Polarization & Extremism Research & Innovation Lab
School of Public Affairs

SPLC

Everytown for Gun Safety

U.S. Youth Attitudes on Guns: Final Qualitative Focus Group Findings

Pasha Dashtgard, Ph.D.,
Meili Criezis, and Rae Jereza, Ph.D.

February 2024

Acknowledgments

American University's Polarization & Extremism Research & Innovation Lab (PERIL) produced this report in collaboration and with funding from Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund and the Southern Poverty Law Center's Intelligence Project.

Dr. Pasha Dashtgard, Director of Research
Dr. Rae Jereza, Senior Researcher
Meili Criezis, Graduate Assistant

SPLC Creative Department

We also wish to acknowledge and honor the lives of young people who have been killed, wounded, or impacted by gun violence in the United States.

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Overview

Partnership & Qualitative Report

Published in July 2023, *U.S. Youth Attitudes on Guns* is a joint report between the Polarization & Extremism Research & Innovation Lab (PERIL), Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund and the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC). Through mixed methods research, this report provided groundbreaking insights into young people's access to guns, experiences with gun violence and perceptions of safety, as well as views on male supremacy, racial resentment and the Second Amendment.

In addition to a quantitative survey of 4,156 youth aged 14–30, the initial *U.S. Youth Attitudes on Guns* report includes findings from a preliminary analysis of 17 focus groups and interviews with 38 young people. Through this analysis, we discerned broad patterns of how youth create meaning for themselves regarding gun access, gun use, community/neighborhood safety, experiences of gun violence, trust in institutions (e.g., the State and media) and the root causes of gun violence. Since July 2023, we have gathered data from six more young people, bringing the final number of **qualitative study*** participants to 44 (N = 44) across a total of 26 focus groups and interviews.[1] This report, *U.S. Youth Attitudes on Guns*: Final Qualitative Focus Group Findings, contains the final analysis of the entire qualitative portion of our research.

Methods

Our methodology is based on grounded theory: a set of approaches to qualitative research characterized by the idea that theory construction should flow from the data (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Charmaz, 2000; Clarke, 2005, Birks and Mills, 2011). Thus, our approach is iterative, and data collection and analysis occur simultaneously. Findings presented here are based on data collected from 60–90 minute semi-structured focus groups and interviews (N = 26) with U.S.-based youth (N = 44) aged 14-30. We recruited these participants from the population of survey-takers who participated in the quantitative portion of this study, the results from which are detailed in the initial *U.S. Youth Attitudes on Guns* report.

PERIL researchers only recruited teenagers, i.e., participants aged 14–19, for the last nine focus groups and interviews since non-teenage youth comprised the majority of our initial participants. These interviews yielded new insights into how teens understand safety and the securitized approaches their schools take to prevent mass shootings.

Moreover, teens aligned with older participants' ideas about the roots of gun violence. Like the young adults in our sample, teens constructed the individual as the locus of "pathology" from which violent actions take place. They described such "pathologies" as "mental illness" and occasionally pointed to specific diagnoses (e.g., depression, PTSD and anxiety) as causes of these problems.

This final round of analysis deepened analysis of phenomena we had initially coded one-dimensionally. For example, we found that the **code*** "experienced shooting in community" did not necessarily capture the ways in which participants experienced gun violence: First, because "community" is a fluid term, and second because "experience" need not be direct in-person experience. We had participants, for instance, who reported feeling disturbed by a shooting that occurred in their state, which they had only heard or read about in the news, a phenomenon known as "vicarious trauma"[2]. Conversely, there were participants who had witnessed shootings in-person who reported that they did not feel particularly affected by these shootings in the long term.

The updates below come from a three-stage coding process. The first stage involved line-by-

*For definitions of key terms, see glossary on page 11.

1 Originally, our final n was 47. But we decided to exclude three participants for the following reasons: 1) One reported that they were a teenager but they appeared significantly older given the types of life experiences they shared; 2) Two showed up for two focus groups/interviews.

