

## Reasons for Skepticism on Results from a New Poll on:

# THE INCIDENCE OF GUN VIOLENCE AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

By Gary Kleck

In the last week of July, LH Research, Inc. (LHRI), issued a press release announcing the results of its latest poll. A survey of 2,508 students in grades 6-12, clustered in 96 schools, had produced shocking numbers about the prevalence of violence among America's youth. Among other remarkable findings, the survey's results indicated that: 13% of students had, in the preceding year, experienced someone seriously threatening to shoot them; 11% of the students had actually been shot at in the preceding year; nearly 4% had been wounded in a gunshot attack in the past year; 15% had carried a handgun in the preceding 30 days; and that 9% had themselves shot a gun at another person.<sup>1</sup>

Each of these results is implausible, being inconsistent with more sophisticated prior research. Yet, the findings seem to have been accepted by LH Research as valid and generalizable to the nation's students, and were duly reported as such in prominent newspaper stories across the country.

How badly out of line with prior research were the findings? The easiest way to address this question is to identify where similar research exists and make appropriate comparisons. For example, 15% of the students in the LHRI poll claimed to have carried a handgun in the past 30 days. In 1991, just two years earlier, the national Youth Risk Behavior Survey, conducted by the federal Centers for Disease Control (CDC), found that only 3% of students in grades 9-12 had carried a handgun for protection in the previous 30 days.<sup>2</sup> Despite the fact that

the LHRI poll also covered students in grades 6-8 (as well as 9-12), where gun carrying is presumably lower than in grades 9-12, the survey uncovered a carry-rate *five* times higher than the CDC survey. Part of the problem may be that LHRI inflated the carry-rate by encouraging students to report carrying for "any purpose," not just protection, even though their survey was clearly concerned with violence-related carrying. Thus, some students could have been reporting innocuous handgun "carrying" at a target range, perhaps even under adult supervision.

### LHRI vs. NCVS

In the LHRI survey, 13% of the students claimed that someone had seriously threatened to shoot them in just the past year. This claim is easy enough to check, since a major federal survey continuously monitors victimization. The multi-million-dollar National Criminal Victimization Survey (NCVS) has been conducted since 1973 by the US Bureau of the Census. Each year's estimates are based on interviews with about 95,000 persons in 47,000 households, with over 2 million interviews completed since 1973. Each year's annual report provides independent confirmation of violent victimization risks, which have remained fairly stable over the past twenty years. The survey covers both violent and nonviolent victimization among all Americans age 12 and over, permitting one to separately estimate risks of violent victimization among persons age 12-19; 97% of the LHRI sample was age 12-19.

The NCVS for 1991 indicated that only 8% of those age 12-19 were the victim of *any* kind of violent crime; since only 12% of violent crimes involved of-

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fenders with guns, this implied that only 1% (8% of 12%) had been the victim of any kind of gun crime.<sup>3</sup> Threats to shoot the victim would necessarily be a subset of this 1%. The LHRI results therefore vastly overstated the risk of a young person being threatened with a shooting.

A full 11% of the LHRI students claimed to have actually been shot at. The most current available data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics indicates that from 1979 to 1987, on average, 13% of gun crimes have involved the offender actually shooting at the victim (the rest involve only threats or offenders who possessed guns but did not use them).<sup>4</sup> Specifically, for gun crimes involving shooting at the victim, only 1/7 of 1% (13% of 1%) of persons age 12-19 were shot at. Admittedly this estimate is somewhat dated; however, even if the percent were as high as 20% for gun crimes involving shooting at the victim, that would

## What the LH Research Survey Reported

Over the past year, has anyone seriously threatened to shoot you, or not?

Have been seriously threatened	13%
Have not been threatened	83
Not sure	4

Over the past year, has anyone shot at you with a gun, or not?

Been shot at	11%
Not been shot at	85
Not sure	4

Were you seriously injured when you were shot at, not seriously injured, or not injured at all?

	Of those shot at	Percent of entire sample
Seriously injured	9%	1%
Injured, but not seriously	25	3
Not injured at all	62	6
Not sure	4	*

During the past 30 days, have you carried a handgun at any time for any purpose, or not?

Carried handgun	15%
Did not carry a handgun	82
Not sure	3

Have you ever shot a gun at somebody or not?

