

^a All results are from the 1999 national gun policy survey, except as marked otherwise. For question wording, see Smith, 2000.

^b Magazine safeties are devices that prevent a gun from being fired if the magazine has been removed from the gun.

^c Load indicators are devices that indicate whether guns are loaded.

^d Personalized guns, or “smart guns,” would incorporate fingerprint recognition or other technology so that only authorized users could fire the guns.

of criminals, even if it means that it will be harder for law-abiding citizens to purchase handguns.”

Policies That Draw Public Opposition

One type of gun control policy draws consistent public opposition: the general prohibition of guns. In the 1998 poll, less than 39% of respondents supported restricting the possession of handguns to “the police and other authorized persons”; in 1999, less than 13% wanted a “total ban on handguns.” These numbers indicate that the public’s support for firearms regulation does have its limits.

Indeed, despite a general desire for stronger firearms regulation, many Americans feel that an armed citizenry makes for a safer community. This attitude can be seen in poll findings regarding “concealed-carry” laws, which allow law-abiding citizens to carry concealed weapons in most public places. In recent years, at least 29 states have enacted “shall-issue” concealed-weapons laws, which require states to issue concealed-weapons permits to any adult who passes a criminal background check (and in some cases completes a gun safety course). A narrow plurality of Americans, some 45%, believe that shall-issue con-

cealed-carry laws make communities less safe, whereas 44% feel that these laws make communities safer.⁷

Strength of Public Support for Gun Control

Contrary to popular beliefs about the strength of support for gun rights, the NORC data indicate that gun control advocates are at least as strong in their support for gun control as opponents are in their opposition. Gun control advocates have engaged in slightly more political actions (such as contacting politicians) than their opponents have. Pro-gun control candidates pick up more votes than anti-gun control candidates in hypothetical congressional races. In addition, people who rank crime and violence as the nation’s top problem support more gun control measures than those less concerned about crime.⁸

Gun Control and Violence Prevention Policies Aimed at Children and Youth

The NORC National Gun Policy Surveys also asked American adults their opinions regarding gun control policies designed to prevent children and youth from using firearms. The data here tell a story similar to that told by polling data on more general gun control

Table 3

Attitudes toward Guns and Criminal Activity

Percentage Who Support Prohibiting Gun Sales to Criminals Convicted of...

Domestic violence	90.4
Drunk and disorderly conduct (97–98)	83.6
Carrying a concealed weapon without a permit	82.6
Assault and battery that does not involve a lethal weapon or serious injury	81.8
Driving under the influence of alcohol	66.5

Percentage Who Support a Waiting Period and \$25 Fee to Pay for Background Checks 78.9

Percentage Who Support Tougher Penalties for Criminal Gun Use

Double sentence if gun used during crime	78.2
Treat illegal gun possession as a serious crime	81.6

Source: Smith, T.W. 1999 *National gun policy survey of the National Opinion Research Center: Research findings*. Chicago, IL: NORC, 2000. For question wording, see Smith, 2000.

Table 4

Support for Measures to Curb Youth Violence

Measure	% in Support
Expel threatening, violent, and unstable students	81.0
Metal detectors and guards in all schools	73.5
Prohibit ownership/use of firearms to individuals under age 18	68.0
Prohibit guns in homes with anyone under age 18	29.1

Source: Smith, T.W. 1999 *National gun policy survey of the National Opinion Research Center: Research findings*. Chicago, IL: NORC, 2000. For question wording, see Smith, 2000.

measures. Americans strongly support measures to restrict youth access to guns and reduce school violence, but they oppose measures to ban guns from households with children. Perhaps surprisingly, there is little difference between the opinions of parents and nonparents on gun control issues.

Support for Restricting Youth Access to Guns

As Table 4 illustrates, the public broadly supports measures to restrict youth access to guns. In 1999, for example, 68% would refuse to allow children under age 18 to own or use firearms. In addition, nearly 80% of NORC survey respondents endorsed banning handgun purchases by youth under age 21. (See Table 1.)

The public also supports product safety measures designed to limit youth access to guns; in 1999, nearly 86% of survey respondents supported requiring that all new handguns be designed so that they “cannot be fired by a young child’s small hands.” And more than 76% believed that owners should be held liable if a gun is not stored properly and is misused by a child. (See Table 2 and the article by Hardy in this journal issue.)

In the aftermath of the 1999 school shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, and in other communities, large majorities of respondents also supported measures to reduce school violence. For example, nearly 74% endorsed having metal detectors and security guards in all middle and high schools.⁹

People also mentioned “availability of guns” as the factor most to blame for the shootings.¹⁰

But the public does not favor banning guns from households with children. Instead, Americans are more likely to favor measures requiring the safe and secure storage of guns, as indicated in Table 2.

Parental Attitudes toward Gun Control

The NORC surveys found little difference between parents and nonparents when it comes to gun control issues. Parents are slightly more supportive of childproofing firearms; 69% of parents strongly favor mandatory childproofing of handguns, compared to 63% of adults without children in the home. Gun ownership does not vary by the presence of children in the household, however, and parenthood has surprisingly little impact on how people think about and use firearms. Parents and nonparents have similar responses to most questions dealing with children, such as gun-owner liability for children’s misuse of unsafely stored guns or measures to restrict the use and ownership of guns by minors.

