High School Students' Attitudes about Firearms Policies

Katherine A. Vittes,[1] Susan B. Sorenson,[1] and Dennis Gilbert[2]

[1] School of Public Health, University of California, Los Angeles

[2] Department of Sociology, Hamilton College

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Journal of Adolescent Health, 2003; 6:471-478.
For the published version of the paper, please visit the journal's webpage.

Abstract

Purpose

To examine high school students' attitudes about firearm policies and to compare their attitudes with those of adults.

Methods

The Hamilton Youth and Guns Poll is the first national survey of high school students about their attitudes concerning firearm policies. Questions were asked of 1,005 sophomores, juniors, and seniors about their actual (i.e., direct) exposure (e.g., presence of a gun in the home) and about their social (i.e., indirect) exposure (e.g., whether the student could get a gun) to firearms and related violence. Population weights were applied and multivariate logistic regression was used to examine the relationship between demographic and exposure variables and opinions about firearm policies.

Results

Most high school students supported more restrictive firearm policies. Opinions varied little by demographic variables with the exception of gender: Females were significantly more supportive of most firearm policies. Actual exposure was a more consistent predictor than social exposure. Students living in a home with a gun, particularly a handgun, were less likely to support most restrictive gun policies.

Conclusions

Most high school students in the United States favor stringent policies governing firearms. Adolescents' attitudes about firearm policies parallel those of adults.

Keywords: Attitudes, firearms, guns, gender differences, adolescents

The death rate owing to firearms is higher in the United States than in any other industrialized nation.(1) The difference is especially pronounced among adolescents and young adults for whom, in the U.S., gunshot wounds rank second as a cause of death.(2) Many U.S. teenagers have had firsthand experience with firearms: Nearly one-quarter of urban 10th and 11th grade students have friends who have been victimized with a gun, and 8% have themselves received gun-related threats.(3) Moreover, U.S. teenagers have relatively easy access to firearms. Although federal law prohibits sales of rifles and shotguns to persons under 18-years old and sales of handguns to people under age 21-years, those under these ages are more likely than people who are 21-years or older to use a gun to kill themselves or someone else.(4) In addition, one-half of adolescents in a national survey reported that they could get a gun if they wanted one(5) and 6.4% have carried a gun in the past 30 days.(6) The home is a primary source of potential access: 19.6%(7) to 44.0%(8) of teenagers report that they live in homes that contain a firearm.

Given their exposure to firearms and their risk of fatal gunshot wounds, surprisingly little is known about adolescents' attitudes toward firearm policies. What is known comes from a few, non-representative samples of local high school students. One study of low income, inner-city high school students found that most believe it is too easy to obtain a gun and there should be more restrictive laws regarding access and ownership of firearms.(9) Frequency data indicate that adolescents' attitudes about firearms policies vary substantially by gender: Females are more likely than males to favor restrictive policies.(8) A study of non-urban students found that Whites and boys, compared with non-Whites and girls, were more likely to express pro-gun sentiments.(10) Although young people from urban areas are at greater risk of firearm

homicide than those from non-metropolitan areas,(11) we do not know whether locale (e.g., rural versus urban, East versus Midwest) is associated with their attitudes about firearm policies. We also do not know whether there is an association between adolescents' exposure to firearms and related violence and their opinions about firearm policies.

Given that teenagers are more often the perpetrators and the victims of firearm shootings and that they comprise the next generation of policy makers and voters, their opinions regarding firearm policy are important. We will examine how these attitudes vary by sociodemographic characteristics, by actual and social exposures to guns and gun policies, and by fear of gun violence.

Methods

Conceptual model

The conceptual model underlying these analyses is diagrammed in Figure 1. Based on previous adult and smaller adolescent surveys, we predicted that female, minority, and urban teenagers would be more supportive of restrictive gun policies than males, Whites, and non-urban teens. We predicted that actual exposure would be a stronger predictor (than either sociodemographic characteristics or social exposure) of support for restrictive gun policies. We also predicted that fear would be positively associated with support for restrictive gun policies.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Sample and data collection

The Hamilton Youth and Guns Poll measured attitudes of high school students toward gun policies. A pilot survey was conducted with 300 high school students. Based on survey responses, the questionnaire was amended and administered via telephone to a sample of 1,005 adolescents across the United States. The research was approved by the Hamilton College Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. Analysis reported herein met Human Subjects Protection exemption criteria as determined by the UCLA Office for the Protection of Human Subjects.

A national sample of high school students was drawn from a list supplied by Survey Sampling Inc., a private sampling firm in Westport, Connecticut. The list was compiled using information from self-report questionnaires, parent surveys, and education-related businesses such as school photographers. The demographics of the sample suggest that it was a representative national sample, and post hoc weighting did not substantially change the results.

By design, the sample was limited to high school students. It, therefore, does not include youth who were not enrolled in school (e.g., teenagers who have dropped out of school, institutionalized youth, and those with home-schooling). There is some evidence that high school dropouts are more likely to engage in multiple risk behaviors including weapon carrying.(12) The attitudes of such youth are not represented in this research. Albeit the most direct way to assess opinion, these data share the limitations inherent in self-report data.