Have shot a gun at somebody	9%
Have not	87
Not sure	4

\*less than 1%

**Source:** Survey by LH Research, Inc. for the Harvard School of Public Health, under a grant from the Joyce Foundation, April 19-May 21, 1993.

only figure to 1/5 of 1% (20% of 1%) of persons age 12-19 being shot at in 1991. The LHRI results therefore would have implied a risk over 50 times higher than that produced by what is the most sophisticated and extensive crime survey.

Among the students reporting being shot at in the LHRI study, 34% reported suffering an injury in the attack, presumably meaning a non-fatal gunshot wound. Thus, 34% of 11%, or nearly 4%, claimed to have been shot in the preceding year. The NCVS indicates that from 1979 to 1987, on average, only 2% of handgun crime victimizations involved the victim actually suffering a gunshot wound, implying that .02% (2% of 1%) of persons age 12-19 were the victim of an assault involving a non-fatal gunshot wound.<sup>5</sup> Even if the percent of handgun crime victimization had doubled from the aver-

age for the 1979-1987 period, the LHRI results would still be overstated by a factor of 100.

### How Many Youth Have Shot At Someone?

Finally, perhaps the most disturbing result of all was the finding that 9% of the students reported that they themselves had shot a gun at someone. The question pertained to lifetime experience rather than any specific time span, but given the ages of the students, almost all of these experiences must have happened within the preceding six or seven years, at most. Criminologists agree that the share of the population that commits violence is smaller than the share that is the victim of violence (i.e., crime committing is more concentrated than crime victimization). Thus, the share of persons who have shot

at someone is almost certainly smaller than the share who have been shot at. Since the NCVS indicates that the risk of a person age 12-19 being shot at in any one year is about one-seventh of 1%, this implies that the risk even over a seven year period is perhaps 1%. The share of young people who have committed such an act would be even lower. These figures indicate that the LHRI survey again greatly exaggerated the share of American youth who have shot at another person.

How could the results of the LHRI survey have been so radically wrong? One might hypothesize that their sample overrepresented schools in high-crime areas. School principals were survey gatekeepers; their permission had to be obtained before their students could be included in the sample. Principals in high-crime areas probably are more concerned about a gun-violence problem than

## What the NCVS Has Found

**Editor's Note:** National estimates utilized by the author in this article, especially from the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), require certain data computations. Below is the process through which the NCVS estimates were calculated.

### One percent of students are the victim of a gun crime.

Violent Crime Victims	Gun Crime Victims	Threat of Being Shot
Did the offender(s) hit you, knock you down, or actually attack you in any way?	Did the offender(s) have a weapon such as a gun or knife, or something to use as a weapon, such as a bottle or wrench?	Those age 12-19 who were the victim of any kind of gun crime, with serious threats being a subset.
Did the offender(s) threaten you with harm in any way?	What was the weapon?	
Those age 12-19 responding "yes" to one of the individual screening questions on violent crime victimizations, and "yes" to either of the two questions listed above, were considered victims of a violent crime.	Those victims responding "yes," their offender had a weapon that was either a "handgun (pistol, revolver, etc.)" or "other gun (rifle, shotgun, etc.)" were considered a gun crime victim.	
<b>8%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>1%</b>
<b>x</b>	<b>=</b>	

### One-seventh of 1% of persons age 12-19 were shot at in 1991.

Gun Crime: Shots Fired	Gun Crime Victims	Victims Shot At
What was the weapon? How did the offender(s) attack you?	Those age 12-19 who were the victim of any kind of gun crime.	Those age 12-19 who were the victim of any kind of gun crime, who actually got shot or shot at.
Those responding their offender had a gun and that the attack involved either being "shot" or "shot at (but missed)" were considered gun crime victims that had been shot at.		
<b>13%*</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>1/7 of 1%</b>
<b>x</b>	<b>=</b>	

### .02 percent of those age 12-19 actually suffer a gun shot wound.

Shots Fired: Gunshot Wound	Gun Crime Victims	Gunshot Wound Victims
How did the offender(s) attack you? What were the injuries you suffered, if any?	Those age 12-19 who were the victims of any kind of gun crime.	Those age 12-19 who actually suffered a gunshot wound.
Those responding their offender had "shot" them in the attack and that they had suffered a "gunshot/bullet wound" were considered the victim of a gun crime with a gunshot wound sustained.		
<b>2%</b>	<b>1%</b>	<b>.02%</b>
<b>x</b>	<b>=</b>	

\*This estimate was derived from the *Handgun Crime Victims* report. This report has only included handgun data, therefore, the author has made the assumption that the probability of shots being fired from other gun types is the same as for handguns.

