



# Does Your Boyfriend Own a Gun?

## (Are You Sure?)

He's everything you want in a guy—until you discover a semiautomatic under the mattress.

Unbelievable? Not by a long shot: it's estimated that nearly half of American men own a gun. What does that mean for you?

By Jennifer Baumgardner

heather Anderson\* had been dating James for a month when she first saw the gun. It was a bright, unusually warm winter Saturday in Lincoln, Nebraska, and they were driving to the grocery store after sleeping at her place and exchanging belated Christmas gifts (a Nautica jacket for him, perfume for her) the evening before. Heather was thinking about how James was the first guy she'd clicked with in a long time. Like her, James, who had the goofy vibe of a comedian, loved being around kids. A recent graduate of the University of Nebraska, Heather nannied all through high school and college; James now worked at a day-care center owned by his family. James was from a

rougher background than she was—she had had a middle-class upbringing in Fargo, North Dakota; his twin brother was in jail for drugs. But when he talked about his past, it was largely to illustrate how much his life had changed.

As they came to a halt at a stop sign, a gleaming black pistol slid forward from underneath Heather's seat. In shock, Heather froze: "My heart dropped. I thought, Do I say anything? Do I shove it back with my foot and pretend I didn't see it?" Other than an unloaded John Wayne commemorative gun that her father kept locked in a showcase in their home, Heather had never been that close to a firearm. James had never mentioned that he owned a gun, much less kept one in his car.

Suddenly, Heather found herself viewing her new boyfriend, and their relationship, through the barrel of a gun. "I didn't say anything that day, but I'm sure he could tell that I saw it," says Heather, 22, who has huge blue eyes and a slight Fargo twang. "It made me question whether he was someone I could trust." Why, for instance, did James feel he needed a gun with him when he worked around kids? Was it even legally owned? And why had he never mentioned it to her? She wasn't sure what to think, because she had certainly never dated a gun-owner before...at least as far as she knew.

## Odds Are, You'll Date a Guy With a Gun

For many women, finding a boyfriend's gun—or learning he has one—is a little like coming across his hard-core porn collection. It hints at all sorts of dark, messy desires in your partner, from his delusions of being a badass Puff Daddy to his ability to menace you. How to reconcile this revelation with your image of the cute guy who rubs your feet for two hours while you bitch about work, and says he couldn't live without you? The

*\*Some names and identifying details in this story have been changed.*

discovery can trigger twinges of unease about the very person you spend time with and rely on the most.

If you're one of the many women who just assume their boyfriends don't own a gun, you could be wrong. In fact, nearly half of American men—think almost one out of two—currently own a firearm, estimates the Washington, D.C.-based advocacy organization Handgun Control, while about 11 percent of women do. In fact, 65 percent of American men own a gun at some point in their lifetime. But since only three states require registration for gun ownership, exact figures are unavailable, making it impossible to know how likely it is for the men you date to own or carry a gun.

Women like you are caught in the crossfire: each day, more than one woman is fatally shot by a lover or ex during the course of an argument, according to a 1998 study by the Violence Policy Center, a nonprofit education organization. And a firearm kept in the home for protection has proven 22 times more likely to kill a person living in the house, or a visiting friend, than an assailant.

Sandra Taylor, 29, a poised, straight-talking New York City newspaper reporter, feels “really connected” with her boyfriend, a 30-year-old aspiring filmmaker: “I don’t doubt his

Her boyfriend, who told her that he keeps a gun for safety reasons, has never gotten licensed (screened as a gun owner) or registered his weapon. “Our relationship had been great until that point and suddenly I thought, What else is going on that I don’t know about? You have to stop and think,” says Sandra, brooding. “Here’s where we are now—I’ve told him if it doesn’t get registered, I’ll turn it in.”

### What Is It With Guys and Guns?

“The bottom line is that you’re right to be uncomfortable with guns,” underscores Steve Handwerker, Ph.D., a licensed clinical psychologist based in Boca Raton, Florida. “They can be tools of violence, so your ability to become comfortable is entirely based on the agenda of the gun owner.”

From Nebraska to New Hampshire, hunting is a popular pastime; in many areas, guns are simply a fact of life—as mundane as cell phones on a city street. Ellen Needham, M.S.W., a family therapist in Appleton, Wisconsin, confirms this sentiment, noting, “Many women resent how much time their husbands and boyfriends spend with their guns.”

In the United States, 84 percent of *female* gun owners say they’ve armed themselves for protection; men are

Mark Taylor, 33, a Vermont-bred man pursuing a master’s in real-estate development, says he wants to get a gun someday, having learned to shoot as a kid. “You sense this profound power,” he explains, speculating that women would find it “hot and mysterious” if they found out their boyfriend secretly kept a gun. Men like Jan and Mark view a gun as an accessory that makes them feel more masculine and secure—in the same way that a large purse filled with items you won’t likely need (aspirin, five tubes of lipgloss, your Filofax) might make you feel both feminine and prepared for anything.