Measures

Respondents were asked about their sociodemographic characteristics, exposure to firearms and related issues, perceptions about personal and school safety, and opinions about various firearm policies.

The six sociodemographic predictors used in the analyses were gender, ethnicity, political party, family income, locale, and region of the U.S. Political party affiliation had three response options: "Republican," "Democrat," and "no party affiliation." "Neither" and "not sure" were recorded when volunteered by students. Respondents were classified into regions of the U.S. (i.e., East, South, Midwest, and West) on the basis of their telephone area codes.

Variables measuring exposure to firearms were divided into two categories, each containing four questions. The first category ascertained respondents' actual (i.e., direct) exposure to firearms and firearm violence, namely, whether they: lived in a home with a gun, knew someone who carried a gun in or on the way to school, knew of someone who was shot in their neighborhood, or had someone close to them (e.g., a friend or family member) ever been shot. The second category measured social (i.e., indirect) exposure to firearms and firearm-related issues, namely, whether respondents: were exposed to gun control issues in the media, had talked about gun control with others, lived with or were themselves a member of the National Rifle Association (NRA), and believed they could get a gun in their neighborhood.

Fearfulness was measured with three school-related questions, specifically, whether respondents: thought their school was safe, felt safe while in or on the way to school, and knew someone at school who had been threatened or shot with a gun.

Students were asked about their opinions about various firearm policies. Response options to most policy questions were “approve” and “disapprove.” “Not sure,” although not offered as a response category, was recorded when volunteered. Few students (1.6%-2.4%) said “not sure” to a firearm policy question. To make for a more conservative test, when binary variables were created, all “not sure” responses were combined with “disapprove.” Two attitude questions used Likert-type scales. The question order, wording, and answer categories for the Hamilton Youth and Guns survey are available from the authors.

Data analysis

Cross-tabulations and Chi-square tests were used to examine the bivariate relationships between support for firearm policies and sociodemographic, exposure, and fear variables. Population weights for year in school, parents’ education, ethnicity, and region were applied. The data were not weighted for gender because the slightly higher percentage of females than males in the sample mirrors that of high school students in the general population.

Multivariate logistic regressions were conducted on each of the 12 response variables (i.e., firearm policy questions). All variables were dummy-coded. Because there were few Asians in the sample, they were grouped with the “other/mixed” ethnicity category. Similarly, cities with populations of 100k-500k were combined with those with greater than 500k. The exposure and fear predictors and all response variables were dichotomous.

Following from the conceptual model used to guide the analyses (Figure 1) predictors were added sequentially in groups. Sociodemographic variables were added

first, followed by actual exposure, social exposure, and fearfulness. The statistical significance of adding each set was tested and the most parsimonious model was identified for each firearm policy.

Results

The sample was almost evenly divided between males and females (48.2% vs. 51.8%). Population weights resulted in a sample in which 72.2% was white, 11.0% was black, 8.5% was Hispanic, 3.5% was Asian, and 4.3% described their race/ethnicity as "other/mixed," 0.5% did not respond to the race/ethnicity question. Family income was reported as "above $50,000" by 33.5%, "about $50,000" by 33.8%, and "below $50,000" by 21.7%; 10.1% responded "not sure" to the family income question.

The respondents were equally distributed across the three grades (34.1% sophomore, 33.5% junior, 32.4% senior). Most (90.1%) attended public school. Most (73.0%) lived with two parents, whereas 15.9% lived with one parent and 11.1% were in other living arrangements. A minority of the students identified with a political party: 23.9% said they were Democrats, 19.0% said they were Republicans, 49.5% said they were neither, and 7.7% responded "not sure."

Exposure to firearms

Actual exposure. A substantial proportion of students had direct experience with firearms. Just under half (46.8%) reported living in a home with a gun; slightly over half of students living with a gun (52.5%) had a handgun at home (i.e., in addition to or instead of a long gun). About one-fifth (18.3%) of the students knew someone who had carried a gun on the way to or from or in school. It was not uncommon for teenagers to have personal experience with shootings. One-quarter (26.6%) reported that someone

had been killed or seriously injured by a gunshot in their neighborhood; the majority (57.2%) of these deaths occurred within the past year. One-quarter (25.5%) reported that a friend, family member, or they themselves had been shot at with a gun.

Social exposure. Even students who had not been directly exposed to firearm violence were familiar with firearms and the issues related to them. One of every eight students (12.6%) lived with, or were themselves, a member of the National Rifle Association (NRA). A substantial minority (44.5%) reported that it would be relatively easy for someone their age living in their neighborhood to obtain a handgun.

Most students had been exposed to gun policy issues. The majority reported having seen gun control issues raised in the media (90.6%) or had discussed gun control with friends, at home, or in a class within the past year (80.9%).

