

Cal-VEX 2020: Firearm Exposure in California

BACKGROUND

State representative research from 2018 suggests that one in four adults in California¹ – 4.2 million people – live in a household with a firearm. Nearly half of all firearm owners¹ in the state (46%) have three or more firearms, with most firearm owners reporting that they purchased the firearm(s) for purposes of protection. Onset of the pandemic resulted in a spike in firearm purchases² in spring 2020, with California being among the top five³ purchasing states. Despite data on prevalence on firearms in households in California, and data on firearm sales, we have little data on gender and racial/ethnic variation in experiences of firearm violence to guide our understanding of these issues in the state.

Objective. To assess gender and racial/ethnic differences in victimization from firearms, as well as experiences and beliefs related to the value of firearms in households.

METHODS

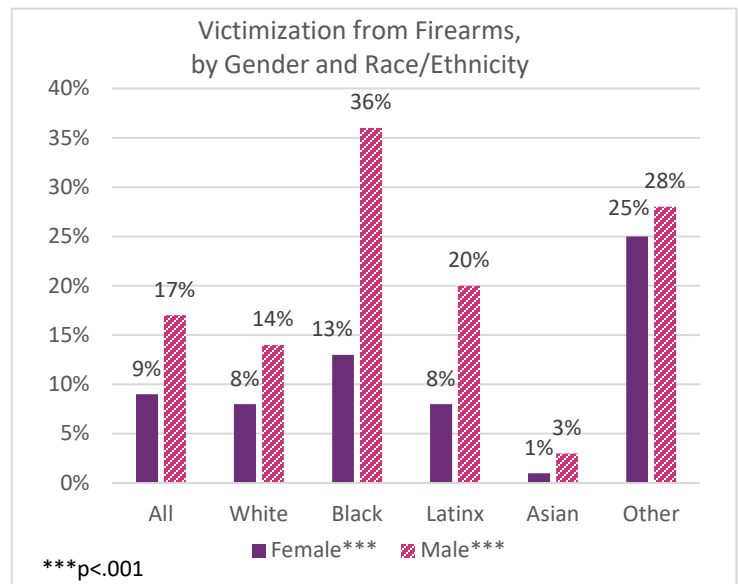
The California Study on Violence Experiences Across the Lifespan (Cal-VEX) is a state-representative survey on experiences of violence conducted with 2115 California residents aged 18 and older⁴. Our survey, conducted in English and Spanish, assesses experiences of physical, sexual, and weapon-related violence across the lifespan, as well as sociodemographic and health data. Data were collected March 19th-27th, 2020. The current analysis uses data on participant reports of violence or threats with a gun, the perpetrator of the violence, presence of firearms in households, and beliefs regarding the value of firearms.

Analysis. We present prevalence of victimization from firearms and experiences/beliefs related to firearms in households, for the total sample and disaggregated by gender and race/ethnicity. Chi-square tests assess associations by gender, and by race/ethnicity for gender stratified outcomes. Statistical significance of tests was defined as a p-value <0.05.

