For the women who’ve never gotten closer to a gun than the TV screen during *Law and Order: SVU*, and who consider themselves typical in that regard, these numbers may come as a shock: nearly one-quarter of the American women surveyed last year in a Gallup poll reported owning a gun.

That number vaults to 43 percent when women told whether anyone in their household (including them) keeps a gun. In other words, almost half of the adult female population lives with guns within reach. And that slice of the population pie jumped 10 percentage points in a decade, at a time when overall gun ownership remained relatively flat.

Forget the stereotypes about the fairer sex and firearms. Women now sit squarely in the middle of American gun culture, whether for sport, hunting, or self-defense.

Breaking Nails asked five ordinary women to share their gun stories: why and how they joined the well-armed ranks, and how that decision has affected their lives. We wanted that conversation to take place without all the red-and-blue politics and emotionalism over gun-control policies. All that’s beside the point for women who wonder: What’s it like to be a gun person? Take aim at the stereotypes and fire when ready.

**Tatiana Whitlock, 32**

Industial designer + small business owner
Portland, Maine

Every Tuesday evening, a handful of girlfriends and I head to the North Berwick Rod & Gun Club to enjoy a cup of coffee and each other’s company, then take to the range until either daylight or our ammunition runs out.

I didn’t start shooting until about a year ago. Growing up in southern Maine, my family hunted small game, and my mom had the attitude that there are no boy’s- or girl’s-only activities. She encouraged me to give anything a shot — so I’d sit with my male relatives in duck blinds at 5 a.m. and eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches while they hunted. I was taught to respect weapons, but never learned to use a gun myself.

I work from my home and have two toddlers, so I never spent much time out with other gals. My husband mentioned that I might like a new hobby, and I decided to satisfy my longtime curiosity about shooting. To this day I’m not sure what “hobby” meant to my husband — a book club was just not in the cards for me — but he was surprised and impressed, and is completely supportive.

Shooting appeals to me most because it requires both complete mental calm and total body awareness; it’s rewarding because such focus and control mean accurately hitting my target. Anything less results in not being able to “hit the broad side of a barn.”

For now, guns are something I only use out of my home. Until I really understand concealed carry and the implications of using a firearm for self-defense, I won’t have a loaded weapon anywhere but at the range. After seeing men’s leg holsters and special shirt pockets, I’ve realized there aren’t very many places a woman can conceal a weapon. A purse isn’t on you 100 percent of the time — if it leaves you, there’s a loaded weapon inside. And I am NOT going to wear a bra holster!

**Romi Klear, 35**

NRA-certified firearms instructor
St. Stephens Church, Va.

I grew up around guns, and started my company — L3 Firearms Training, for “Ladies Locked & Loaded” — to help women develop the skills and attitude necessary to be safe around firearms. Gun ownership is normal in Virginia, but mostly for men. My husband and I get odd looks because I have a concealed carry permit and he doesn’t — it’s a breach of that southern man-takes-care-of-his-woman tradition. Gun use is becoming more accepted and encouraged for women, though.

About a quarter of my students are females who know how shoot and want to brush up or obtain a concealed weapon permit. Another quarter are women who shoot regularly but

**Editor’s Note**

Interviews of Tatiana Whitlock, Romi Klear, Valerie Hendrey, JoAnn Bloom, and Angela Godwin by Matti Hart. Edited for length and clarity.
Valerie Hendrey, 27
Dredging company administrative asst.
Chicago, Ill.

Last month, I bought my first gun — a Smith & Wesson Model 22A automatic pistol. Until recently, when my mom and I joined a shooting class, I’d seen firearms but never touched one. We started out in basic pistol training to get comfortable around guns, and the second I pulled that trigger I was in love. I’ve since joined a rifle club and go shooting every other Sunday. You feel what it’s like to be a woman newly out of vet school who lives alone to a 67-year-old widow who needs to know how to handle her late husband’s guns.

Certain groups of women are resistant when I talk to them about what I do. They’re afraid a gun’s going to jump off the table and shoot them. This is a demographic I target (no pun intended). It’s not that every woman needs to own a gun and carry it all the time, but every woman should be informed and open-minded about firearms. What if you come across a gun? You need to be able to unload it, to put it somewhere safe. You should be knowledgeable enough to be comfortable around guns rather than intimidated by them.

I’d love to see more women realize they don’t have to be afraid of handling a gun. If a woman knows her way around a gun, it doesn’t mean she can’t still be feminine — she’s just that much stronger.

Concealed Carry (V.)

Concealed Carry is the practice of keeping a firearm — usually a handgun — discreetly on your person, or in close proximity to you (such as in your vehicle) in public.

49 states (all except Illinois) have some law that allows ordinary citizens to carry a concealed weapon, but each law is different.

Generally, a permit is required to practice concealed carry, and special registration and licensing procedures must be followed to obtain one.

JoAnn Bloom, 63
Dean at Rasmussen College and NRA-certified firearms instructor
Appleton, Wis.

In my first career, I was an intensive care and pediatrics nurse. Back then, I never thought I’d get into guns and shooting — my dad was a physician who viewed guns as a danger in the home, and while nursing I saw the results of weapon use gone haywire. But several years ago, the necessity to learn how to defend myself overrode everything I’d come to believe about firearms.

I lost my husband to cancer in 2006, and, shortly after, a stalker repeatedly broke into my house. I’d come home to my pots and pans rearranged, lights on or off that hadn’t been, and doors unlocked — things I would be aware of if I had done them myself. Once when I came back from work, someone had used my toilet and left the seat up. I never knew who was going to be waiting for me.

