

Batterers' Use of Guns to Threaten Intimate Partners

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Objectives

To present the prevalence of gun ownership among batterers and describe their self-reported use of guns to threaten intimate partners.

Methods

We used multivariate methods to analyze data from 8529 men enrolled in Massachusetts certified batterer intervention programs between 1999 and 2003.

Results

Seven percent of the sample reported owning guns during the past 3 years. Recent gun owners were 7.8 times more likely than non-gun-owners to have threatened their partners with guns. Gun owners and non-gun-owners were equally likely to have threatened their partners with knives. Batterers reported using guns to threaten their partners in 4 ways, including 1) threatening to shoot them; 2) cleaning, holding, or loading a gun during an argument; 3) threatening to shoot a pet or person the victim cared about; and 4) shooting a gun during an argument with a victim. Identified risk markers for threatening an intimate partner with a gun included substance abuse, homicidal behavior, making knife threats, and gun ownership in the 3 years preceding assessment.

Conclusion

Among batterers, owning a gun is highly correlated with using a gun to threaten an intimate partner. Legal restrictions that prohibit batterers from owning and possessing firearms should be enforced consistently. Detailed contextual information about the circumstances in which batterers use guns to threaten intimate partners and potential protective and risk factors relevant to firearm use by batterers should be explored. (*JAMWA*. 2005;60:62-68)

Women in the United States are 11 times more likely than women in other high-income countries to be victims of homicide.¹ One-third of women murdered in the United States each year are killed by current or former partners, compared with only 4% of male homicide victims.² Fatal assaults represent only a fraction of violent crimes perpetrated against women by their intimate partners. It is estimated that each year 2% of US women survive rapes, sexual assaults, stalking, and physical attacks by intimate partners.³ These incidents result in nearly 2 million injuries each year, at a cost of \$4.1 billion in direct medical and mental health care services.⁴

Firearms play a significant role in intimate partner femicides and nonlethal abuse. Women are twice as likely to be shot and killed by intimate partners as they are to be murdered by strangers using any type of weapon.⁵ American women who are killed by their intimate partners are more likely to be killed with guns than by all other methods combined. In fact, each year from 1980 to 2000, 60% to 70% of batterers who killed their female intimate partners used firearms to do so.⁶ Four percent to 5% of women who have experienced nonlethal intimate partner violence (IPV) have reported that partners threatened them with guns at some point in their lives.^{3,7} More than 3800 women sustained gun-related injuries inflicted by spouses or ex-spouses between 1993 and 1999.⁸ According to victim reports, lifetime gun threats by batterers are more prevalent than knife threats (3%) and are almost as prevalent as assaults with objects (5%).³

The sequelae of nonlethal gun-related threats have not been extensively researched. However, one study of 150 people held at gunpoint by a robber found higher than expected levels of post-traumatic stress disorder among survivors 6 months after the incident.⁹ Other re-

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search has suggested that children exposed to interparental violence involving knives or guns are at elevated risk for conduct disorders, depression, and anxiety.¹⁰ A germinal study of IPV victims found that abusers' gun ownership can be perceived as a constant lethal threat and may inhibit help-seeking or attempts to leave the relationship.¹¹ Several recent studies have supported the contention that IPV victims whose batterers have access to guns are in greater danger than women who are battered by non-gun-owners. Batterers with access to guns appear to be more physically injurious to victims¹² and are 7 to 8 times more likely to kill their victims than are batterers without guns.^{7,13}

The prevalence of gun ownership among batterers in the United States is unknown. Although women typically underreport the presence of guns in the home as compared with their cohabiting male partners' reports,¹⁴ studies have found that 24% of battered women in a Kansas sample and 41% of battered women in a Texas-Virginia sample reported that guns were kept in their homes.^{7,12} Thirty-five percent of all women in Kansas and 29% of all women in both Texas and Virginia reported that guns were kept at home,¹⁵ so it remains unclear whether male batterers are any more or less likely to own guns than other men.

The goals of this study were to: 1) calculate gun ownership among male batterers enrolled in a statewide network of intervention programs, 2) find out how often they made 4 specific types of gun-related threats, 3) estimate the relationship between recent gun ownership and lifetime gun threats in this sample, 4) identify other risk markers for threatening an intimate partner with a gun, and 5) compare the number of knife and gun threats by gun owners and non-gun-owners.