Parents, however, do remain concerned about their children’s exposure to guns.¹¹ People with children under age 18 were asked if they would let their child “play in or visit” a house where a handgun is present: 70% said they would allow the visit if the handgun was both “unloaded and locked away,” 33% if the handgun was “loaded but locked away,” and 8% if the handgun was

“loaded and not locked away.” Not surprisingly, gun-owning parents are less opposed to their children being around guns than parents who do not own guns.¹²

Stability in Public Opinion toward Firearms Regulation

By and large, attitudes toward firearms regulation have shown great stability over the last 40 years. Gun control has been debated at the national level since the mid-1960s, so public opinion on gun control tends to be mature and not subject to large or sudden fluctuations or shifts. Except for a period in the late 1980s and early 1990s when support for gun control measures rose moderately, attitudes have generally remained stable over time.¹³ Moreover, the little change that has occurred has tended to be back-and-forth, rather than a clear, long-term trend in one direction.

Two factors could account for the stability of these attitudes. First, gun control is a long-debated issue familiar to most people. Second, individuals’ attitudes toward guns are shaped by prior experience with firearms, especially by an individual’s exposure to guns while growing up and by the prominence of guns in the local community. These formative experiences may well fix people’s attitudes toward guns and gun control.

The stability of public attitudes toward gun control can be seen clearly in public reaction to the mass shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, in April 1999. Many gun control advocates expected that Littleton would create a groundswell of support for stronger gun control measures, or at least for measures to restrict youth access to guns. Indeed, the Littleton shootings attracted a tremendous amount of media and public attention.¹⁴

That media coverage and public attention, however, did not translate into additional support for gun control laws. As Table 5 indicates, Littleton did increase the salience and importance of crime and gun violence in the public’s mind. In the immediate aftermath of the shooting, respondents in public opinion polls became much more likely to mention crime in general or gun violence in particular as the most important problem facing the country.¹⁵ Littleton also brought gun control to the top of people’s minds, advanced its place on

the political agenda,¹⁶ and became a key factor behind the organization of the Million Mom March and other initiatives to pass gun control laws.¹⁷

Although Littleton may have motivated the majority of the American public who already support gun control laws, it did not change people’s minds about how to address the problem of crime and gun violence. There is little indication that Littleton generally increased support for gun control in the short term and no sign that it did so after six months.¹⁸ Thus, Littleton serves as a powerful example of how fixed Americans’ views of gun control really are. Even a mass school shooting on live television did little to change people’s views on this issue.

Conclusion

Short of prohibiting guns, Americans strongly favor most measures to regulate firearms. Even most gun owners believe that there should be a set of common-sense regulations to control firearms—just as automobiles are registered, drivers are licensed, and car sales are recorded and documented.

However, support for gun control has its limits. Most Americans oppose outright bans or severe limits on gun ownership. Moreover, a significant minority of Americans remain firmly opposed to many gun control policies, and opinions on gun control, whether for or against, tend to remain fixed over time. Regardless of how they feel about guns, Americans are unlikely to change their minds on the issue.

This finding may help explain why gun control policies have been slow to change, despite broad public support for tighter regulation of firearms. Although support for gun control is strong, it faces significant opposition, which has remained solid despite public events such as the Littleton shootings that some pundits thought would weaken pro-gun public opinion. The battle lines on gun control are well drawn and entrenched. It may be some time before there is significant movement on either side.

Table 5

Percentage of Public Ranking Guns and Crime as Most Important U.S. Problems/Issues: Pre- and Post-Littleton^a

	Guns/Gun Control %	Crime/Violence %	Sample Size
Harris Poll (Top Issue)			
Before Littleton			
1/99	1	7	1,008
2/99	1	8	1,007
4/8/99–4/13/99	1	7	1,006
After Littleton			
5/14/99–5/19/99	10	19	1,010
6/99	9	14	1,006
8/99	9	13	1,008
Gallup (Top Problem)			
Before Littleton			
1/99	*	13	1,009
After Littleton			
5/23/99–5/24/99	10	17	1,050
CBS (Top Problem)			
Before Littleton			
1/30/99–2/1/99	–	6	1,058
4/13/99–4/14/99	–	4	878
After Littleton			
4/22/99	3	16	450
5/1/99–5/2/99	3	19	1,151

* = less than 0.5%

– = not listed as category

Source: Smith, T.W. 1999 *National gun policy survey of the National Opinion Research Center: Research findings*. Chicago, IL: NORC, 2000.

^a The Littleton shootings took place on April 20, 1999. For question wording and more information on these polls, see Smith, 2000.