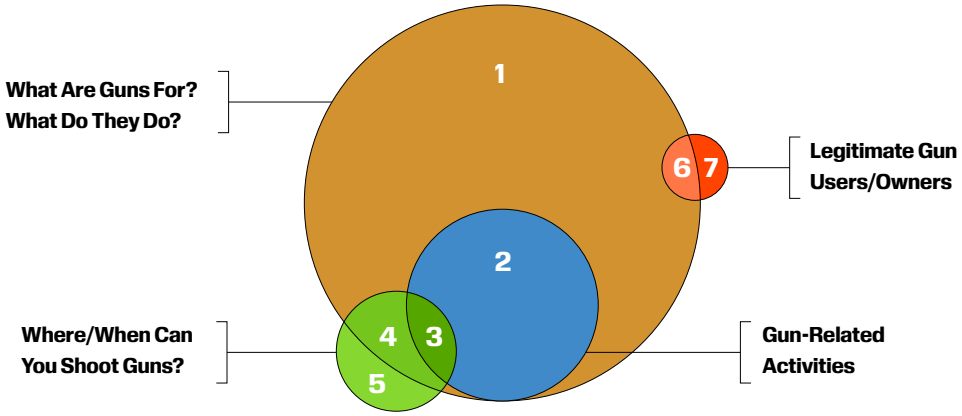
2 We placed vicarious trauma in quotation marks to acknowledge that we are using the term in a conceptual sense rather than as a formal diagnosis.

line coding of all 26 focus group and interview transcripts (including a re-coding of the first four transcripts discussed in the initial *U.S. Youth Attitudes on Guns* report). The second stage involved **axial coding*** on the digital collaboration platform Miro, which we used to visualize potential relationships between categories of codes. For example, in Figure 1 (below), the category "What Are Guns For? What Do They Do?" overlaps with categories such as "Gun-Related Activities," "'Legitimate' Gun Owners/Users," and "Where/When Can You Shoot Guns?" Codes (represented as sticky notes in Figure 1) are then contained within these multiple categories. The third and final stage of the coding process involved theorizing across **themes*** to connect and group findings into broader patterns that emerge from the data.

Figure 1
What American Youth Are Saying About Guns

Example of axial coding on Miro involving the categories "What Are Guns For? What Do They Do?" "Gun-Related Activities," "Legitimate Gun Users/Owners," and "Where/When Can You Shoot Guns?"

The overlapping areas indicated by numbers 1 through 7 illustrate the interconnected relationships between categories.



What Are Guns For? What Do They Do?

1
- Guns are dangerous
- Gun confers authority and entitlement to power
- Women need protection
- Exhilaration
- Just a way of life
- Guns are an American right
- Guns are tools
- Guns are a double-edged sword
- Guns are not toys
- Guns are for emergencies
- Guns are a big responsibility
- Guns as last resort

Gun-Related Activities

2
- Shooting inanimate targets
- 3D gun printing
- Gun in house leads to gun use
- Heirloom
- BB gun
- Air soft
- Paintball gun
- Shooting practice
- Collecting/collector's items
- Historical reenactment/ memorabilia
- Hunting experience
- Ghost guns
- Intergenerational gun bonding
- Father-son gun bonding

Where/When Can You Shoot Guns?

3
- Space for shooting
- Empty space
- Summer camp

4
- Guns offer protection
- Guns deter violence
- Guns make me/people feel safe
- Violence/protection

5
- The South

Legitimate Gun Users/Owners

6
- Masculine protector
- Savior complex

7
- Responsible gun owner
- Gun safety enthusiast
- "Boys will be boys"

Continued Codebook Development

New & Refined Qualitative Codes*

With the completion of our qualitative analysis, we have added new codes to our **codebook*** of narrative tropes and rhetorical strategies. Some notable examples that emerged when we started interviewing more teenaged participants include:

- **"Broken Windows" Theory.** Instances where participants voiced alignment with the "broken windows" theory of policing, which assumed that markers of neighborhood "disorder," e.g., aging and broken infrastructure, graffiti, chipped paint, etc., indicate that a neighborhood is "unsafe."

- **Need for Dialogue Between Parents and Children.** Instances when participants expressed that parents do not spend enough time listening to their children's thoughts and feelings around guns, gun violence and feeling safe from potential gun violence. Further, that judgmental scolding and a lack of attention to their children obscures potential for gun violence.