Methods

Sample

The records of 8529 male clients of Massachusetts batterer intervention programs were retrieved from a publicly available database from the Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH). Massachusetts courts order roughly 2500 people to one of the 20 state-certified batterer intervention programs each year. All of the programs are for nonincarcerated offenders. The data used in this analysis were collected from batterer intervention program clients during their initial appointments; counselors used a stan-

dard data collection form that was completed and forwarded to MDPH for compilation. The Human Subjects Committee at the Harvard School of Public Health approved the use of this dataset for this research.

Data from 8623 clients who completed intake interviews between October 1999 and May 2003 were available. Twenty records were dropped because they did not include data on gun ownership; data from 74 female batterers were also dropped.

Measures

Recent gun ownership was assessed through a single question on the intake form: Have you personally owned a gun in the last 3 years? Each client was also asked the following 4 questions: Have you ever threatened to use a firearm against an intimate partner without actually displaying the firearm? Have you ever handled, cleaned, loaded, or displayed a firearm during an argument with a partner or ex-partner? Have you ever threatened to use a firearm against a person or thing an intimate partner cared about (family member, pet, friend, or object) without actually displaying a firearm? Have you ever shot a gun during an argument with a partner or ex-partner? Cli-

ents were classified as having threatened an intimate with a gun if they responded positively to one or more of these questions.

Independent variables included self-reported demographics, knife threats against intimate partner, criminal behavior, incarceration and restraining order history before the assault or violation resulting in referral to the intervention program, lifetime drug or alcohol abuse, lifetime suicidal or homicidal behavior, history of military service, fatherhood status, and recent gun ownership. The majority of these exposures were assessed through single-item self-reports. Knife threats against intimate partners were assessed by 2 questions: Have you ever cleaned, handled or displayed a knife during an argument with a victim? Have you ever used a knife during an argument with a victim? Program counselors verified clients' responses with records from probation or child protective services when possible.

The substance abuse variable was a composite that included a positive response to any 1 of 4 questions pertaining to residential and outpatient substance abuse treatment, self-reported alcohol or drug abuse, and binge drinking

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Table 1. Frequency of Gun- and Knife-Related Threats Among Batterers, No. (%) (n=8529)

Threat	Gun Owners (n=612)	Non-gun-owners (n=7917)	Total (n=8529)
Knife or gun threat	79 (12.9)	388 (4.9)	467 (5.5)
Gun threat	72 (11.8)	165 (2.1)	237 (2.8)
Threatened partner with gun without displaying it	38 (6.2)	88 (1.1)	126 (1.5)
Cleaned, loaded, or held gun during argument with partner	42 (6.9)	74 (0.9)	116 (1.4)
Threatened pet or other thing partner cares about without displaying gun	28 (4.6)	73 (0.9)	101 (1.2)
Shot gun during argument with partner	26 (4.3)	42 (0.5)	68 (1.0)
Knife threat	23 (3.8)	262 (3.3)	285 (3.4)
Handled, cleaned, or displayed knife during argument with partner	19 (3.1)	186 (2.4)	205 (2.4)
Used knife as weapon or to threaten during argument with partner	15 (2.5)	181 (2.3)	196 (2.3)

(which was defined as consuming 5 or more drinks on an occasion). One of these 4 questions is also asked on the national Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey (BRFSS): In the past 30 days, on how many days have you had at least one drink of alcohol? The other 3 questions were: Do you have a history of alcohol or other drug abuse? That is, have you suffered any social, emotional, physical, or legal consequences as a result of substance abuse? Have you ever been referred to a substance abuse program? Have you ever been in residential treatment for drugs or alcohol?

Demographic variables, including age, income, and race, were collected through standard questions taken from the national Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey. Census data and definitions of metropolitan statistical areas were used to categorize clients as rural, suburban, or urban residents.

Analysis

Three separate analyses were performed using STATA software version 6.¹⁶ First, the frequencies of specific forms of gun-related and knife-related threats were calculated. Next, bivariate and multivariate analyses were conducted to examine both crude and adjusted relationships between individual factors and batterers' gun threats. Criterion for entry into the final model was a p-value of .20. Two variables were considered to be nearly collinear if the absolute value of the correlation coefficient was 0.9.¹⁷ The highest correlation coefficient between 2 predictor variables was 0.3, thus no near collinearity was detected.