FINDINGS

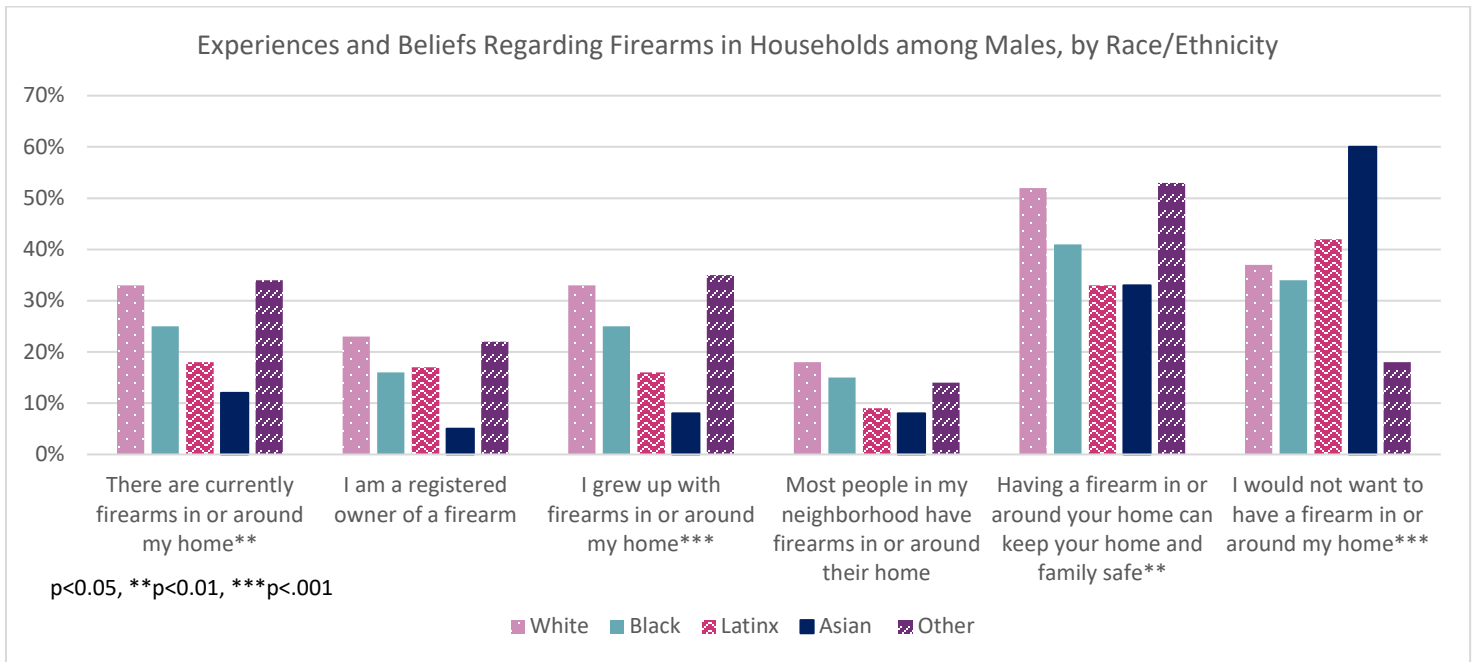
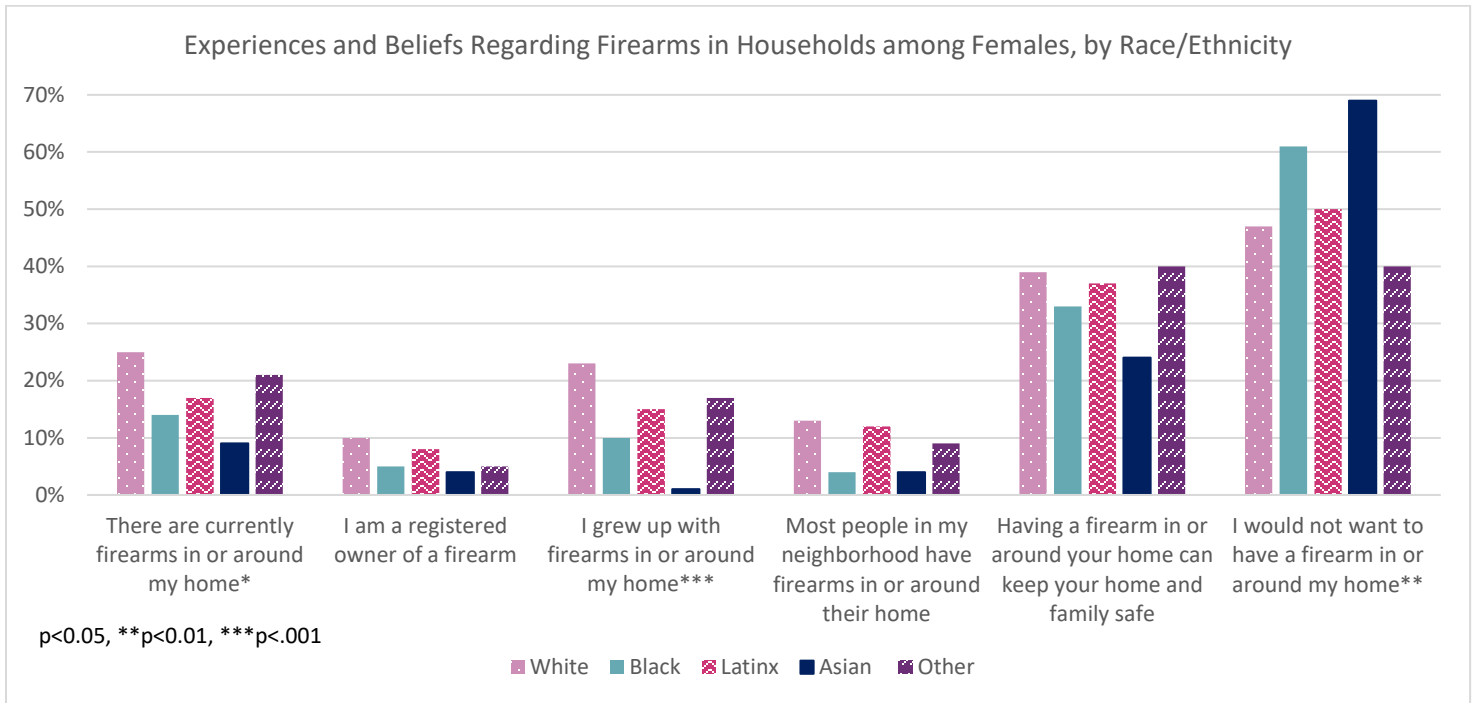
Prevalence of Victimization from Firearms