ENDNOTES

1. Dozens of public opinion polls over the last 20 years have documented public support for firearms regulation. See Smith, T.W. The 75% solution: An analysis of the structure of attitudes on gun control, 1959–1977. *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* (1980) 71(3):300–16; Stinchcombe, A.L., Adams, R., Heimer, C.A., et al. *Crime and punishment: Changing attitudes in America*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1980; Wright, J.D. Public opinion and gun control: A comparison of results from two recent national surveys. *The Annals, American Academy of Political and Social Science*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications (May 1981) 455:24–39; Crocker, R. Attitudes toward gun control: A review. In *Federal regulation of firearms*. Congressional Research Service, ed. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1982; Tyler, T.R., and Lavrakas, P.J. Support for gun control: The influence of personal, sociotropic, and ideological concerns. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* (1983) 13(5):392–405; Wright, J.D. Second thoughts on gun control. *Public Interest* (Spring 1988) 91:23–29; Kleck, G. *Point blank: Guns and violence in America*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1991; Mauser, G.A., and Kopel, D.B. “Sorry, wrong number”: Why media polls on gun control are often unreliable. *Political Communication* (1992) 9(2):69–92; Kauder, N.B. One-gun-a-month: Measuring public opinion concerning a gun control initiative. *Behavioral Sciences and the Law* (1993) 11(4):353–60; Vernick, J.S., Teret, S.P., Howard, K.A., et al. Public opinion polling on gun policy. *Health Affairs* (Winter 1993) 12(4):198–208; Hemenway, D., and Azrael, D. Gun use in the United States: Results of a national survey. Unpublished paper. Harvard School of Public Health; Edel, W. *Gun control: Threat to liberty or defense against anarchy*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1995; Spitzer, R.J. *The politics of gun control*. Chatham, NJ: Chatham House, 1995; Adams, K. Guns and gun control. In *Americans view crime and justice: A national public opinion survey*. T.J. Flanagan and D.R. Longmire, eds. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1996; Blendon, R.J., Young, J.T., and Hemenway, D. The American public and the gun control debate. *Journal of the American Medical Association* (June 1996) 275(22):1719–22; Kleck, G. Crime, culture conflict and sources of support for gun control. *American Behavioral Scientist* (February 1996) 39(4):387–404; Schuldt, R., Judy, E., Hostetler, B., and McCool, M. Public opinion on allowing citizens to carry concealed handguns: The effect of question wording on majority opinion. Paper presented to the Midwest Association for Public Opinion Research. Chicago, IL, November 1997; Carter, G.L. *The gun control movement*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997; Kates, D.B., Jr. Public opinion: The effects of extremist discourse on the gun debate. In *The great American gun debate: Essays on firearms and violence*. D.B. Kates Jr. and G. Kleck, eds. San Francisco: Pacific Research Institute, 1997, pp. 94–122; Kleck, G. *Targeting guns: Firearms and their control*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1997; Public Policy Forum. *Public opinion survey*. December 1997; Smith, T.W. *1996 National gun policy survey of the National Opinion Research Center: Research findings*. Chicago, IL: NORC, March 1997; Bowie, A., Chorak, S., Guilbault, R., et al. *Chicagoland gun study*. Chicago, IL: National Opinion Research Center, 1998; Frank N. Magid Associates. *Iowans’ attitudes towards guns and government regulation of guns—legislative summary*. Frank N. Magid Associates, October 1998; Harding, D.R., Jr. Public opinion and gun control: Appearance and transparency in support and opposition. In *The changing politics of gun control*. J.M. Bruce and C. Wilcox, eds. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998, pp. 196–223; Peter D. Hart Research Associates. *Parents, kids, and guns: A nationwide survey*. Peter D. Hart Research Associates, October 1998; Poll: Most Americans favor stricter gun laws. *Yahoo! News*. May 27, 1998; Michigan Partnership to Prevent Gun Violence. *Michigan statewide survey*. February 1998; Singh, R. Gun control in America. *Political Quarterly* (1998) 69(3):288–96; Smith, T.W. *1997–98 National gun policy survey of the National Opinion Research Center: Research findings*. Chicago, IL: NORC, March 1998; Teret, S.P., Webster, D.W., Vernick, J.S., et al. Support for new policies to regulate firearms. *New England Journal of Medicine* (September 17, 1998) 339(12):813–18; and Smith, T.W. *1998 National gun policy survey of the National Opinion Research Center: Research findings*. Chicago, IL: NORC, March 1999.
2. This report utilizes data primarily from (1) the 1999 National Gun Policy Survey (NGPS-99), (2) the 1998 National Gun Policy Survey (NGPS-98), (3) the 1997–1998 National Gun Policy Survey (NGPS-97), (4) the 1996 National Gun Policy Survey (NGPS-96), and (5) the 1972–1998 General Social Survey (GSS) conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago. The NGPSs were designed in collaboration with the Center for Gun Policy and Research at The Johns Hopkins University with funding from the Joyce Foundation. The NGPS-96, NGPS-97, NGPS-98, and NGPS-99 are national, random-digit dial telephone surveys of adults living in households with telephones. Data were collected September 13 to November 11, 1996; November 8, 1997, to January 27, 1998; September 10 to November 15, 1998; and September 9 to December 4, 1999, respectively. Analysis used a weight that adjusted for age, gender, race, education, and region according to U.S. Census figures. Full technical details on the NGPSs appear in Haggerty, C.C., and Shin, H. *1996 National gun policy survey: Methodology report*. Chicago, IL: National Opinion Research Center, January 1997; Woolley, R., Kuby, A.M., and Shin, H. *1997/1998 National gun policy survey: Methodology report*. Chicago, IL: National Opinion Research Center, 1998; Kuby, A.M., Imhof, L., and Shin, H. *Fall 1998 National gun policy survey: Methodology report*. Chicago, IL: National Opinion Research Center, 1999; and Kuby, A.M., Imhof, L., and Shin, H. *Fall 1999 National gun policy survey: Methodology report*. Chicago, IL: National Opinion Research Center, 2000. The GSSs are in-person interviews of adults living in households in the United States. The latest data were collected in February to May 1998. Full technical details are presented in Davis, J.A., Smith, T.W., and Marsden, P.V. *General social surveys, 1972–2000: Cumulative codebook*. Chicago, IL: National Opinion Research Center, 2001. Supplemental data from various state and national polls are also employed in this article and are cited when used.
3. See note no. 1, Carter, p. 49.
4. Support for a ban on manufacturing increases from 54% to 58% when the descriptor “often known as Saturday night specials” is added. For full question wording, see Smith, T.W. *1999 National gun policy survey of the National Opinion Research Center: Research findings*. Chicago, IL: NORC, 2000. The difference is not statistically significant at the .05 level. For the meaning and use of the term “Saturday night special,” see Oliver, C. A new way to control crime? ‘Saturday night specials’ bans haven’t worked. *Investor’s Business Daily*, February 6, 1996, at A1.
5. There are 19 separate percentages in Table 1 but only 11 distinct items from the 1999 National Gun Policy Survey.
6. There are 16 questions in Table 2 but only 11 involving separate items asked of everyone on the 1999 National Gun Policy Survey.

