

# Recommendations for Developing State Firearm Surveys and Applying Findings

## Background

The [Joyce Foundation found](#) that since 2019 more than a dozen states have initiated formal offices focused on the prevention of firearm-related harms, many of which have adopted a public health approach. In addition, states with and without formal offices focused on firearms are working to improve firearms data collection that can inform prevention strategies specific to injuries, suicides, and violence in their jurisdictions.

While existing public health data systems like the Youth Risk Behavior Survey and the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System include certain questions about firearm use, access, and storage, many jurisdictions are eager to collect additional and nuanced information about firearms to translate into preventative action. In recent years, four states—Colorado, Missouri, New Jersey, and California—administered firearm-specific surveys to understand residents' perspectives on firearms and firearm-related harms, and opportunities to use this data to inform prevention strategies. Survey administrators from each state shared their process for developing, analyzing, disseminating, and promoting results of their firearm surveys (detailed in Appendix A). The themes and lessons learned from their surveys can help inform other jurisdictions that may consider firearm survey development.

## Survey Development and Dissemination Recommendations

### Getting Started

Consider the existing data gaps within your jurisdiction related to firearm attitudes, experiences, and behaviors, as well as perspectives of population groups that may be more challenging to identify within existing data. Use this to inform the survey purpose and audience.

Then, create a plan that lays out short and long-term goals from development to dissemination of the survey (e.g., what you are hoping to get out of the data, how you plan to use this data to develop or apply prevention strategies, etc.).

### Leveraging Partnerships

Develop strong networks with institutes of higher education to support survey administration, analysis, dissemination, and publication.

Involve the right partners (e.g., community organizations, public health professionals, firearm retailers, communities that experience the highest levels of violence exposure, etc.) and perspectives from the early planning stages. Continue to engage them through results dissemination and action.

### Asking the Right Questions

Don't recreate the wheel. Utilize existing firearm surveys as a template for developing questions. Consider including questions about prevention strategies, policies, and evidence-based practices to better understand your population's perspectives and attitudes toward potential interventions.

Expand qualitative data collection through interviews or focus groups to better identify the lived experiences of hard-to-reach populations. Additionally, consider each of the unique audiences that will engage with the survey and the most effective strategies to increase diverse participant response (e.g., pilot survey questions, offer multiple language options, etc.).

### Focusing on Language that Resonates

Ensure you have built community trust, and involve community voices that reflect the populations most impacted by or experienced with firearms. Frame the survey in a way that resonates with the general public, ensuring they can agree with the purpose and intentions (e.g., “The survey is intended to promote the health and wellbeing of the community.”).

Use plain language that reflects firearm owners’ experiences when developing questions. For example, ask owners if firearms are “locked in a *specific place*” instead of general questions about safe storage. Learn more about firearm language that resonates best in [“Talking About ‘Firearm Injury’ and ‘Gun Violence’: Words Matter”](#), published in the *American Journal of Public Health*.

Finally, test survey language with people who have diverse perspectives prior to survey administration (e.g., firearm owners, firearm harm prevention advocacy groups, etc.).

### Data to Action: Promoting Results and Applying Findings

Make sure community voices are heard prior to releasing the data. Then, share results with the community, and listen to and consider feedback. Also, promote results to leadership and key collaborators to increase awareness and knowledge of firearm-related issues and public perceptions about effective prevention strategies. (e.g., share results with public health leadership, governors’ offices, and policymakers to inform legislative considerations).

Be creative in how you share your data to reach a broad audience. For example, use social media platforms for short digestible content, develop data dashboards, partner with marketing firms to promote findings, etc.

Consider other cross-sector or community partners that may have interest in the survey results (i.e., adverse childhood experience prevention experts working to reduce exposure to community violence, suicide prevention partners focused on reducing access to lethal means, etc.).

### Common Survey Challenges

It is likely that you will run into challenges throughout the firearm survey process. Common survey challenges include:

- Lack of alignment across partners with differing priorities for survey content, and how that data will be used to inform policymakers, community members, and the general public.
- Lack of sufficient budget for the staff time and resources it takes to engage partners authentically, and develop, analyze, and disseminate a survey and its findings from beginning to end.
- Reaching sufficient respondents from specific communities to obtain data representative of one’s jurisdiction, specifically including rural communities and populations directly impacted or closest to firearm-related harms.
- Some residents choose not to respond to a firearm survey due to the topic’s politicized nature. Sometimes, there is also public backlash.

*This brief is intended to summarize common recommendations and challenges in various state survey experiences and may not directly reflect one state’s entire experience or the nuances of each survey.*

## Appendix A

### State Profiles

This section reflects a summary of each state, and the content and methods they used for their firearm survey.

