PASSIONS RUN HIGH IN UTAH; HALF OWN GUNS, NEARLY ALL HAVE AN OPINION
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Maybe you don't own a gun, but chances are your neighbor does.
In fact, according to a Deseret News/KSL TV poll conducted by Dan Jones and Associates, 49 percent of those questioned say they own a handgun, rifle and/or shotgun, whereas 48 percent do not. (The remaining 3 percent either did not know or refused to say.) It's also a good bet that just about everyone has an opinion on guns. Ban them altogether? Restrict them? No restrictions at all?
Utahns questioned by the Deseret News have strong feelings about guns, both pro and con. Where one woman laments the loss of her son to a gun-toting stalker, a man believes his handgun saved his life.
As a child advocate for Primary Children's Medical Center, Tim Cosgrove regularly sees the carnage wrought by firearms. Since 1994, some 53 children have been rushed to the Primary emergency room with gunshot wounds.
Six have died.
"We see the results of gun violence, the impacts of guns on children's lives," he said.
Primary Children's Medical Center echoes the policy statement of the Utah Hospital Association: Guns should not be allowed in hospitals or mental health facilities. After all, the very nature of hospitals is to save lives, while the purpose of guns is to take them, Cosgrove said.
He rattles off the statistics: Utah has the sixth-highest suicide rate in the nation, and within four years, homicide and suicide will surpass car accidents as the No. 1 killer of kids.
"The problem," he said, "is that guns are just too readily available. We're not saying there should be no right to own and carry guns, but that right comes with responsibilities."
Cosgrove believes the changes to Utah gun laws being mulled by Utah lawmakers are long overdue, but they also don't go far enough. He believes gun owners have a responsibility to keep their guns locked up and that the age for purchasing firearms ought to be raised.
Psychoanalyst-turned-Utah County Commissioner David Gardner has an entirely different point of view. He is an avid gun enthusiast, and he isn't bashful about revealing he has a concealed-weapons permit.
He packs a little heat, not only under his jacket but with his pro-gun elocution. And his tongue is as sharp as the knife he carries.
"Go ahead. Tell me if I'm armed," Gardner, chairman of Wasatch Mental Health, boldly challenged the state Board of Mental Health in a meeting earlier this year. "Right. You can't."
Gardner, 49, first obtained a permit in 1984 after incidents in his professional practice about which he refuses to speak other than to say, "It doesn't take many death threats to you or your family."
While in private practice at Utah Valley Regional Medical Center, Gardner deposited his firearm in a lockbox each morning before entering the secured unit. But banning guns from mental health centers is unenforceable, he said.
"If I walk into a mental health facility with my gun, what are they going to do?" Gardner said. Leaving the weapon under the car seat or in the glove box or in the trunk is irresponsible, he said.
"What if a patient sees me do it and breaks into the car? Now what?" he asks.

Bottom line for Gardner: Law-abiding residents are responsible guns owners and law breakers are not. "Those people who are hellbent on creating a ruckus are going to do so. It doesn't matter how many laws you have."

Utah lawmakers are in the midst of a political donnybrook over the gun issue. Republican Gov. Mike Leavitt wants a special legislative session to deal with banning concealed weapons from churches, schools and mental institutions and to keep them out of the hands of people convicted of violent misdemeanors.

The GOP-controlled House is balking at the special session, saying more-restrictive gun laws on law-abiding citizens just aren't necessary.

The debate swirling on Capitol Hill about restricting where concealed weapons can be carried might seem to affect the lives of a good share of Utahns. But that may not be the case at all.

According the Deseret News poll, only 4 percent of gun owners have ever carried a gun into a school or church. And only 4 percent of gun owners said they would ever take a gun into a school or church.

Only half of those surveyed possess guns. By extrapolation, that means all of the political anguish over gun rights and whether weapons should be banned from churches, schools and mental institutions is over an issue that directly affects only 2 percent of the population.

When gun owners polled by the Deseret News were asked about the main reason they own guns, only 9 percent said for defense of self or family. Some 54 percent keep guns for hunting and 18 percent for target shooting -- activities that would not be restricted by any of the legislation being proposed.

The recreational aspect of gun ownership is evident in the fact 80 percent of gun owners said they own rifles and 63 percent own shotguns. By contrast, some 54 percent own handguns.

Don Dunbar, a self-proclaimed American cowboy patriot, is one of them. He believes his .22-caliber Browning automatic saved his life early one morning in May 1998.

He never fired the gun. Never even pointed it at the group of attackers who startled him out of sleep at his campsite behind Willard Peak in Box Elder County.

But he knows he would be dead if he hadn't been able to reach in his bag, grab the firearm, shove in a clip and cock it loud enough for the seven young people who attacked him to hear.

"Their attitude just changed completely," said Dunbar, who calls Brigham City home.

The carload of young people, who Box Elder County deputy sheriffs later determined were between ages 15 and 21, drove into Dunbar's camp one morning ranting and raving. One young man flipped the 235-pound Dunbar like a rag doll, then threatened him and summoned the others to attack.

Dunbar got away briefly and the situation changed when one of the girls yelled, "He's got a gun." The assailants backed off and drove away.