7. Nine percent feel that shall-issue laws make communities neither more nor less safe, and 3% do not know or have no answer.
8. See note no. 4, Smith, and note no. 1, Smith (1997).
9. A Gallup poll on April 21, 1999, judged the following measures as very effective “as a way to stop violence in high schools and middle schools”: stricter gun control laws for teenagers (62%), increased counseling for teenagers (60%), metal detectors in schools (53%), stricter regulation of violence on TV and in movies (52%), restrictions on what is available to teenagers on the Internet (50%), holding parents legally responsible for crimes their children commit with their parents’ guns (47%), school dress codes (36%), random body searches of students (34%), and stiffer penalties for parents whose children commit crimes (34%). See Saad, L. Columbine could cast long shadow over 2000 election. *Gallup poll release*. Princeton, NJ: Gallup Organization, June 9, 1999.
10. The following were blamed a great deal for “causing shootings like the one in Littleton”: availability of guns (60%); parents (51%); TV programs, movies, and music (49%); social pressures on youth (43%); media coverage of similar incidents (34%); the Internet (34%); and schools (11%). See note no. 9, Saad; and Newport, F. Public continues to believe a variety of factors caused Littleton. *Gallup poll release*. Princeton, NJ: Gallup Organization, May 13, 1999.
11. For information on parents and guns, see note no. 1, Peter D. Hart Research Associates. For information on the safe storage of firearms, see Weil, D.S., and Hemenway, D. Loaded guns in the house: An analysis of a national random survey of gun owners. *Journal of the American Medical Association* (1992) 267(22): 3033-37; and Hemenway, D., Solnick, S.J., and Azrael, D.R. Firearm training and storage. *Journal of the American Medical Association* (1995) 273(1):46-50.
12. Of parents who personally own a gun, 3% do not want their child to visit a household with a locked and unloaded handgun, 41% object if the handgun is loaded but locked away, and 77% are opposed if the handgun is loaded and unlocked. For parents without guns in their household, opposition is respectively 42%, 75%, and 95%. Similarly on NGPS-97, having a visitor with a gun in one’s home is opposed by 44% of those personally owning guns, 68% of those who do not personally own a gun but have one in the home, and 72% of those without guns.
13. See note no. 1, Stinchcombe, et al; Smith (1980); and Smith (1997).
14. The Columbine killings in Littleton, Colorado, garnered the third-highest number of minutes in evening network news coverage in 1999, behind only the war in Kosovo and the President Clinton scandal/impeachment. See TV news. *Time* (December 27, 1999) 54(26):36. Also, The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found Littleton to be the third top news event of the 1990s, with 68% of the public reporting that they were following the story “very closely,” behind only the Rodney King verdict in 1992 (70%) and the crash of TWA flight 800 in 1996 (69%). See The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. *Record news interest in Littleton shooting*. Washington, DC: The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, September 22, 1999. Available online at <http://www.people-press.org/shooting.htm>.
15. Poll responses on problem salience in the last half of 1999 and the first half of 2000 then showed a decline in public concern about and attention toward crime and violence in general and guns in particular.
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Children and Guns: Advocacy Groups Speak Out

James Forman, Jr.