**Table 1: Colorado Firearm Survey Profile**

<b>Colorado</b>	
Survey Purpose	To advance understanding of firearm-related topics, collect perspectives from populations that represent Colorado's diversity, inform responsive education and prevention of firearm harms, and monitor trends over time.
Partners Involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• University of Colorado School of Medicine Firearm Injury Prevention Initiative.</li> <li>• Injury &amp; Violence Prevention Center in the Colorado School of Public Health.</li> <li>• Ipsos (market research consulting firm).</li> <li>• Policy experts.</li> <li>• Medical/clinical professionals.</li> <li>• Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment's Office of Gun Violence Prevention and Office of Suicide Prevention.</li> <li>• Individuals with lived experiences from communities most affected by firearm harms.</li> </ul>
Survey Topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demographics.</li> <li>• Firearms culture, access, and safety behaviors, including in- and out-of-home secure storage, in-home safety checks, and training.</li> <li>• Concerns about firearm-related harms.</li> <li>• Lived experience with firearm-related harms.</li> <li>• Awareness and opinions on prevention practices and policies, including questions specific to secure storage laws, background checks, emergency risk protection orders, and creating protective environments.</li> </ul>
Survey Audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adults 18+ living in Colorado.</li> <li>• Not limited to firearm owners; wanted broad representation of Colorado adults' perspectives.</li> </ul>
Methodology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online survey administered in both English and Spanish.</li> <li>• 1,520 total respondents (blend of probability and non-probability sample).</li> <li>• Weighted to population demographics of Colorado.</li> </ul>
Cost	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approximately \$80k for a contract with Ipsos to administer the survey.</li> <li>• Staff time included subject matter experts to develop the survey, analyst time for analysis, quality assurance, and report development.</li> <li>• Around \$150-200k for individuals to promote dissemination activities.</li> </ul>
Funding Source	Contract with the state health department's Office of Gun Violence Prevention.
Survey Frequency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First administration was in 2023.</li> </ul>

<b>Colorado</b>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Will repeat the full Colorado Firearm Injury Prevention Survey bi-annually in odd years.</li> <li>• Will include specialty surveys to understand more from groups most affected by harms or groups focused on prevention of harms, administered in even years (e.g., a survey will be administered to public safety officers in Colorado in 2025).</li> </ul>
Learn More	<a href="#">Colorado Firearm Injury Prevention Survey</a>

**Table 2: Missouri Firearm Survey Profile**

<b>Missouri</b>	
Survey Purpose	“To gain insight into the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors related to firearms among Missourians, with the goal of informing the development and implementation of effective firearm injury prevention policies and practices.”
Partners Involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Missouri Foundation for Health.</li> <li>• Ipsos.</li> <li>• University of Michigan.</li> </ul>
Survey Topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Varies over time.</li> <li>• Demographics.</li> <li>• Firearms culture, access, and safety behaviors, including secure storage and training.</li> <li>• Awareness and perceptions of prevention practices and policies, including questions specific to suicide prevention, background checks, training, and carrying firearms in public.</li> <li>• Experience with and perceptions of mental health and physical safety.</li> </ul>
Survey Audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adults 18+ living in Missouri.</li> <li>• Not limited to firearm owners.</li> </ul>
Methodology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Online and paper survey administered in English.</li> <li>• 1,050 respondents.</li> <li>• Oversampling of people living in rural areas and firearm owners.</li> <li>• Weighted to population demographics of Missouri.</li> </ul>
Cost	Approximately \$150k for data collection, analysis, and dissemination.
Funding Source	Private foundation with endowment.
Survey Frequency	No regular survey cadence.
Learn More	<a href="#">Understanding Firearm Beliefs and Practices Among Missourians: Missouri Firearms Survey Reports</a>

**Table 3: New Jersey Firearm Survey Profile**

<b>New Jersey</b>	
Survey Purpose	To gain insight about firearm safety, storage, and policies among New Jersey adults.
Partners Involved	Eagleton Center for Public Interest Polling.
Survey Topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demographics.</li> <li>• Firearm possession and safety practices, including questions about storing and carrying firearms and talking with a healthcare professional about their firearm.</li> <li>• Opinions about the effectiveness of certain policies to prevent mass violence.</li> </ul>
Survey Audience	Adults 18+ living in New Jersey.
Methodology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Telephone using live interviewers, approximately six questions added to an existing behavior survey.</li> <li>• 1,018 respondents.</li> <li>• Weighted to population demographics of New Jersey.</li> </ul>
Cost	Approximately \$20k.
Funding Source	Direct funding from state legislature.
Survey Frequency	One-time.
Learn More	<a href="#">2022 Report on Firearms in New Jersey</a>

**Table 4: California Firearm Survey Profile**

<b>California</b>	
Survey Purpose	The California Safety and Wellbeing Survey provides detailed data on a broad range of topics related to firearm ownership and exposure to violence and its consequences for California’s large and diverse population. It helps to tailor resources and prevention strategies to communities experiencing the greatest burden of violence-related harms with the goal of improving public health and safety outcomes across the state.
Partners Involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• California Firearm Violence Research Center.</li> <li>• UC Davis Violence Prevention Research Program.</li> <li>• Ipsos.</li> </ul>
Survey Topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Firearm ownership, access, and storage practices.</li> <li>• Exposure to and experiences of violence and violence-related harms.</li> <li>• Opinions on firearm policy and violence prevention strategies.</li> <li>• Emerging concerns relevant to public health and safety, including COVID-19, encounters with law enforcement, and discrimination.</li> <li>• Health status, health conditions, and mental health.</li> </ul>

<b>California</b>	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sociodemographic factors.</li></ul>
Survey Audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Adults 18+ living in California.</li><li>• 13 to 17-year-old children of adult respondents living in California.</li><li>• Not limited to firearm owners.</li></ul>
Methodology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Online survey administered in both English and Spanish.</li><li>• 2,500-3,200 respondents drawn from the Ipsos KnowledgePanel.</li><li>• Weighted to population demographics of California.</li></ul>
Cost	Approximately \$175-\$200k not including staff time.
Funding Source	Direct funding from state legislature.
Survey Frequency	Approximately every two to three years.
Learn More	<a href="#">California Safety and Wellbeing Survey</a>