- **School Security Measures.** Instances when youth note that they see no prevention-based measures related to gun violence, and that all school safety measures are rooted in carceral logics, such as increased number of police and school resource officers, metal detectors in schools, bag checks conducted by police/school resource officers, stringent protocols around locking doors to classrooms and locking doors to school buildings. This code frequently captured feelings that the school's "solutions" are absurd, unrealistic and ignore students with disabilities.

- **Guns as a Source of Safety for Marginalized People.** Although conversations on gun ownership as a form of protection largely centered on more abstract ideas of personal protection, a minority subset of participant responses proposed that guns act as a source of safety for marginalized people, including people of color and queer communities, as a response to hate crimes and other forms of physical violence.

- **Home Break-ins.** A number of participants outlined various hypothetical threat scenarios to justify their support for either themselves or their families owning guns. Examples often coalesced around an imagined home invasion scenario for which the participant shared their belief that owning a gun as a preemptive form of caution would prepare them for future threats to their property and/or self. This code was often tied to one's roles as a husband and/or father and the demand that one protects one's family (using guns).

Additional Qualitative Themes*

By analyzing our data with these new codes, we found seven additional qualitative themes beyond those detailed in the July 2023 *U.S. Youth Attitudes on Guns* report. We touched upon these findings in that preliminary qualitative round of coding, but they emerged as unique and fully realized concepts upon further analysis and integration of the additional interview data:

- **Mental Health as Both Cause and Consequence of Gun Violence.** Youth expressed concerns about a lack of general access to mental health care for people with mental illness and, in turn, identified mental health issues as a root cause for gun violence. They accomplished this discursively by using "mental health" as a catchall term for all non-normative problematic behaviors. In doing so, they made general and vague references to mental illness broadly, without specifying diagnoses or particular conditions. Although most mentally ill people do not harm others, anxieties surrounding mental health and gun violence reflect a stigmatizing

belief that violent acts are disproportionately carried out by individuals with mental health issues. There was a feeling that mental illness could be prevented or discovered by improved parent-child dialogue. There was also a conceptual link between the "broken windows" theory code and mental illness, such that participants who deemed places as unsafe, dirty or neglected also understood those places as harbingers of mental illness.

- **School Safety Measures.** Participants tied school safety measures to broader issues around societal responses to safety concerns through securitized and carceral approaches. Schools functioned as microcosms of society's overall reliance on surveillance-based responses, for example, in heightened use of metal detectors and bag checks, the push to increase police officers and school resource officers in schools and on campuses, and the updated protocols for doors being locked to classrooms and school buildings. Safety was understood as a condition that can be achieved through (social) control, surveillance and restriction. Police and school administrations were trusted to be capable of solving this problem, though research subjects also expressed doubt about their actual ability to solve the problem of gun violence.

Participants framed a "masculine protector" figure as both legitimate gun owner, user and the person for whom guns are intended.

- **Poverty.** Participants talked about "poverty" as both a marker of neighborhood safety and a cause of gun violence. Poverty is understood as leading to a degraded family structure, an increased presence of robberies, drug use, crime and mental illness, all of which were seen as precipitants of gun violence. Consequently, participants inversely linked poverty to feelings of safety.

- **Uncertainty and Unpredictable Violence.** Participants expressed the idea that "anything could happen anywhere" or "violence could happen anywhere." Uncertainty, a lack of predictability and fear of random acts of violence lay at the heart of this notion. Subjects saw protection as an always-legitimate justification for gun possession, specifically when used to protect oneself from unpredictable violence or to assuage fears of chaos in the aftermath of societal collapse.

- **Empty Spaces.** Participants talked about certain characteristics of space, e.g., "empty space," in ways that suggest rural, "uninhabited" areas are spaces where it is acceptable for recreational shooting to take place. Implicitly, it was understood that guns are safe, acceptable and normal in country/rural areas but not in cities/urban areas.

- **Gun Men.** Participants framed a "masculine protector" figure as both legitimate gun owner, user and the person for whom guns are intended. Guns were understood as the domain of the masculine, where children are taught by fathers, uncles, grandfathers and other male role models to use guns. Aggression and violence were tied to a specific hegemonic masculine ideal (i.e., masculine protector), of which gun use is a logical extension. Interest in and enthusiasm for guns were seen as natural and expected of boys, though men were expected to adopt a more serious protection-focused and less playful relationship to guns and gun ownership as they age.