### He’s Armed, But Is He Dangerous?

Mindy McEvoy, 23, an animated, throaty-voiced criminal justice major from Orange County, California, learned her boyfriend owned a gun the night she met him, back in 1998. A 23-year-old Los Angeles police officer, Steve bought Mindy a drink at a local bar where she was out celebrating a friend’s birthday. Then the bouncer suggested that if Steve was going to keep drinking, he stow his weapon in his car. “He asked me to hold his [gun] belt out in the parking lot, and all of these bullets just dropped into the car,” says Mindy. “I have always been petrified of guns. Meanwhile, Steve carries his everywhere he goes.”

Such gun-toting tendencies may be socially acceptable given that they’re part of Steve’s job, but they sometimes make Mindy uncomfortable. When she learned that Steve actually owned three guns, including a shotgun that he keeps under his bed, she felt the need to question it. “His response was, ‘Why do you have so many shoes?’” she says, laughing. But the guns’ constant presence—either on Steve’s belt or a nearby table—can be unnerving, she admits, especially during an argument. Mindy recalls one fight she and Steve had during a period when they had temporarily stopped seeing each other: “He was screaming and yelling about the fact that I had gone out with someone

## “When I found his gun, my heart dropped. It made me doubt whether I would ever be able to trust him again.”

dedication to me, or where we are heading.” But everything was called into question when Sandra, doing routine cleaning around the house a few months after they moved in together—a year and a half after they began dating—found a semiautomatic under his side of their mattress. “I went nuts,” she says. “Then I confronted him, and *he* went nuts, saying, ‘Why are you looking around?’ I said, ‘This is not your place anymore—this is our place. You don’t have space in this apartment that doesn’t affect me.’”

more likely to use guns for recreation. Clearly, though, there are status reasons, too. Jan Ordway, 37, a contractor in Castine, Maine, owns 17 firearms. “There’s a group of guys I used to go hunting with, and we all liked to show off our guns to each other,” he says. As for the women Jan has dated, not all have been impressed. “One girl didn’t even want to see the guns,” he recalls. “I said, ‘It’s fine if you hate them, as long as you don’t expect me to curtail my use of them or keep them out of the house.’ Guns are too much a part of me.”

else,” Mindy says. “In the back of my mind, I kept thinking about his gun. I thought, *Calm him down.*”

The gun is in the back of her mind at other times, too. If Steve and Mindy are snuggling in front of the TV at her house and hear a suspicious sound, Steve’s gun makes Mindy feel secure. But if she’s out with him and his friends at a bar, it scares her to death. “If he’s been drinking and there is a fight...,” Mindy says, her voice trailing off. “This is a fear that my parents have, too—that a situation will get out of control while he’s drinking and someone will get shot.”

Of course, the mere fact that someone owns a gun isn’t cause to doubt his character. After all, many guys want guns around precisely to protect themselves and those they love. So how can you tell if a guy with a gun is predisposed to unwarranted aggression or carelessness? Some advocates for gun ownership, such as Don B. Kates, Jr., coauthor of *The Great American Gun Debate: Essays on Firearms and Violence* (Pacific Research Institute, 1997), cite research showing that firearm accidents are usually perpetrated by people who have a record of heavy drinking, drug

use or car accidents. But Kim Mariani, a spokesperson for Handgun Control, says there’s no way to know for sure, and safety precautions are key (see “How to Talk to a Guy About His Gun,” below). And Mindy is right to worry about guns and drinking, says Bonnie Jacobson, Ph.D., a New York

## When Mindy hears a strange noise, his gun makes her feel secure. When they fight, it scares her to death.

City-based therapist, author and director of the New York Institute for Psychological Change. “Would a responsible person drive drunk? No. In the same way, he shouldn’t carry his gun on him when using alcohol.”

### Not All Bonds Are Bulletproof

Sandra has calmed down a little since the day she found her boyfriend’s gun under their bed. But it remains there, still unregistered. Recently, she gave him a deadline: “He has three weeks to get the paperwork, or I turn the gun in,” she says, adding firmly, “I have no problem moving out if it remains an unresolved issue.”

“Does he have a right to his love of guns? Yes,” says Needham. “But you have to be honest with yourself—and him—if you deplore them.” Mindy, for one, is concerned about having guns in the house if she and Steve ever have children, but she’s willing to deal with them for now.

Heather and James broke up soon after she saw his gun that day in the car. She never said anything, but the relationship dwindled and she didn’t do anything to rekindle it. “I didn’t trust him much after I saw the gun,” explains Heather. “It was like he was a different person. I began to think I was going to see him on the news in some sort of violent death or crime.”

Currently single, Heather says she never wants to be in that position again. “All you can think of is how easily something could happen, how easily someone could get killed if we got into a confrontation,” she says. “The next person I date is not going to have a handgun.” 🗡️