When gun control and pro-gun advocacy groups talk about children and guns, the images they describe could not be more different. Josh Sugarmann, executive director of the Violence Policy Center, a leading national gun control group, tells the story of two-year-old Kaile Hinke from Fort Myers, Florida, who was shot in the chest by her three-year-old brother Colton. According to Sugarmann, “Colton found the loaded .25-caliber pistol in a drawer in his parents’ bedroom, where he and Kaile were playing while their mother was in another room. Kaile was driven to Lee Memorial Hospital where she was pronounced dead.”¹

Erich Pratt, communications director for Gun Owners of America, paints a very different picture, describing Jessica Carpenter, a California 14-year-old who was baby-sitting her younger siblings when a pitchfork-wielding assailant invaded their home. “Having been trained by her father, Jessica knew how to use a firearm. There was just one problem: The household gun was locked up in compliance with California state law.”² Accordingly, said Pratt, “Jessica had few options. She could not call 911 because the intruder had cut the phone lines to the house.

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She could not protect herself, for state officials had effectively removed that possibility. Her only option was to flee the house and leave her siblings behind.” Jessica survived, but her two younger siblings did not.

“Advocates are so far apart on this issue that even when they imagine the same kid, their gut reactions are totally different,” said David Kopel, research director at the Denver-based pro-gun Independence Institute. Kopel gave an example: “a 13-year-old kid who says he wants to go out to the nearby field and shoot some cans. The pro-gun folks think that’s great; let’s make this happen. It’s an idyllic picture. The anti-gun people are horrified: a kid with a gun—and unsupervised, too. That’s even worse.”

This article addresses the issue of child and youth access to guns from the perspective of advocates on both sides of the gun debate. It is based on telephone interviews with 29 pro-gun and gun control advocates, conducted between September and December 2001. Two questions frame the inquiry. First, to what extent do advocates believe that young people’s access to guns is problematic? Second, if gun access is a problem, what solutions do advocates on each side of the debate endorse? As this article makes clear, although gun control groups unanimously believe that easy access to firearms by children and youth is a problem, the responses they propose vary depending on regional and philosophical differences.

Most gun control advocacy groups view public awareness about the risks guns pose to children as central to their advocacy.

Pro-gun groups, for their part, generally do not believe that youth access to guns is problematic. To the extent that they see it as a concern, they define the problem much more narrowly than do gun control groups.

Advocates for Stronger Controls

Gun control advocacy groups are unanimous in their belief that access to guns is a major cause of youth violence. They differ, however, in the approaches they take toward limiting youth access to guns, with political and geographic considerations playing key roles in their strategies.

The Extent of the Problem

Bryan Miller, executive director of Ceasefire New Jersey, reflected the views of gun control advocates interviewed for this article when he said, “Every category of gun deaths for kids is a problem, whether you’re talking about accidents, suicides, or homicides. And every category of kid is a problem, too, whether you’re talking about toddlers or teenagers.”

Jill Ward, director of Violence Prevention and Youth Development at the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF), agreed. “Access is a huge problem. We understand that if a child is killed and a firearm is involved, there are a host of causes that contributed to that death—it could be a troubled family, troubled child, etcetera. But we also know that no matter what else has happened, the presence of a gun makes any situation more lethal. So in that sense, access to guns is critical.”

Strategies for Reducing Youth Gun Violence

Gun control advocacy groups differ regarding how best to curb youth access to guns. In part, their approaches reflect varied assessments of what is politically possible. According to Ward, “We support a whole range of legislative initiatives, but we are trying to maximize those issues that are most viable right now. Our priorities are governed by politics.” Regional differences also help to determine both what is appropriate and what is politically feasible. “Gun reform law is a regional issue, and what you push for is going to depend on where you live,” said Gerry Anderson, executive director of Ari-

zona’s Halt Gun Violence. “We’re a rural state with a lot of gun owners, and what we need may be different from what makes sense in New Jersey.” Several strategies for reducing youth gun use are popular across groups, however, including public awareness and education, legislative advocacy, and investment in youth at risk for gun violence.

Public Awareness and Education

Most gun control advocacy groups view public awareness about the risks guns pose to children as central to their advocacy. For the CDF’s Ward, “Public awareness is critical. People need to know how many kids are killed and injured by guns.” In particular, CDF focuses on raising public awareness about gun suicides among youth, “because they have not declined nearly as rapidly as accidental shootings,” said Ward. “And we know that if kids cannot get guns, they will be less successful if they attempt to kill themselves. Without a gun, that troubled kid might have a second chance.”

Public awareness also plays an important role in state-level organizations, especially those in areas where gun ownership is high. Bruce Gryniewski, executive director of Washington Ceasefire, echoed the views of many state-level advocates when he said, “We do have legislative priorities, but it is so hard to make any headway legislatively that we tend to focus on awareness.” State groups that focus on public awareness use traditional organizing methods, said Jonathan Wilson, outreach coordinator for North Carolinians Against Gun Violence. According to Wilson, “We hand out literature, balloons, brochures, you name it, all spreading the message that we should ‘protect children, not guns’ and that the safest homes are gun-free homes.”