So I learned how to shoot a one-handed handgun. I’m not a passive person; rather I like being in control, and knowing how to handle a gun became fun for me. It was a challenge and a stress reliever on top of a defensive skill. In the height of my training, I shot up to 2,000 rounds per day. I learned how to shoot one-handed and from concealment. I entered competitions in which the objective was to effectively act as I would in a self-defense scenario. Instructors visited my home to show me how to establish an emergency safe room. It all gave me the confidence I needed to protect myself.

After my stalker was caught, I kept shooting, and developed a passion for engaging women in the sport. I love to teach in the classroom and I love shooting, so it was an easy transition to become a firearms instructor. I’ve been at it for five years now, and it’s a joy to see other women find a place where they feel safe through learning to handle a gun. I teach men, too, but my specialty is teaching women.

Sometimes a woman needs to be taught by a woman. Anyone can learn to shoot but there are particulars for female gun users that only another female can understand — frankly, our line of sight is different because we have to worry about boobs!

For me, shooting is mostly a sport now. But sometimes my work in higher education makes me consider the possibility of an incident at the school, a gunman on campus or another emergency. I can’t carry a gun at work, but if I see someone doing something stupid with a gun on TV I get angry — I yell at the screen! But mostly, learning to shoot has given me a new hobby and an outlet for negative energy. If you get a bad day at work, you go to the range and the stress is all gone. You have to focus so hard on shooting that you can’t worry about anything else.

Beyond Amendment Two

How to wield your constitutional right safely and legally.

Gun use and ownership require careful attention to federal and state regulations. Firearm laws vary widely by state, and the procedural intricacies of using or purchasing a weapon can be confusing, so it’s vital that you familiarize yourself with local policy on shooters’ permits, gun registration, and firearms transport. A visit to your state’s website will direct you to this information; find it by searching “firearm,” or locating a link to state police resources.

The National Rifle Association is a reliable source for firearm safety information and for finding training clinics in your area — it even offers “Women on Target” programs designed specifically for new female shooters. Check out the NRA web pages noted below, and don’t be shy — contact a reputable gun club or certified instructor about learning to shoot.

We’re serious about shooting, they’re hugely accepting. A greater variety of individuals than you would expect are into guns — I shoot with women who are nurses and women in their 70s. It’s one of those things I think everyone should try at least once.

People sometimes look at me like I’m crazy when I say I’m going to the range — but they’ve never used a gun. Having a firearm in my home and knowing how to use it is an added benefit of the classes I’ve taken. I’ve got the tool and the skills needed to protect myself if I ever need to, and I know how to handle guns safely (these days, if I see someone doing something stupid with a gun on TV I get angry — I yell at the screen!) But mostly, learning to shoot has given me a new hobby and an outlet for negative energy. If you have a bad day at work, you go to the range and the stress is all gone. You have to focus so hard on shooting that you can’t worry about anything else.

Photo by Scott Marks, Courtesy of JoAnn Bloom

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and I don’t keep one locked in my vehicle. Still, my firearms training has left me well informed about what to do if I need to protect myself or help those around me stay out of harm’s way.

Angela Godwin, 52
Sealer of Weights & Measures
Ventura Co., Calif.

In my family guns were always for the men. My uncles and grandfather were hunters, but I was never included in anything to do with firearms. As I got older, I occasionally shot a gun — usually a boyfriend’s, and never with any formal training. Last May, I decided it was time for me to learn the safe and proper way to use a firearm, and I signed up for a seven-gun shooting workshop at the Ojai Valley Gun Club. The clinic was set up in stations. At each, you could try out a different kind of gun, and I found that I really like using a pistol, and also a shotgun for trap shooting. There was a super instructor, a great guy who got me really comfortable handling and firing a gun. He covered firearm safety very thoroughly, and by the end of the clinic, I felt confident that I could be a responsible gun owner. I bought a Smith & Wesson .22-caliber pistol soon after I finished the class. It’s been a good beginner’s gun; ammunition is relatively inexpensive, so I can go to the range and practice as much as I want.

Since I purchased a gun, a few people have asked me why I would do such a thing — I have a 10-year-old daughter, and to some it’s appalling that I brought a weapon into our home. But on top of the fact that my gun is locked up when I’m not shooting, my daughter knows how to handle it. After she turned 10, I got her into junior gun club. The learning environment is very controlled and the kids learn firearm safety just as thoroughly as I did. Now not only can my daughter feel comfortable around my gun, but she’ll also know what to do if she comes across a weapon in someone else’s house. I figure a healthy respect for firearms is good for her to have even if she doesn’t stick with shooting.

Getting a pistol permit or buying a gun is a lot like adopting a child: There are crazy procedural differences in each state, and it can be a lengthy process. But I think it’s important for people to (legally) have guns. It’s one of those skills that speaks to some basic human element — if I had to, I could protect my child and myself. Or shoot myself dinner.

JoAnn Bloom

The Long and Short of It
How to tell a gun...from another gun

Handguns are compact firearms designed to be shot with one hand while the shooter braces the weapon with her other hand.

| Single-shot pistol: single cartridges are fed to the firing chamber, and the gun must be reloaded after each shot |
| Semi-automatic pistol: cartridges are fed to the firing chamber, one at a time, via a mechanism powered by the previous shot |
| Revolver: ammunition fed to the firing chamber via a rotating cylinder that operates with the trigger and hammer mechanism |

Long Guns are firearms with an extended barrel that are designed to be shot with the gun’s buttstock braced against the shooter’s shoulder.

| Rifle: single bullets are propelled through a rifled (grooved) barrel that creates spin on the round |
| Shotgun: a shell filled with small shot, or a single slug, is propelled through a smoothbore (unrifled) |

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