- 13% of Californians have either been threatened with a firearm or had a firearm used against them (or experienced both).
 - Males more than females have been victimized with a firearm (Females: 9%; Male: 17%; $p < 0.001$)
- There are pronounced racial/ethnic disparities in victimization from firearms.
 - Black males are most likely across gender and racial/ethnic groups to have been victimized by firearms (Black males: 36%; other/multiracial males: 28%; Latinx males: 20%; white males: 14%).
 - Victimization was comparable by gender among participants identifying as multi-racial or other race- 28% and 25%, respectively, for males and females.



Perpetrators of Firearm Violence

- Among females who had experienced violence with a firearm, 46% report that a stranger committed the violence against them and 38% reported that it was a partner.
- Among males who had experienced violence with a firearm, the following perpetrators were reported by >10%: stranger (67%), acquaintance (18%), police (14%), Friend or other close known person (10%)
- Our sample size was too small to detect statistically significant differences by race/ethnicity, but prevalence data does suggest that some differences may exist. Among males who had experienced violence with a firearm:
 - 92% of Black men, 61% of white men, and 57% of Latinx men reported that this violence was from a stranger.
 - 35% of Black men, 13% of white men, and 7% of Latinx men reported that this violence was from the police.



Firearms in Households

- Nearly one in four adults in California (22%) have a firearm in or around their household.
- Women are less likely than men to be a registered firearm owner (8% vs 18%, p<0.001) and have a firearm in the household (19% vs 25%, p<0.05).
- When examined by race/ethnicity, we find that white and ‘Other Race’ Californians are most likely, and Asians are least likely, to have a firearm in their home and be a registered firearm owner. White men and ‘Other Race’ men were the most likely to report having a firearm in their household (33% and 34%, respectively) and registered firearm ownership (23% and 22%, respectively) in our sample. Among Asians, 12% of males and 9% of females have a firearm in their home, and 5% of males and 4% and females are registered owners.

- One in five adults in California (20%) also grew up with a firearm in or around their home.
 - Women are less likely than men to have grown up with a firearm in their home (16% vs 24%, $p < 0.01$).
 - By race/ethnicity, white and 'Other Race' Californians are more likely, and Asians least likely, to have grown up with a firearm in their home. One in three (33%) white men and 23% of white women grew up with a firearm at home, where only 8% of Asian men and less than 1% of Asian women grew up with a firearm at home.
- Only 12% of participants believe that most people in their neighborhood have firearms in their household, suggesting that Californians do not believe the presence of firearms in households is normative in their communities. No differences by gender or race/ethnicity were seen in terms of this belief.