Closely related to the public awareness campaigns of gun control advocates are their educational programs, most of which currently focus on promoting “safe storage” of guns—the message that parents who own guns should store them locked, unloaded, and out of children’s reach. “Once you have convinced people that guns can be dangerous to kids, the next step is talking to them about whether they should have a gun and, if they do, how they can store it safely,” said Diana

Madarieta, executive director of Ceasefire Oregon. Madarieta pointed out that 51% of homes in Oregon contain a gun, and she does not think that number is likely to decline. Therefore, she said, “safe storage is the key issue when talking about kids. We own guns in my house, but the guns and ammunition are locked. We try and educate people by talking to them about whether they are really safer having a gun and then teaching them about safe storage of that gun if they choose to have one.”

Legislative Advocacy

Most gun control advocacy groups complement their public awareness and education efforts with a legislative agenda targeted at reducing youth access to guns, with specific legislative initiatives varying significantly from state to state. Some of these legislative efforts—such as proposals to mandate background checks for all gun purchases or gun owner licensing and gun registration—aim to reduce youth gun violence by making it more difficult

for young people and criminals to obtain guns illegally. (See the article by Wintemute in this journal issue.) Many advocacy groups also push for enacting or strengthening Child Access Prevention (CAP) laws, which impose criminal penalties on adults who store firearms negligently if children later access and use them. Despite mixed data on the effectiveness of CAP laws in preventing gun deaths among children and youth (see the article by Hardy in this journal issue), many gun control advocates view CAP laws as important additions to safe-storage education. They argue that when the government mandates behavior change, people tend to listen. Said the CDF’s Ward, “Many people wear seatbelts now because the government has said you need to do this to be safe, and if you don’t, you can be penalized. Laws requiring safe storage of guns around kids are the same.”

Some gun control advocates also have seized on technological innovations to push for legislation that would require the sale of “childproof guns.” (See the article by

Teret and Culross in this journal issue.) On a state level, one of the most vocal advocates for childproof guns is New Jersey's Miller. According to Miller, "Technology is the answer. The gun industry has the ability to make guns that will not operate in the hands of children or other nonauthorized users." Perhaps reflecting regional differences, however, other gun control advocates are less sure about the future of childproof guns. "I think we need more research before we jump on the smart technology bandwagon," argued Oregon's Madarieta. Said Arizona's Anderson, "We're not pushing for a law requiring childproof-only guns here, and I'm not sure the market or the technology is there yet."

Investment in Youth at Risk of Gun Violence

Another segment of the gun control movement works directly with at-risk youth and communities to reduce gun violence. "Our approach to juvenile violence is radically different from others in the gun control movement," said Edyie Andrews, education director at The Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence (EFSGV). "We aim our education efforts at kids, not adults, but we don't try to scare kids." Instead, Andrews believes the key is "talking to kids and focusing on the positive things they are doing. Show them that most young people aren't carrying [guns]." The EFSGV visits housing projects, community centers, and schools to recruit students who are interested in addressing gun violence in their neighborhoods. According to Andrews, "We support students in organizing themselves. Some students want to do poster contests, some a book of poetry, some a press conference."

Another gun violence prevention group that works directly with youth is Youth ALIVE! in Oakland, California. According to Program Director Nic Bekaert, Youth ALIVE!'s Caught in the Crossfire program takes its message directly to youth hospitalized with gun injuries. "When kids have just been shot and are in the hospital, they are wide open to suggestions for how to deal with their lives," said Bekaert. Youth ALIVE!'s staff members, many of whom were themselves formerly involved in gun violence and the drug trade, develop one-on-one mentoring relationships with young victims of violence to help prevent future violence. Comprehensive support services follow, including efforts to get youth back in school and employed. Although it focuses on victims of gun violence, Youth ALIVE! knows

that it is dealing with perpetrators at the same time. As Bekaert said, "There is so much overlap between these different groups. Any place you choose to enter the cycle of violence you will find the same kids."

Approaches like those of EFSGV and Youth ALIVE! are endorsed by gun control supporter Mike Males, who has criticized some traditional gun control groups for buying into "a climate of demonizing kids by portraying them as violent threats in our midst." Males argued that negative images of youth lead to punitive criminal justice policies, including laws that allow juveniles to be tried as adults if a weapon is involved. "As long as adults have access to guns, kids will have access, too, and gun control groups are fooling themselves if they think otherwise," said Males.

The real issue, said Males, is "that if you drive from Santa Barbara to Bakersfield [California], it's a 1¹/₂-hour drive, but the black kids in Bakersfield have a death rate that is 40 times higher than the white kids in Santa Barbara." Males' solution to juvenile violence "involves comprehensive efforts to reduce youth poverty and unemployment" and "increasing access to quality education and jobs."

Advocates for Gun Rights

Pro-gun groups generally disagree with the gun control groups who view youth access to guns as a key factor in youth violence. However, some pro-gun advocates do endorse strategies for reducing children's unsupervised access to guns.

The Extent of the Problem

Many pro-gun advocates agree with Joe Waldron, executive director of the Bellevue, Washington-based Citizens Committee for the Right to Keep and Bear Arms (Citizens Committee), who said, "Access to guns has nothing to do with juvenile violence." Pro-gun advocates point to the fact that homicides make up the majority of child gun deaths. Homicide rates are "lower in rural areas, where gun ownership and training are highest, than in the inner city, where ownership rates are lower," said Waldron.

