



## Firearms in California: Statewide Experiences and Beliefs

### OVERVIEW

America is facing a gun violence epidemic.<sup>i</sup> Deaths from firearms, considered a “significant and growing public health problem” by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, are on the rise.<sup>ii</sup> Firearm deaths increased by 23% from 2019 to 2021 nationwide.<sup>iii</sup> While these trends are staggering, focusing only on firearm-related deaths can mask the scope of Americans’ exposure to firearm violence. Many more experience violence and threats from firearms that fall short of deaths. In this brief, we assess the extent to which Californians are affected by firearm violence. Using a state-representative survey, we highlight the prevalence of exposure to firearm violence across age, race/ethnicity, and gender. We report on where Californians are most likely to experience violence and discuss practices and attitudes around firearm ownership. This brief emphasizes that, despite being among the states with the lowest incidence of firearm deaths, firearm violence still impacts hundreds of thousands of Californians every year.

### METHODS

The California Study on Violence Experiences across the Lifespan (CalVEX) is a state-representative online survey administered to 3,560 California residents aged 18 years and older between March and May 2023. The survey asks about respondents’ experiences with physical violence and sexual violence and collects information about their health and socioeconomic circumstances. This brief focuses on participants’ violent experiences with guns— including threats or actual harm with weapons, gun ownership, and beliefs regarding the value and risks of firearms in the home. We present results by gender identity (men, women, and non-binary individuals) and by race/ethnicity (white, Black, Asian, and Hispanic/Latinx).

### FINDINGS

#### Direct Experiences of Gun Violence: Threatened or Harmed with a Gun

- Approximately 1 in 8 California adults (12%) reported having had a direct experience with gun violence (i.e., threats or harm by a firearm) in their lifetime.
  - Men (15%) are more likely than women (9%) and non-binary (7%) people to have directly experienced gun violence.
  - More women (1.8%) compared to men (0.4%) reported having been threatened or harmed with a gun by an intimate partner; 1.6% of non-binary individuals report having this experience.
  - White and Hispanic/Latinx California adults report similar rates of lifetime exposure to gun violence, 13% and 11%, respectively. However, Black Californians (23%) report significantly higher rates of gun violence, while Asian Californians report lower rates (7%).
- 1 in 30 Californians (3%) directly experienced gun violence before they were 18 years old.

- Men were four times as likely as women to have had a direct experience of gun violence as a child, 4% vs. 1%; 2% of non-binary individuals experienced gun violence as a child.
- Prevalence of direct experience of gun violence before age 18 is comparable for White, Hispanic/Latinx, and Asian Californians (2%, 3%, and 2%, respectively) but markedly higher for Black Californians (6%).
- In the past year, 365,000 Californians, corresponding to 1 in 100 Californian adults (1%), experienced gun violence. Past year experiences with gun violence did not differ across genders or racial/ethnic groups.
  - Men, women, and non-binary individuals are similarly likely to have directly experienced gun violence in the past year (2%, 1%, and 1%, respectively).
  - Direct experience of gun violence in the past year did not differ significantly by race/ethnicity (0.9% white, 2.3% Black, 0% Asian, 2.0% Hispanic/Latinx).
  - Gun violence in the past year was most often perpetrated by strangers and in public spaces.
    - The most common location of gun violence in the past year was in places such as parks, on the street, and in neighborhoods.

### **Mental Health Effects of Experiences with Gun Violence**

*Direct experiences of gun violence, either threat or harm from a gun, affect a large number of adults in California. People who experienced gun violence in the past year are also more likely to report mental health concerns.*

- People who experienced gun violence in the past year were **five times more likely to report past year suicidality** (32% vs 6%), and **two times more likely to report past year substance misuse** (68% vs 29%).