Results

Seven percent (n=612) of our sample reported gun ownership during the previous 3 years. Thirteen percent (n=79)

of the gun owners and 5% (n=388) of the non-gun-owners had used either knives or guns to threaten intimate partners (Table 1). Almost 3% (n=237) of the total sample and 12% (n=72) of those who owned guns during the previous 3 years reported that they had made at least 1 of 4 gun-related threats during their lifetimes. Forty-six percent (n=108) of those who reported making at least 1 form of gun threat made 2 or more. Between 3% and 4% of both gun-owning and non-gun-owning batterers reported using knives to threaten or harm intimate partners during their lifetimes.

Men from all racial, income, age, and metropolitan status categories reported threatening their partners with guns (Table 2). Bivariate results indicated that lower-income batterers were somewhat more likely to report using guns to threaten intimates than were their higher-income counterparts. Substance abusers were 70% more likely to have threatened partners with guns than were those without histories of substance abuse. Homicidal and suicidal behavior were strongly associated with gun threats in the crude analysis; suicidal behavior did not remain significant in the adjusted model.

Three variables failed to meet the criterion for entry into the final model, including history of military service, fatherhood, and history of suicidal behavior. Suicidal behavior was retained for clinical interest and is therefore included in Table 2. An interaction between age and criminal history also failed to meet the criterion for retention in the final model.

Gun ownership was strongly associated with using a gun to threaten an intimate in the multivariate model; recent gun owners were 7.8 times more likely than non-gun-owners to have made gun-related threats to intimates in the preceding 3 years. Those who had made knife-related threats were 8.8 times more likely than were those who reported no knife

Table 2. Batterers' Use of Guns to Threaten Intimate Partners, by Demographic Characteristics

Characteristic No.	Total	Used Gun to Threaten Partner, (%)	Crude Odds Ratio (95% Confidence Interval)	Adjusted Odds Ratio (95% Confidence Interval)*
Overall sample	8529	237 (2.8)		
Annual income				
<\$20 000 (reference group)	5010	158 (3.2)	1.0 reference	1.0 reference
≥\$20 000 and <\$50000	2428	53 (2.2)	0.7 (0.5-0.9)	0.8 (0.6-1.2)
≥\$50 000	737	17 (2.3)	0.7 (0.4-1.2)	0.9 (0.5-1.5)
Residence				
Urban (reference group)	3692	115 (3.1)	1.0 reference	1.0 reference
Suburban	3623	85 (2.4)	0.8 (0.5-1.1)	0.8 (0.6-1.1)
Rural	679	18 (2.7)	1.0 (0.7-1.5)	0.7 (0.4-1.2)
Race				
White (reference group)	4701	131 (2.8)	1.0 reference	1.0 reference
African American	1774	65 (3.7)	1.3 (1.0-1.8)	1.5 (1.0-2.1)
Hispanic	1542	31 (2.0)	0.7 (0.5-1.1)	0.8 (0.5-1.3)
Other	512	10 (2.0)	0.7 (0.4-1.3)	1.0 (0.5-2.0)
Owned a gun past 3 years				
Yes	612	72 (11.8)	6.3 (4.7-8.4)	7.8 (5.6-11.0)
No	7917	165 (2.1)		
Ever used knife to threaten/harm partner				
Yes	285	55 (19.3)	10.6 (7.6-14.7)	8.8 (6.1-12.8)
No	8244	182 (2.4)		
Criminal record before referral event				
Yes	5405	180 (3.3)	1.9 (1.4-2.5)	1.3 (1.0-1.9)
No	3124	57 (1.8)		
Victim had restraining order at referral event				
Yes	1126	48 (4.3)	1.7 (1.2-2.4)	1.6 (1.1-2.2)
No	7170	183 (2.6)		
History of substance abuse				
Yes	3598	133 (3.7)	1.7 (1.4-2.3)	1.6 (1.2-2.1)
No	4909	104 (2.1)		
Ever served a jail/prison sentence for IPV				
Yes	2399	95 (4.0)	1.7 (1.3-2.3)	1.3 (0.9-1.7)
No	6130	142 (2.3)		
Ever attempted suicide				
Yes	725	33 (5.0)	1.8 (1.2-2.6)	1.0 (0.6-1.5)
No	7804	204 (2.6)		
Ever attempted homicide (of intimate or nonintimate)				
Yes	188	33 (17.6)	8.5 (5.7-12.8)	4.3 (2.7-7.0)
No	8341	204 (2.5)		

*Controlling for all other variables in the table

threats to have also made gun-related threats. Seventy percent of the 23 individuals who owned guns and had made knife-related threats also made gun-related threats.