Gun advocates generally believe that youth gun violence is a problem rooted in culture, not in access to

Gun advocates generally believe that youth gun violence is a problem rooted in culture, not in access to guns.

guns. According to Larry Pratt, executive director of Gun Owners of America, “Juvenile violence is not a result of kids’ access to guns, but stems from the failure of our culture to give kids a sense of individual responsibility and respect for human life.”

Pro-gun advocates tend to define youth gun violence primarily in terms of youth gun homicide. In response to specific questions about suicide, pro-gun advocates argued that attentive parenting, not restricted access to guns, is the appropriate response. Accidental shootings, which constitute the third category of youth gun deaths, are the one type of child gun violence that pro-gun advocates uniformly say relates to access. Although these advocates generally believe that the number of accidental deaths is too small to warrant substantial attention, they do support targeted educational programs aimed at reducing this category of deaths.

Strategies for Reducing Youth Gun Violence

Although they do not view guns as a significant underlying cause of youth violence, pro-gun groups do promote some measures aimed at reducing unsupervised access to guns by children and youth, especially educational programs for young children, adolescents, and adults. Some pro-gun advocates also endorse safe-storage programs and increased investments in youth at risk for gun violence, although these positions have generated controversy within the gun rights community.

Education and Training Efforts

To address the problem of accidental death and injury when young children access guns, pro-gun advocates uniformly endorse the National Rifle Association’s (NRA’s) Eddie Eagle Gun Safety Program. Aimed at children from prekindergarten through sixth grade, Eddie Eagle has one simple message, said NRA spokesperson Nance Pretto-Simmons: “If you see a gun, stop, don’t touch, leave the area, and tell an adult.” Eddie Eagle was developed under Marion Hammer’s leadership at the NRA, and Hammer credits it for the nationwide reduction in gun accidents. So too does the Citizens Committee’s Waldron, who said

gun education programs must work “to demystify guns by dispelling the mysterious and rebellious characteristics attached to guns by contemporary culture.” (For a discussion of Eddie Eagle and other gun avoidance programs, see the article by Hardy.)

Although it has long been the most prominent educational program sponsored by the pro-gun lobby, Eddie Eagle is not alone. The National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF) has developed a video series for teenagers who are too old for Eddie Eagle. The videos feature various scenarios in which teens are forced to make decisions when confronted with unsafe gun practices. In one, a student who learns that a classmate has brought a gun to school is encouraged to tell a teacher. In another, one teen starts playing with his father’s gun in front of his friends, and the message is that kids should leave the house immediately and tell an adult. Gary Mehalik of the NSSF said that the video series “help[s] kids learn how to get out of dangerous situations.” This message is more important today than ever before, he noted, because so many kids now learn about guns from unreliable sources. “It is one thing for [kids] to form their opinions about guns from a father, uncle, or scoutmaster. If they come from a community that uses and respects guns, they will understand how to act with a gun. But if they are learning about guns from action movies and [video games like] *Doom*, they are learning to do things that are unsafe.”

Pro-gun advocates also point to the importance of educating parents, especially when it comes to combating firearm suicides by teens. Although pro-gun advocates disagree about the extent to which kids’ access to guns is related to the incidence of teen suicide, none deny the relationship entirely. “The suicide issue is the one place where the gun control people are at least plausible on a common-sense level,” said the Independence Institute’s Kopel. But while pro-gun advocates concede that access to guns may be a factor in youth suicide, they do not believe that the restrictions suggested by gun control advocates will deter a suicidal teen. According to most pro-gun advocates, suicidal teens who encounter a locked gun will either disable

Although pro-gun advocates are divided on the efficacy of trigger locks and other safe-storage mechanisms, they are unanimous in their condemnation of any legislation mandating such devices.

the lock, find another gun, or kill themselves another way. “If somebody is bound and determined to do something harmful,” said the NSSF’s Mehalik, “they will do it no matter how many roadblocks we put in the way.”

The real solution, say pro-gun advocates, is not to limit access to firearms, but to help parents, teachers, and other adults understand the warning signs for adolescent suicide. “The only way to reduce teen suicide is to educate parents on spotting depression,” said the Citizens Committee’s Waldron. If parents are properly educated, they will react appropriately, he argued. Paul Blackman, the NRA’s research coordinator, concurred. “I know a real gunner; this guy walked me through his house and showed me a loaded gun in every room,” he said. “But you can be sure that the day his kid showed suicidal tendencies, he took each and every one of those guns and locked them up.”

Pro-gun advocacy groups complement their education efforts for younger children with training for teenagers. The NRA’s Blackman believes that education and supervised access to guns lead to responsible gun use among adolescents, whereas unsupervised access often leads to accidents and violence. Who is competent to provide the training and at what age a child is ready to be unsupervised with a gun are issues that “vary from circumstance to circumstance,” said Blackman. The NSSF’s Mehalik agreed that it is impossible to have ironclad rules about the appropriate age of the trainer or trainee: “In general, I would say that if a child is involved, the supervisor should be an adult, but an older teen would be a fine trainer if well-initiated. Look, there are 15-year-old Olympic shooters that would be great supervisors. The point is that the mentor should be mature and knowledgeable about guns.”