### **Gun Ownership**

*California adults are regularly obtaining guns without registering them and without being trained to use the weapons; this happens most frequently among men. We see higher gun ownership among men compared to women, and among White compared with Black, Asian, and Hispanic/Latinx adults.*

- 1 in 5 California adults in this sample (21%) report currently owning a gun.
  - The greatest prevalence of gun ownership was reported among non-binary individuals (32%). Men were more likely than women to report gun ownership (27% men; 15% women).
  - White respondents were more likely than Black, Asian, and Hispanic/Latinx respondents to report gun ownership (29% White; 18% Black; 14% Asian; 17% Hispanic/Latinx).
  - Individuals who committed acts of IPV in the past year were 4x more likely to own a gun compared to those who did not report IPV perpetration (80% vs. 21%) and 10x more likely to have purchased a gun in the past year compared to those who did not report IPV perpetration (46% vs 4.6%).
- 1 in 8 California adults (12%) report being a registered owner of a gun.
  - Men reported higher registered gun ownership than women and non-binary people (18% men; 6% women; 5% non-binary individuals).
  - White respondents were more likely than Black, Asian, and Hispanic/Latinx respondents to report being a registered gun owner (16% White; 10% Black; 9% Asian; 8% Hispanic/Latinx).
- 1 in 5 California adults (20%) report having been trained to use a gun.
  - Men were more likely than women to report having been trained to use a gun (28% men; 13% women; 15% non-binary individuals).
  - White respondents were more likely than Black, Asian, and Hispanic/Latinx respondents to report having been trained to use a gun (29% White; 16% Black; 16% Asian, 13% Hispanic/Latinx).
- 1 in 20 California adults (5%) reported purchasing a gun in the past year.
  - Men were more likely than women to report past year gun purchasing (8% men; 2% women; 4% non-binary individuals).
  - Past year gun purchase did not differ significantly by race/ethnicity.

## Recent Gun Violence and Gun Purchasing

- People who experienced gun violence in the past year were **four times more likely to have purchased a gun** in the past year (21% vs 5%).
- People who experienced gun violence in the past year were **five times more likely to be first-time gun purchasers** (10% vs 2%).

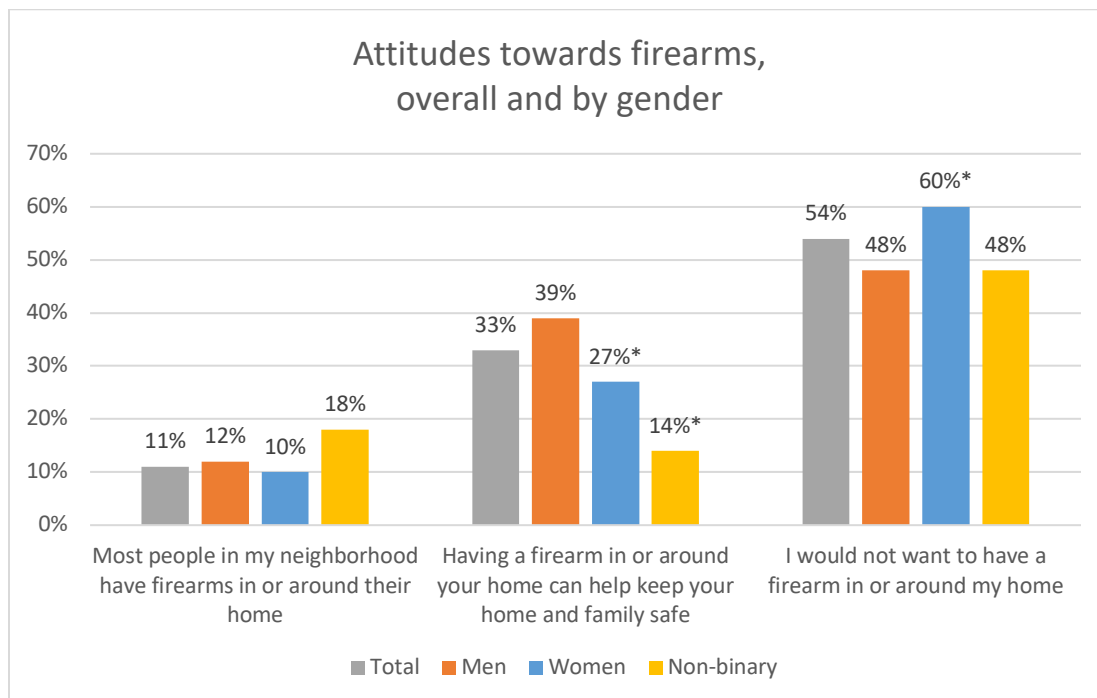
## Having a Gun or Other Firearm in the Home

- 1 in 5 California adults (20%) report that there is a firearm in or around their home.
  - Men were more likely than women to report having a firearm in or around their homes (23% men; 17% women; 28% non-binary individuals).
  - White respondents were more likely than Black, Asian, and Hispanic/Latinx respondents to report a firearm in or around their homes (30% White; 17% Black; 13% Asian; 14% Hispanic/Latinx).