- **Strategies and Solutions to Gun Violence.** Participants' proposed strategies and solutions to gun violence ranged from the micro-individual strategies (e.g., use "common sense" and "beware of your surroundings") to the meso/macro grassroots "community" level (e.g., "appeal to unity," "community-specific security," "dialogue/compromise"), to the meso/macro legislative level (e.g., "stricter laws can prevent shootings"). Trust in institutions was importantly linked to many of these notions, as participants saw schools and the State as responsible for curbing gun violence while they also criticized them for focusing on reactive, crisis-mitigation strategies rather than prevention-focused policies.

Newly Identified Conceptual Implications

With the addition of five codes and seven themes, qualitative analysis of the data revealed five broader conceptual implications in addition to the ones found during preliminary analysis:

Family and Guns

Family members' opinions, experiences and history of gun ownership (or lack thereof) played an important role in normalizing guns and influencing how young people related to firearms. For some participants, the topic of guns acted as a point of tension, a situation in which their family held varying and conflicting opinions on issues about gun regulation. They treated gun ownership as highly personal, almost taboo, akin to one's religious views or sexual history. Others shared how guns provided an opportunity for family bonding. Commonly mentioned experiences included participants visiting a shooting range or the countryside for target shooting with their fathers. The strong connection between masculinity and guns proved to be bidirectional in terms of family bonding experiences. Participants saw it as a rite of passage for fathers and male family figures to first introduce guns to children in their life and for children to be invited into male spaces with their fathers, uncles, brothers and grandfathers to shoot, hunt and/or learn gun safety.

For a number of participants, such experiences represented the first time that they had handled a firearm. However, early exposure to guns through a family member did not necessarily equate to comfortability around guns. One participant shared a story about going recreational shooting with his father: "He let me shoot it a couple of times when I was young. That was pretty much the first encounter I had [with a gun], and I didn't really care for it, you know, it was loud."

Another young person talked about seeing a gun for the first time as a child when one of his father's friends bought a pistol. This participant's mother, who had been raised in an abusive environment, had a strong aversion to firearms and reacted negatively when seeing the pistol. Although his father owned guns for recreational shooting purposes, he kept them disassembled and out of reach in a separate room. The young person in this story concluded, "I have no personal interest in them [guns] as a hobby or as a mode of self defense … they just don't hit right." Another focus group participant shared how his father set aside his gun-oriented hobbies because his wife felt uncomfortable around them.

In contrast, other participants felt comforted by the fact that a family member owned a gun. In these instances, gun ownership provided a sense of safety for the family as a whole and the participants described the safety measures the family member took to secure the weapon. Participants tied this notion of the "Good Gun Owner" to the perception that family members were responsible with guns and emphasized proper gun safety.

Gun ownership in the family also connected generations. For example, participants described how their grandfathers passed down hunting rifles to their fathers. Cross-generational familiarity and family bonding time oriented around guns for sport helped some participants feel comfortable, imbuing guns and gun ownership with warmth and a sense of tradition.

Fantasies of Gun Use for Protection

Some participants described various hypothetical situations in which they would want to have a gun as a source of protection, such as walking in an area where they felt unsafe, responding to a home invasion, being robbed at knifepoint, or being targeted by bigots because of their race or gender. In these imagined scenarios, guns offered a sense of security and peace of mind in an unpredictable, dangerous and hostile world. As one speaker stated, "You never know what could happen in this world. There's a lot of dangerous people and dangerous things out there."