The experience added a personal testimony to Dunbar's already firm support for the right to keep and bear arms.

Dunbar, 45, was raised on a 23,000-acre ranch in Torrey. He grew up working the land, and guns were a part of that upbringing. "Firearms are just a tool to me."

Dunbar says lawmakers are treading on dangerous territory. "I believe we're losing our freedoms," he said.

But what about the freedoms of Steven Molen, a 22-year-old student at Indiana University who was killed trying to intervene in the fatal shooting of a woman victimized by a stalker?

Ron and Norma Molen cannot forget. For years, the Utah couple have circulated information
about handgun deaths, lobbied the Legislature for tougher gun laws and repeated over and over
the story of how their youngest child died in 1992.

The stalker, a 29-year-old German graduate student at another university, carried two guns.
One was wrested away by Steven after his girlfriend was shot. The gunman used the second to
kill Steven and later himself.

Ron Molen, who was raised just outside of Chicago, moved to Salt Lake City to attend
architecture school and stayed.

He finds it ironic that Utah, a state founded on a bedrock of religious faith, is a flagship state
for the NRA. "We are the most religious state in the union and the flagship state for the NRA.
Those two things are not very consistent," he said.

The Molens said it took the death of their son, a highly praised student and published fiction
writer, to find the courage to begin speaking out. In 1994, they formed Utahns Against Gun
Violence.

The Molens believe the most important legislative issue is not guns in the schools but a
Democratic proposal to require child safety measures on gun triggers.

"That is going to save some lives directly," he said. "The guns kids are bringing into schools,
they are taking them right out of their parents' home."

The Molens have seen "a sea change" in attitude, even in conservative Utah, since they
organized Utahns Against Gun Violence. "Even to have the governor pushing for some gun
control laws is amazing," Ron Molen said.

Seventeen-year-old Tom Randall is one who wants his right to carry guns protected, even
though he is too young for a concealed weapons permit.

Randall is a good kid. He doesn't hang around with the wrong crowd. He doesn't stir up
trouble.

But Randall, who will be a senior next fall at South Jordan's Bingham High School, believes
he will be better protected if he's able to carry a concealed weapon.

So he can't wait until he turns 18, when he can legally apply for a concealed weapons permit.

As a teenager, he and friends are often out driving at night. That's when most crimes happen,
he said. "If I were to have a handgun on me, I'd feel a lot safer than if I only had my hands and
my car keys to defend ourselves."

And he doesn't like the suggestions he's hearing from lawmakers that the age at which a Utahn
can apply for a concealed weapon be raised from age 18 to 21. "You are technically a
responsible adult at 18. Is that not true? If that's the case, then you should be able to carry a
weapon at 18," Randall said.

Randall has never been threatened; he's never been in a tight spot that a gun would have got
him out of. But a friend's experiences let him know teenagers with a Utah gang are never far
from potential trouble.

He doesn't want to give his friend's name, but the boy used to be in a local gang. He got out
but was hassled and threatened by the gang, and -- after an exhaustive series of tests and firearms
proficiency exams -- got special permission from the state to carry a concealed weapon before
age 18.

Salt Lake Police Sgt. Don Bell, a 27-year veteran now assigned to sex crimes, offers a caution
to anyone thinking a gun will protect them from crime:

"I don't like telling people, yes, you should get a gun, or no, you shouldn't," he said. "That is a
decision each person must make. But if you do have one, can you stand in front of the mirror,
look yourself in the eye and say, 'I can kill another human being'? If you can't, there is just no
sense having a weapon."

Bell and other Utah law enforcement officers are increasingly nervous about the more than 22,000 legal concealed weapons being packed by law-abiding citizens.

From their first day in the police academy, officers are trained to assume everyone has a gun and that the reason they have a gun is to hurt the officer. And officers are taught to respond accordingly.

But with legal concealed weapons, how are police officers to know if the weapon is legal or not? If the person is a criminal suspect or average Joe?

"Right now, there are at least 20,000 people carrying a gun with ammunition that could conceivably hurt me," Bell said. "They may be law-abiding, but if I or any law enforcement officer come up against them for any reason, say a traffic stop or mistaken identity or any untold number of reasons, and they have a weapon on them, I don't care if they say they have a permit."

"That gun can hurt me, and I will treat the situation exactly like we treated people 10 or 15 or 20 years ago. They will be put down on the ground, handcuffed and secured," Bell said. "My concern is that I go home at night."

The bottom line is police do not come equipped with a database to know if a person has a permit or is law-abiding. Officers cannot assume that everyone who is packing a gun is law-abiding, Bell said.

And basic police training is to assume otherwise.

Bell cringed at a recent quote by a witness to a bank robbery in which the suspect was eventually killed by police officers. The witness, who had a concealed weapon permit, lamented he chose the wrong day to leave his gun at home, that maybe he could have stopped the suspect.

But if police had arrived on the scene of a bank robbery and found someone standing there with a gun, and did not know who that person was, Bell said the situation could have turned tragic for the witness.

Anything could happen.

"It is bizarre to me that people would want to even put themselves in that situation," Bell said.