**Source:** US Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Criminal Victimization in the United States, 1991* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1992); and US Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Handgun Crime Victims* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1990).

principals elsewhere, and might be more easily persuaded of the value of a survey on the topic. Unfortunately, the LHRI report says nothing about what percent of principals agreed to the survey or whether crime rates in and around the sample schools were representative of the nation's schools. Therefore, this hypothesis must remain speculative.

We do not have to speculate about the questionnaire itself. Its design virtually guaranteed a response-set bias, in which students were encouraged to provide responses indicating a gun-violence problem more widespread than it really was. The authors did not even wait until the first question to tip off students that the survey was about youth violence. Instead of following the standard practice of describing the survey's purpose in bland and general terms (e.g. "problems facing America's young people"), the authors needlessly informed students in an introductory letter that the subject was "the safety of young people today." The very first question then asked about crime, and by the third question, it was obvious to even the least attentive student that the adult authors of the survey instrument considered youth violence to be a very serious problem indeed. Question 3 reads: "Now thinking about young people in America, we want to know how many young Americans you feel are described by each of the following statements—most, some, few, or hardly any? (1) Are safe from violence in schools ... (3) Are physically safe going to and from school ... (5) Live in safe neighborhoods (6) Live in homes safe from violence." Four of the six statements referred to safety or violence. Since no one does a survey about a topic they consider trivial, Question 3 made it abundantly clear to students that the surveyors considered youth violence to be a very serious problem.

A survey's focal topics must, of course, eventually become evident to students. Generally, survey researchers would have preceded an item like Question 3 with open-ended questions inquiring generally about what problems the students thought were serious, only later asking for specific assessments about violence. The LHRI surveyors did not do

this. We should also note the unbalanced response categories to this question, with all but one of the choices indicating that less than a majority of young Americans were safe from violence. The authors might as well have asked if the students thought the problem of youth violence was (a) huge, (b) enormous, or (c) very large. If the question itself was not enough of a hint as to what kinds of answers the authors favored, the answer categories made it crystal clear.

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#### Response-Set Bias

By the time the questionnaire got to the more factual questions concerning victimization and gun carrying, students had been exposed to an avalanche of similarly biasing items. For example, by the time the question about handgun carrying was asked, the students had read no less than twelve items about violence, and eight others referring specifically to guns or other weapons. At least three of the items asked students to rate how serious gun violence was, or how much they felt endangered by guns.

This sort of response-set bias can be a problem in any survey. But it is especially troublesome in a survey of young people. The LHRI questionnaires were administered by teachers in their classrooms, a context of adult authority. While survey respondents in general are often anxious to please, and to provide answers supporting what they believe to be the researchers' hypotheses, students in a classroom context would be especially prone to tell the adult surveyors what they apparently wanted to hear.

Overstating the problem of youth vio-

lence in general and gun violence in particular does not merely serve to instill in people excessive concern over a genuinely serious problem. Instead, alarmist results like those in the LHRI poll serve to frighten people, and frightened people are not reasonable people, prone to supporting well-reasoned solutions to social problems.

Advocates of handgun bans are belatedly learning what advocates of bans on alcohol, marijuana, sexually explicit materials, and homosexual behavior have known for decades: You can frighten people into supporting your policies by exploiting parents' fears about their children. As David Kopel has put it, "by asking us to 'do it for our kids,' gun-control advocates hope to short-circuit rational discussion." Battered by a decade of scientific research contradicting the central factual premises underlying gun control, advocates have apparently decided to fight more exclusively on an emotional battlefield, where one terrorizes one's targets into submission rather than honestly persuading them with credible evidence. The LHRI survey appears to be nothing more than advocacy polling.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Survey by LH Research, Inc. for the Harvard School of Public Health under a grant from the Joyce Foundation, April 19-May 21, 1993.

<sup>2</sup>US Centers for Disease Control, "Behavior Related to Unintentional and Intentional Injuries Among High School Students - United States, 1991," *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, No. 41 (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1992), pp. 760-772.

<sup>3</sup>US Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Criminal Victimization in the United States, 1991* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1992).

<sup>4</sup>US Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Handgun Crime Victims* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1990). This report has only included handgun data. Therefore, I have made the assumption that the probability of shots being fired from other gun types is the same as for handguns.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

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