Although the participants described hypothetical dangers they might encounter, these scenarios

For some participants, the topic of guns acted as a point of tension, a situation in which their family held varying and conflicting opinions on issues about gun regulation.

often drew on knowledge of real-world violence from news or other sources. This demonstrates the media's impact on perceptions of safety and gun violence. Participants thought that since certain types of violence had happened elsewhere, they might someday face similar circumstances. They viewed owning a gun as responsible preparation for this eventuality. "Better to have and not need than need and not have" was a common refrain. This reflects a classic manifestation of anxiety: worrying about potential future situations as a coping mechanism by which respondents sought to lower their stress by preparing for a worst-case scenario. For many participants — especially male participants - the thought of being rendered powerless, helpless and/or vulnerable was a motivating factor for gun ownership. From this perspective, guns offer protection from harm (understood as an always-legitimate reason to own guns) and protection from potential emasculation. Women perceived gun ownership as an equalizer, a way to protect oneself in the absence of a male protector. As a result of this "always be prepared" mantra, gun ownership was seen to represent the serious and reasonable response to a chaotic, unstable world full of crime, criminals and impending catastrophe.

These findings ultimately constitute a sub-category of responses for those we examined in the "What is Safety? What Makes Us Safe?" section of our previous report. This new set of responses highlights the fear of threatening situations, often informed by knowledge of actual instances of past violence, which can foster the idea that the only way to effectively protect oneself from a perceived threat is through gun ownership.

Traumatic Experiences and Guns

This concept reflects a tension between perceptions of mental illness, both as a cause of gun violence and a consequence of it. Participants talked candidly about traumatic experiences involving guns, describing the incidents as "scary," "giving me chills," "sad" and creating a sense of urgency to escape a dangerous situation. In one case, a young person shared how these experiences made them want to own guns for protection: "[I]t made me wanna have a firearm of my own … When I get older I wanna have a gun because I was like … he could've just ended my life right there, you know, by accident."

Another participant described their mother as a survivor of abuse and thus extremely apprehensive around firearms: "[M]y mom was raised in an environment with a lot of abuse, so she had a very severe aversion to things like guns." Some invoked traumatic experiences to explain why they would want to own a gun while others pointed to guns as catalysts for traumatic experiences.

Rumination and hypervigilance about a mass shooting happening at work, school or in their neighborhood were common symptoms found in our sample, as were detachment and numbness. This was also reflected in the strong relationship between trauma and depression, anxiety and loneliness. Having experienced trauma related strongly to support for restricting gun ownership and banning assault weapons. So while some young people in our study wanted to own guns because of their experiences with gun violence, most youth (59.5%) were motivated to curtail gun access as a result of their trauma.

Carceral Logics and School Safety

Many of the participants attended schools that implemented intensive security measures, including metal detectors at the entrance of the school, bag checks conducted by school resource officers or police officers for every student entering the school, a continuous police presence on school grounds, always locking doors to classrooms except during passing periods, and locking doors to the school to control who can enter and exit.

Attitudes towards metal detectors tended to be ambivalent. Students accepted them as a part of their daily school routine, but some participants felt that they were disruptive and/or had doubts about their overall effectiveness. One student suggested that schools should address the topics

of gun safety and people who are not handling firearms appropriately. Students lamented the lack of prevention-focused solutions to the problem of gun violence and found the crisis-mitigation strategies to be too reactive and unrealistic to genuinely provide protection in a mass shooter/school shooter situation.

Although having a police officer or armed security guard present on school grounds made some students feel safer, other students expressed doubts that the security personnel would be able to fully protect people if a shooting happened. They reasoned that it would not be possible for that security guard to cover that much ground.

Focus group participants seemed aware of the various ways their schools sought to establish a safer environment. Many of the participants felt an increased sense of safety due to measures such as active shooter drills, backpack checks, metal detectors, security personnel on school grounds, increased adult presence in the hallways and the confiscation of items that were viewed as being potentially dangerous, such as pepper spray. However, this also revealed a pattern of institutions' limited imaginations. They reflect common notions of who and what provide safety: more surveillance, increased presence of law enforcement or quasi-law enforcement, and strategies to more effectively "bar the door." The similarities between these mitigation strategies and security measures instituted in jails and prisons are striking.

Police and Guns

Outside of a school context, participants' perceptions of law enforcement varied. Some thought that police create safety, while others believed that police are dangerous, untrustworthy and do not make an environment safer. The diversity of opinions regarding law enforcement reflects complex relationships that communities have with police and that, in many cases, their presence does not necessarily lead to people feeling safer.