Batterers whose victims had filed restraining orders before their enrollment in the intervention program were 60% more likely to have used guns to threaten intimates than were batterers whose victim had not filed orders.

Discussion

This is the first study to ask batterers directly about their use of firearms to threaten their intimate partners. The prevalence of gun ownership reported by batterers was somewhat less than the self-reported gun ownership among men in Massachusetts – 7% and 17% respectively.¹⁵ The prevalence of gun ownership among batterers is likely to be much higher than 7% in Southern and Mountain states, where the prevalence of gun ownership among men can be as high as 60% to 70%.¹⁸

We found that 12% of batterers who owned firearms in the previous 3 years had used them to threaten their intimate partners. This may underestimate the true prevalence of gun threats in this population, because the most severely violent batterers (including those who have shot or pistol whipped their partners) are likely to be incarcerated and thus unrepresented among this sample, and because many batterers might refrain from admitting such an event.

Batterers who owned guns in the previous 3 years were almost 8 times more likely to report having threatened their partners with guns than were those who did not own guns. Batterers who recently owned guns and non-gun-owners were equally likely to have made knife-related threats against intimate partners. Our finding that 3% of the sample had made knife-related threats against intimates is consistent with the lifetime prevalence of knife threats reported by domestic violence victims in a previous study, as is our finding of more gun threats than knife threats.³ It is surprising that more batterers perpetrated gun threats than knife threats, particularly given the low prevalence of gun ownership in Massachusetts and that knives are legal and essentially universally available to batterers. We might expect an even greater disparity between gun and knife threats in states where guns are more widely available.

The fact that gun owners and non-gun-owners were equally likely to use knives may indicate that gun owners are

not inherently more violent than those without guns, but that gun availability makes it easy for batterers to threaten their partners. Alternatively, it is possible that there is a more dangerous subtype of batterer who deliberately acquires firearms in order to engage in threatening behavior and that the gun-related threats substitute for threats that might otherwise have been committed with knives. Another possible explanation is response bias: Batterers who were willing to admit that they owned guns may also have been more willing to admit to making gun threats.

Those with histories of substance abuse or homicidal behavior were more likely to report having made gun threats than were those without such histories. These findings are consistent with previous studies that found substance abuse and previous criminal involvement were associated with the use of guns by batterers to kill or threaten to kill intimate partners.^{3,7,19}

Batterers reported using guns to terrorize their victims without physically injuring them (and in some cases without even displaying the weapon). These types of threats leave no visible trace yet may result in serious disability, such as post-traumatic stress disorder.^{9,20} Court decisions about gun restrictions, restraining orders, and child custody in domestic violence

cases are often contingent on evidence of the use of physical force and direct or implied threats. The criteria for an implied threat should be expanded to include cleaning or handling firearms during disagreements or making gun-related threats against people, animals, or objects associated with the victim.

Our findings have relevance to batterer intervention program directors and other human service professionals who counsel batterers. Although batterers make gun threats infrequently, intervention practitioners should know that certain batterers may be at increased risk of threatening their intimate partners with guns. Counselors should provide information about legal restrictions on gun possession and proper means of relinquishing weapons during group sessions. Batterers' counselors should know that if their clients have been convicted of misdemeanor domestic violence offenses, it is a crime for them to possess firearms. Given the unique relationship of batterer intervention programs to probation departments, staff should consult with local law enforcement officials about their obligation to report this crime to authorities. Further, health care practitioners and all fam-

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ily violence interventionists should advocate for the consistent enforcement of legal proscriptions against gun ownership among batterers.