Perceptions of the Value of Firearms in Households

- Two in five Californians (39%) endorse the belief that having a firearm in the home can help keep one's home and family safe, with males more likely than females to endorse this belief (43% vs. 36%, $p < 0.05$).
 - Racial/ethnic differences in this belief were not seen among females but were seen among males. Half of white and 'Other Race' males endorse this belief (52% and 53%, respectively), and 41% of Black males endorse this, where 33% of Latinx and Asian males, respectively, endorse this belief.
 - Black women were least likely across all racial/ethnic and gender groups to endorse this belief (24%).
- Nearly half of all Californians (46%) reported not wanting a firearm in their home, with females more likely than males to endorse this belief (51% vs. 40%, $p < 0.05$).
 - Statistically significant racial/ethnic differences were seen. Black females and both male and female Asians were most likely to endorse that they did not want a firearm in their home (endorsed by 61% of Black females, 69% of Asian females, and 60% of Asian males). No statistically significant differences were seen among white, Latinx, or 'Other Race' identifying participants.

CONCLUSIONS

- Thirteen percent of Californians- 1 million adult residents in our state - have been victims of firearm violence; males are more likely than females to face this violence. Strangers are the most commonly reported perpetrator of firearm violence for both females and males. These findings demonstrate that even in California, a state with the strongest gun laws in the country, our residents are facing grave firearm-related threats and use from strangers. Even current policy reforms appear to be inadequate for sufficient population-level impact, though policies prohibiting firearm storage and use are certainly important and have demonstrated effectiveness in reducing mortality.⁵
 - Black and Latinx men are disproportionately affected by firearm violence- one in three black men and one in four Latinx men. After strangers and acquaintances, police were the most commonly reported perpetrator, reported by one in eight men who reported firearm violence. Among Black men who have experienced firearm violence, 92% reported this violence from a stranger, which prior research suggests may be linked to community violence and retaliatory behaviors.⁶ One third of Black men reporting firearm violence (35%) indicate police as the abusers.
 - Women who have been victims of gun violence also most commonly report violence from a stranger, but the second most common perpetrator was romantic partners. These findings reinforce the importance of policies prohibiting gun access to those with restraining orders or convictions⁷ of domestic violence. These findings are inconsistent with female homicide data, which indicate that female homicides most often involve IPV.⁸ It may be that strangers may threaten but not use firearms, where, at least among women, partners are more likely to use firearms fatally. Little research has focused on nonfatal firearm violence from partners.⁹
- Almost one in four Californians have a firearm in their household, consistent with prior research¹ from 2018, which also found that most Californians have firearms for protection, despite the fact that home invasion burglaries have declined¹⁰ by 50% in the past decade. Yet 12% report that most people in their neighborhood do not have a firearm. Hence, having a firearm in the home is not viewed as normative, despite many people having one.
 - Females are less likely than males to report gun ownership and to endorse firearms in the household for safety, supporting prior research on the gendered nature of gun ownership and use¹¹. Interestingly, females are also less likely than males to report firearms in the home, currently and when growing up, which may suggest that females are made less aware of male-owned firearms in households, which is disconcerting.

- White males are more likely than white females, as well as more likely than Black, Hispanic, and Latinx males, to own a firearm and to report that having a firearm in the home is important for safety.
- Black women are least likely across all groups by race/ethnicity and gender to believe that a firearm will help keep a home safe, and most likely to state that they do not want a firearm in their household. The disproportionate burden of firearm violence against Black men likely supports these views from Black women.
- Mixed race and other race individuals are at greater risk for violence from firearms, with nearly equivalent prevalence among females and males. Less clear is the nature of this group, and whether these may include those who are perceived or connected to other racial/ethnic groups of focus in this study, impeding our understanding of racial disparities for this subsample. Key populations such as American Indian/Native American people, and non-English or Spanish speakers including those of Asian race/ethnicity, are under-represented in our study, such that findings are not reflective of these groups. More research is needed to examine racial/ethnic disparities for these populations.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND ACTION

Violence from firearms is pervasive in California despite our state having some of the strongest gun laws in the nation. Our findings point to variation in rates of violence between males and females and within racial/ethnic groups. Norms related to masculinity and firearms, as well as the importance of firearms for safety, likely maintain ongoing high prevalence of firearms in homes, suggesting that normative change approaches are needed alongside policy efforts.

Given the heavy burdens of firearm related violence in Black communities, and particularly against Black men from strangers and from police, combined with the greatest concerns with firearms reported by Black women, greater representation of Black communities and particularly Black women are needed in efforts to advocate for better firearm safety measures and better protections from undue or abusive policing against Black men in the state.

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