Positive thoughts about law enforcement included the belief that police presence would reduce crime in an area, that armed security would deter potential school shooters and other bad actors because it would "level the playing field with criminals" and that police are reliable when citizens call.

Rumination and hypervigilance about a mass shooting happening at work, school or in their neighborhood were common symptoms found in our sample, as were detachment and numbness.

Participants who shared more negative perceptions discussed how some police may abuse power, discriminate against minorities and are more reactive than proactive. As one interviewee stated, "they wait for stuff to happen … they're more passive than active." Other participants mentioned that police can escalate situations by approaching them with an assumption that danger and criminality are already present. These responses highlighted the perspective that law enforcement does not hold the cure for gun violence and that police relationships with various communities must be considered when proposing policies that are meant to bolster a community's sense of safety.

Implications & Future Directions

Resources:

U.S. Youth Attitudes on Guns report, July 2023
splcenter.org/peril-everytown

The Year in Hate & Extremism 2022
splcenter.org/yihe2022

PERIL
perilresearch.com/resources

Resources for Victims and Survivors of Gun Violence
everytownsupportfund.org/everytown-survivor-network/resources-for-victims-and-survivors-of-gun-violence

The qualitative findings detailed here provide insights into young Americans' experiences with guns and the ways in which social positionality impacts their sense of safety, views on the drivers of gun violence and their perceptions of protective, responsive measures to addressing gun violence. When considered alongside the quantitative and preliminary qualitative findings in our joint *U.S. Youth Attitudes on Guns* report, this second and final installment of qualitative analysis illustrates the looming presence of guns - in both a physical and psychological sense — in the lives of young Americans.

From this qualitative research, it is evident that more must be done to decrease gun access for minors and increase mental health care access for all. It is also imperative that young people be consulted as key stakeholders in conversations and decisions about school safety and violence prevention measures. Further, we must remain vigilant of and informed about supremacist and antidemocratic ideologies that both rationalize the deployment of gun violence and obscure the root causes of widespread violence motivated by bigotry. For a more complete explanation of the implications of this research and future directions, please see page 21 of our *U.S. Youth Attitudes on Guns* report.

Glossary

Axial Coding — A process by which qualitative researchers review individual codes (see below) and evaluate their connection to each other, creating broader themes, which can be grouped into categories. These categories are created by merging existing codes or by developing new concepts that encompass several codes that closely resemble one another. Axial coding allows qualitative researchers to structure and organize their data to construct larger categories, factors, themes and/or patterns that would otherwise not be obvious if only looking at the constituent codes in isolation. Thus, these larger categories become the "axes," around which their supporting codes revolve.

Codebook — The compendium of codes for a particular project. Codebooks can be broken down into sub-codes and sub-categories as needed. Codebooks reflect the individual patterns, themes, narrative tropes and rhetorical strategies that researchers seek to highlight, allowing researchers to organize and structure findings.

Codes/Coding — A process to systematically categorize and structure researchers' qualitative data (e.g., transcripts from in-depth interviews or focus groups) to highlight, construct, note, or delineate themes and patterns.

Qualitative Study — A type of research study that gathers and analyzes non-numerical data to gain an understanding of research subjects' beliefs, thoughts, feelings, attitudes, motivations and/or social reality.

Themes — Phenomena seen or constructed across codes and/or within the codebook. Themes can be thought of as meta-codes, or constellations of connected codes and patterns that can be perceived in the data; or ways in which ideas, concepts and their subsequent codes are linked through top-down categorization by a qualitative researcher.

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Everytown for Gun Safety
The Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund is the education, research, and litigation arm of Everytown for Gun Safety, the largest gun violence prevention organization in the country. We build awareness about the complexities of gun violence in America so that every person—policymakers, volunteers, cultural influencers, business leaders, and more—can learn about the issues and become part of the solutions.

Polarization & Extremism Research & Innovation Lab (PERIL)
PERIL's mission is to utilize a public health approach to design, test, and scale-up evidence-based tools and intervention strategies to prevent hate, bias, and extremist radicalization.

Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC)
The SPLC seeks to be a catalyst for racial justice in the South and beyond, working in partnership with communities to dismantle white supremacy, strengthen intersectional movements, and advance the human rights of all people.