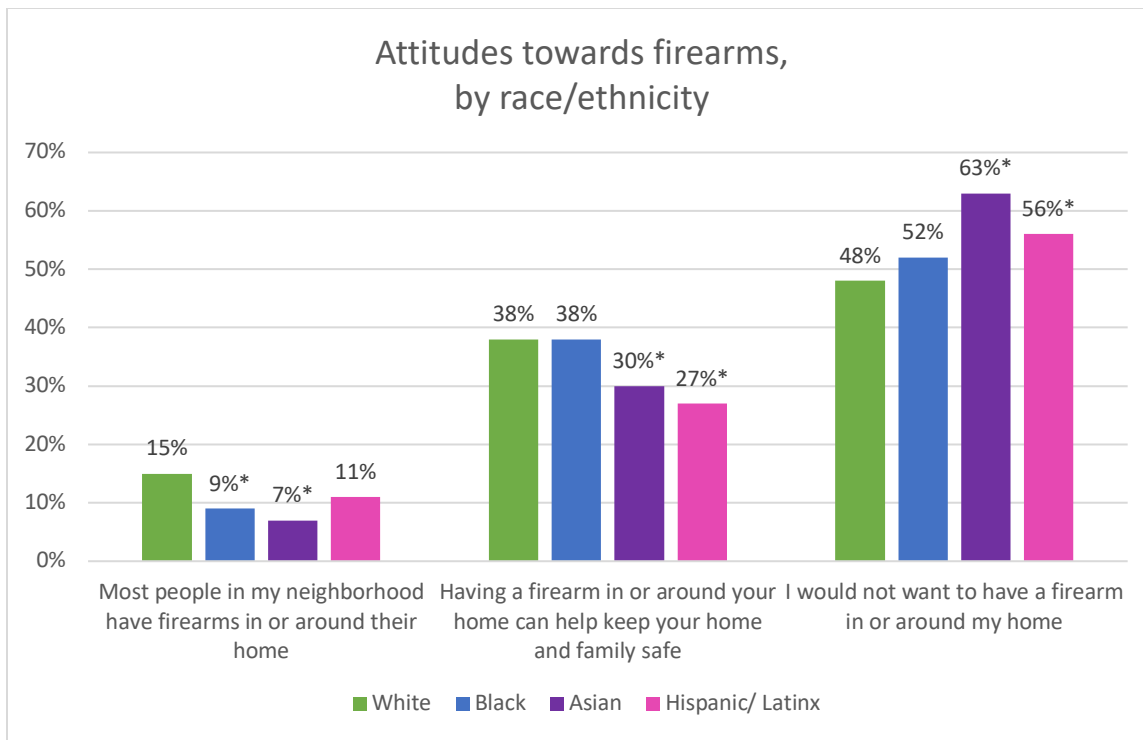
## Beliefs Regarding the Value of Having a Firearm in the Home

*CalVEX asks respondents their views on keeping guns around their homes. A majority endorsed the statement 'I would not want to have a firearm in or around my home.' At the same time, having a firearm in the home is not uncommon in California, and a third of California adults (33%) believe that 'Having a firearm in or around your home can help keep your home and family safe.'*

- Women were less likely than men and non-binary Californians to express reticence about keeping firearms in their homes.
- A greater proportion of Latinx and Asian Californians reported an aversion to firearms in their homes than white or black respondents.



