

Poll: Religious groups divided on gun control, but united against guns in churches

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c. 2012 Religion News Service (RNS) After the movie theater massacre in Aurora, Colo., and a deadly shooting at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wis., Americans are divided on gun control, and within certain religious groups, attitudes are far from ambivalent.

But on the question of guns in churches, there is actual consensus: A strong majority of Americans don't want them in the pews, according to a new poll released Wednesday (Aug. 15) by the Public Religion Research Institute conducted in partnership with Religion News Service.

"Although the issue of gun control tends to divide Americans by party, gender, region and race, there is broad agreement among the public that there are some places where concealed weapons should be off limits," said Daniel Cox, PRRI's research director.

More than three-quarters of respondents (76 percent) said concealed weapons should not be allowed in houses of worship, compared to 20 percent who disagreed.

The poll, conducted in the wake of the Colorado and Wisconsin shootings, shows that a slim majority (52 percent) of Americans favors passing stricter laws, while 44 percent are opposed.

But walk into a Catholic church or an evangelical congregation, and the worshippers may not be so torn about gun control.

Among white evangelicals, for instance, support for stricter gun control is weak, at 35 percent. That compares to the 62 percent of Catholics and 60 percent of unaffiliated Americans who would like to see tighter gun control laws on the books.

The Rev. James Martin, a Jesuit priest who called for tighter gun control after the movie theater massacre last month, offered several reasons why U.S. Catholics may be more likely to support it.

"Catholics may congregate more in urban centers and may be more exposed to violent crimes than people in other parts of the country," said Martin, the author of "The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything."

"And Catholics might be more sympathetic to government regulation, because the church has always seen legitimate government as one way of expressing the will of the people," Martin continued. What's more, he said, "there might be a slightly greater appreciation for the notion of the common good, which is enshrined in Catholic social teaching, in addition to individual rights."

Black Protestants favor stricter gun control even more strongly than Catholics, according to a 2011 ABC News/Washington Post poll, with 71 percent saying they want tougher gun laws.

As for white mainline Protestants, 42 percent endorse tighter gun control, according to the PRRI/RNS survey. This may be because most mainline Protestants (54 percent) live in a household with a gun, Cox said, and the survey found that those who don't live with guns generally tend to favor more gun restrictions.

As Americans remain divided on gun control, they show no consensus when asked about the most effective way to prevent mass shootings. "People are all over the map," Cox said, noting that:

- 27 percent of respondents said stricter gun control would help.
- 22 percent cited better mental health screenings and support for those who want guns.
- 20 percent argued for a greater emphasis on God and morality in school and society.
- 14 percent want stricter security at public gatherings.
- 11 percent said allowing more private citizens to carry guns for protection is the answer.

White evangelicals were more likely than any other group to choose "a greater emphasis on God and morality," with nearly four in 10 saying that this is the best way to prevent mass gun killings.

The survey also found:

-- Women favor stronger gun control laws far more than men (60 percent to 44 percent).

-- Democrats favor stronger gun laws (72 percent). Republicans (65 percent) and Tea Party members (78 percent) oppose them.

-- Better enforcement of existing gun laws has strong support among all Americans, with 67 percent in favor and 31 percent opposed.

-- More than two-thirds (68 percent) say the constitutional right to own and carry a gun is as important as other constitutional rights, while 30 percent disagree.

The poll of 1,006 Americans was conducted Aug. 8-12 and has a margin of error of plus or minus 3.5 percentage points.