The NSSF believes that training is critical for any uninitiated gun user, regardless of age. According to the NSSF, a proper training course includes a comprehensive introduction to firearms safety and basic use, including the ethics of firearms use. (For a discussion

of research surrounding gun safety training programs, see the article by Hardy.)

Safe Storage and Trigger Locks

There is less unanimity in the pro-gun movement concerning the issue of safe gun storage. In 1999, the NSSF joined President Bill Clinton’s Justice Department in launching Project HomeSafe, which distributed gun locks and promotional literature to encourage safe storage. According to the NSSF’s Mehalik, “The gun industry has long believed that guns should be kept safely in the home. To us, this means that whenever the gun is not under your control, it should be made safe. There are many ways to do that, but by distributing gun locks, we are offering one low-cost alternative to gun owners.”

According to the Independence Institute’s Kopel, the pro-gun community is divided on trigger lock initiatives such as Project HomeSafe. “Some support them, some believe they won’t do much but are harmless, and others believe that they are a pernicious effort to promote unsafe storage practices,” he said. The “unsafe practices” cited by some pro-gun advocates include improper installation of trigger locks, which could lead to accidental shootings, and reduced self-defense efficacy of a locked gun. John Velleco, spokesperson for the Gun Owners of America, argued that “trigger locks will lead to more deaths than they would prevent.” They “strike at the very heart” of one’s right to self-defense, said Velleco, because they cut down on the gun user’s response time in an emergency.³

Others questioned the motives of those who support Project HomeSafe, suggesting that the industry is acting voluntarily to reduce the threat that trigger locks will be made mandatory. “Let’s face it, this is a gimmick,” said the NRA’s Blackman. “Trigger locks work in the sense of public relations, in that they might prevent more serious legislative activity. But they won’t really stop somebody who is serious about getting to the gun.”

Although pro-gun advocates are divided on the efficacy of trigger locks and other safe-storage mechanisms,

they are unanimous in their condemnation of any legislation mandating such devices. “The pro-gun community uniformly views safe-storage mandate laws as a threat,” said Kopel—compromising what is, in its view, an unrestricted right to keep and bear arms.

Investment in Youth at Risk of Gun Violence

As noted previously, many pro-gun advocates argue that because most youth gun homicides occur among urban youth, the real problem lies in inner-city communities, not in gun use. Nonetheless, few are working toward solving the problems of the inner city. Typical was the reaction of the Citizens Committee’s Waldron, who stated that inadequate after-school supervision of inner-city children was a principal cause of youth gun violence. When asked if he supported any specific interventions such as increased funding for after-school programs, Waldron said, “I’m not signing up for midnight basketball... because that’s not going to turn a gangbanger into a model citizen.”

One exception was the Independence Institute’s Kopel. According to Kopel, neither side offers appropriate solutions to urban youth violence. “The pro-control camp addresses inner-city gun violence by regulating access,” he said, whereas “the pro-gun camp argues for harsher penalties for illegal gun possession and greater prohibitions on gang membership.” These proposals will not solve the problem, he argued. Instead, society should be debating more comprehensive solutions, including “massive government jobs programs,” “urban enterprise zones,” “charter schools,” or his preferred intervention, “early childhood education programs that are expensive but proven effective.”

Kopel disagreed with those who would suggest that his far-reaching proposals might complement, rather than replace, gun control. “On a theoretical level, it doesn’t have to be one or the other. But the political reality is that no group can push 27 ways at once. You must prioritize, and when you do, you necessarily leave something off the agenda.” Moreover, he argued, “There is

a real problem of advocates letting the politicians off the hook. I mean, we have kids killing kids...so [legislators] enact meaningless access restrictions or increased possession penalties. If advocates allow them to say they've done something, then we've let them off the hook. There is less pressure for them to do something real."

Conclusion

Perhaps the only thing gun control and pro-gun advocates agree on is the difficulty they have in finding common ground. Although alliances do occasionally occur, both sides agree that most often they are bitter adversaries. "We are diametrically opposed to the gun control advocates on almost all points," said Mehalik, whose NSSF is considered more moderate than some gun rights groups.

In states where gun ownership rates are high, the standoff tends to hurt gun control groups more than it

does pro-gun groups, according to Oregon's Madarieta, because "we won't get anything passed unless the gun owners support it." Despite polls that show public support for many of their positions (see the article by Smith in this journal issue), gun control groups are clearly operating at a disadvantage on a national level as well. *Fortune* magazine rated the NRA as the most powerful Washington lobbying group in 2001, replacing the American Association of Retired Persons.⁴ Similarly, the watchdog organization Open Secrets reports that since 1990, gun rights groups have outspent gun control groups 13 to 1 in soft money, political action committees, and individual contributions.⁵

Given this political reality, it is not surprising that some gun control advocates, such as Madarieta, suggest that "more and more we're looking for common ground." Nor is it surprising—given the dramatic difference in perceptions of youth gun violence—that they are having trouble finding it.

ENDNOTES

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