*\*Asterisk indicates a significant difference from men*



*\*Asterisk indicates a significant difference from white respondents*

## IMPLICATIONS

Direct experiences of gun violence—either threat or harm from a gun— affect a large number of adults in California. Over the past year, nearly 365,000 adults likely experienced gun violence in California. Those reporting being victimized by guns, report significant personal consequences. A substantially higher prevalence of suicidality and other mental health concerns was reported by those with recent gun violence exposure. Gun violence also has wider societal consequences. Individuals that experienced past year gun violence were also more likely to have purchased a gun in the past year, often for the first time ever. While crime victims appear to be purchasing weapons to enhance their own personal safety, research suggests that gun purchasing may beget further victimization; in high crime areas, weapons bought for protection may be stolen by criminals, which can contribute to spillover crime and further victimization.<sup>iv</sup>

The CalVEX survey suggests too many guns in California are not registered and many gun owners lack proper training. Since the survey was conducted, new gun control measures were signed into law, which may assuage some of these concerns. This recent legislation enhances the preexisting licensing system, institutes additional measures to trace guns used in crimes, mandates greater training for those purchasing firearms legally, and offers more support for violence prevention efforts.<sup>v</sup> Research suggests gun regulations, such as mandatory registration, can reduce crimes; registered guns are also less likely to be implicated in criminal investigations.<sup>vi</sup> Stricter regulation is correlated with lower homicide rates.<sup>vii</sup> States like California, with the strictest firearm regulations in place, have substantially lower gun violence rates than states with the least stringent regulations. Still, more can be done to reduce gun violence in the state.

While most Californians' experiences with gun violence involved strangers and occurred in public spaces, women report being threatened or harmed by firearms in the context of intimate partner violence (IPV) more frequently. Perpetrators of IPV were ten times more likely to report having purchased a gun in the past year, compared to those who did not report violence against intimate partners. These numbers suggest there may be gaps in the implementation of California's laws barring those who engage in domestic violence from owning firearms legally. Although domestic violence restraining orders (DVRO) can prohibit abusers from owning and accessing firearms, they require both reporting and a conviction to constrain.<sup>viii</sup> Due to stigma and lack of trust in the criminal justice system, many survivors of abuse are reluctant to report IPV.

California law provides other recourse, however. According to a recent report, too few victims are aware of the gun violence restraining orders (GVROs) that are part of California's *Red Flag laws*.<sup>ix</sup> These orders enable individuals—including intimate partners—to initiate a process to get existing guns temporarily removed from those who are deemed a danger to themselves or others. These orders also bar temporarily the sale of weapons to flagged individuals. These tools are rarely used, despite their potential to reduce gun violence committed by close contacts, such as intimate partners.<sup>x</sup> Gun and domestic violence prevention programs may help to create greater awareness of the protections afforded by California law. Given some victim's reluctance to engage with the state, solutions that fall outside of the criminal justice system are also important. Further resources to and emphasis on prevention programs and advocacy may support victims of gun violence, including funding and access to mental health supports. Preventing firearm violence will take a multi-faceted approach across sectors and should include policies that enhance economic and household stability and support communities, as well as programming targeting those at greatest risk, such as safe firearm storage and violence interruption programs.<sup>xi</sup>

*This work is part of the 2023 California Violence Experiences Survey (CalVEX); for more details on this survey, please see the [CalVEX 2023 Report](#).*

**Suggested Citation:** *Thomas, Jakana; Johns, Nicole; Yore, Jennifer B; Fleckman, Julia; Kully, Gennifer; Theall, K; Wagman; J; Raj, Anita. Firearm Exposure in California, California Violence Experiences Survey (CalVEX) 2023. December 2023. Center on Gender Equity and Health, University of California San Diego.*

#### References [see endnotes]

---

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2023/06/29/1184731316/gun-violence-epidemic-suicide-mass-shooting-public-health-emergency-chicago>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/firearm-deaths/index.html>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/04/26/what-the-data-says-about-gun-deaths-in-the-u-s/>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0047272723000567>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.gov.ca.gov/2023/09/26/governor-newsom-strengthens-californias-nation-leading-gun-safety-laws/>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://injuryprevention.bmj.com/content/7/3/184.short>

<sup>vii</sup> <https://everytownresearch.org/rankings/>

<sup>viii</sup> <https://giffords.org/lawcenter/state-laws/domestic-violence-and-firearms-in-california/>

<sup>ix</sup> <https://health.ucdavis.edu/news/headlines/what-are-red-flag-laws-and-how-can-they-prevent-gun-violence/2023/01>

<sup>x</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/buffalo-supermarket-shooting-highland-park-july-4-gun-violence-chicago-politics-5165bbcde8771ebf09e7641674d0de9a>

<sup>xi</sup> <https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/firearm-deaths/index.html#stopviolence>