The Violent Crime Control Act of 1994, the US Gun Control Act of 1968, and the corollary 1996 Lautenberg Amendment made it unlawful for those subject to non-temporary domestic violence restraining orders or those convicted of misdemeanor or felony domestic violence crimes to possess firearms. However, the federal law does not require police or court officers to find out if convicted batterers possess guns or to collect them. In fact, courts do not have the authority to disarm abusers unless state legislation specifically permits them to.²¹ As a result, in many jurisdictions it is left to the batterer to voluntarily relinquish firearms pursuant to conviction or the issuance of a protective order. This loophole may be one reason why, as of 2001, only 566 batterers in the United States had been prosecuted for violating the statutes.²² Another weakness in the federal laws is that while they make it unlawful for batterers to *possess* firearms, there is no provision that prohibits batterers from *owning* firearms and simply entrusting them to someone else while they are subject to restraining orders. By 2000, roughly 30 states had enacted laws to expand the federal prohibition to include ownership, but only 12 extended the prohibition to batterers subject to temporary as well as permanent restraining orders.²³

There is reason to believe that legal interventions may make a difference. One study of laws requiring retail gun vendors to screen potential buyers for restraining orders determined that intimate partner femicides were reduced by as much as 11% in states where these laws had been implemented.²³ Even so, retail gun vendors are not the only source of firearms; in all but 18 states, batterers may buy guns from private sellers at gun shows, garage sales, and swap meets where background checks are not required.²¹ The background check system itself is currently subject to deficiencies that can work to criminals' advantage. As of 2003, gun retailers in 31 states lacked the ability to distinguish batterers from others because they could not identify misdemeanor convictions for partner violence consistently through background checks.²⁴ Reasons for this include incomplete or unclear state record keeping, lack of automated systems, insufficient resources, and problems with the federal definition of domestic violence conviction. Another reason for the

failure of the background check system may be that domestic violence cases are misclassified. A recent study of domestic violence arrests made in Arizona from 2000 to 2002 found that 54% were misclassified, allowing some offenders to retain their firearms after arrest.²⁵

This study was limited by several factors. First, all data came from self-reports. Although evidence suggests that survey responses about gun ownership are generally valid among owners of registered handguns,²⁶ it is possible that a higher than average proportion of this survey population owned unregistered guns and failed to report them, which might mean that results only pertain to legal gun ownership. In addition, batterers may have been hesitant to incriminate

themselves by reporting recent gun ownership or their use of guns to make threats. Thus, the percentage of batterers who threaten their victims with guns in Massachusetts is probably higher than the estimates presented in this article.

A second limitation is that the question about gun ownership asked about gun ownership during the previous 3 years only, and the 4 gun threat questions asked about incidents that may have occurred at any point in the perpetrator's lifetime. Batterers who owned guns 5 years ago and perpe-

trated a gun threat would have been classified as non-gun-owners for the purpose of this study, yet their gun threats would have been recorded. For example, the most severe offenders may have been incarcerated for the 3 years before program entry, making recent gun ownership impossible. This classification problem could lead to an underestimate of the true strength of the relationship between gun ownership and gun threats.

Third, the results of this study may not be generalizable to batterers nationally. All subjects were residents of Massachusetts, which has relatively stringent firearm ownership laws and where relatively few adults own firearms.²⁷ Moreover, all batterers in this sample were known to the state criminal justice system but not incarcerated. Batterers who avoid detection or who are imprisoned may differ from those who are adjudicated to attend community-based batterer intervention programs. The study sample was restricted to male batterers, so results may not apply to females who perpetrate intimate partner abuse. Fourth, although we have data on knife- and gun-related intimidation, we do not have information on other types of threats, the prevalence of re-

Federal law does not require police or court officers to find out if convicted batterers possess guns or collect them.

sulting injuries, victims' corroboration of the batterers' self-reports, or the degree of criminality of each batterer.

In conclusion, our study found that guns are used to intimidate female victims of domestic violence in at least 4 ways, including direct threats; threats to harm people, pets, or other things the victim cares for; and handling or shooting guns during arguments. Not surprisingly, gun ownership ap-

pears to substantially increase the likelihood of a batterer using a gun to intimidate his victim. Additional methods by which batterers use various types of firearms (and other weapons) to control the actions of their victims should be explored through further research. Research to investigate whether gun owners are more likely than non-gun-owners to abuse intimate partners is needed, as is a stable estimate of gun ownership among batterers.

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