Fear

Although nearly one-third (31.1%) of the high school students reported knowing someone who had been threatened or shot at with a gun in school, most students considered their schools to be safe and felt safe on the way to and from, as well as while at school (93.1% and 83.3%, respectively).

Opinions about firearms policies

Most high school students support more restrictive gun policies (Table 1). Nearly two-thirds (64.6%) support enactment of stricter laws covering the sale of firearms; about one-fourth (28.6%) are content with current laws, and only 5.2% think laws should be less strict. Most (82.8%) respondents believe that the government should do everything it could to keep handguns away from criminals, even if that would make it more difficult for law abiding citizens to obtain them. A substantial majority believe that handguns

should be licensed, that all handguns should be registered, that people should be required to pass a safety course before buying a gun, and that a criminal background check should be required for all handgun sales, including private sales and those at gun shows (89.7%, 95.5%, 88.6%, and 91.3%, respectively). Two gun policies garner far less support: Nearly two-thirds (59.9%) disapprove of banning civilian ownership of handguns and most (87.4%) disapprove of banning all handgun possession (i.e., also prohibiting possession by law enforcement officers). The majority (80.6%) of students believe that the United States Constitution guarantees individual citizens the right to own firearms, yet over half (55.3%) believe that laws regulating gun sales and use are not in violation of a person's constitutional rights.

Data from national surveys measuring adults' attitudes about firearm policies (Table 1), indicate that, in general, adolescents are more likely than adults to support more restrictive firearm policies. Notable exceptions are raising the legal purchase age of a handgun and banning all civilian possession of handguns.

Insert Table 1 about here

Bivariate analyses

Cross-tabulations and Chi-square statistics were used to help identify correlates of attitudes about firearm policies. (Tabled data are available from the authors.) Focus herein is on the multivariate analyses because they simultaneously take multiple variables into consideration.

Multivariate models

Multivariate logistic regressions were conducted to predict attitudes about firearm policies. As shown in Table 2, ten of the twelve most parsimonious models included a combination of demographic variables and direct exposure to firearms. Five regression models included the additional construct of social exposure to firearms; only two included fear variables.

Attitudes about firearm policies varied little by sociodemographic variables with one notable exception: Even after taking other variables into account, adolescent girls were substantially more likely than boys to support restrictive firearm policies. With few exceptions, after controlling for other variables, ethnicity was not a consistent predictor of opinion about gun policies. Self-identified Democrats were more likely than others to support five of the twelve policies. Family income and the population size of where the respondent resided generally were unrelated to opinions about firearms policies. The most consistent geographic finding was a relatively limited one: respondents from the South were marginally less likely than those residing in the East to support four of the twelve policies.

When actual exposure to firearms improved the fit of the model (as it did for 10 of the 12 models), having a handgun in the home was the most consistent exposure predictor. Students who resided in homes with a handgun were significantly less likely to support seven of the ten policies. A similar pattern can be observed with long guns: when a rifle or shotgun was in the home, respondents were less likely to support five of the ten policies. Compared to those residing in a home with a long gun, the AOR's were smaller for those residing in a home with a handgun, which indicates that these may be two distinct groups when it comes to opinions about firearm policies.

When social exposure improved the fit of the model (as it did for 5 models), NRA membership was the most consistent social exposure predictor. Students who lived in a home with a NRA member or who themselves were NRA members were less likely to support three of the five policies.

Fear improved the fit of the model in only two of the regressions. In both cases, fear for one's own safety either in or to-from school was the only statistically significant predictor among the fear variables.

Insert Table 2 about here

Discussion

The great majority of U.S. high school students, including those with a gun in their homes, favor more restrictive firearm policies. Whether a general approach to firearms (e.g., laws about firearm sales should be stricter) or a specific firearm policy (e.g., registering a handgun at the time of purchase), 64.4% to 95.5% of U.S. high school students favor it. They believe that the Second Amendment, in agreement with the U.S. Department of Justice's recently adopted interpretation of the Constitution, extends an individual right of gun ownership. Nonetheless, nearly two-thirds (63.7%) of high school students believe that regulating the sale of guns does not violate the Constitution. Most adolescents want handguns to be kept away from criminals even if it makes it harder for law-abiding civilians to obtain guns. Consistent with this thought, most high school students want stricter policies regarding gun sales in general as well as stricter specific sales-related policies (e.g., requiring handgun purchasers to obtain a license). They want

criminal liability to be assessed against adults whose gun storage practices allow access by a child, which currently is law in only 20 states.(13, 14) The only policy that received less support was a ban on handguns, whether a ban for civilians only or for all persons.

Two variables were consistent predictors of students' attitudes about firearm policies. Gender was the sole consistent demographic predictor. Even after controlling for other variables, females remained significantly more likely to support restrictive gun policies. Living in a home with a gun, particularly a handgun, was the sole consistent exposure predictor: High school students in a home with a gun were less supportive of restrictive policies than those in a home without a gun. With a few exceptions social exposure to guns and personal fear were unrelated to opinions about firearm policies.

According to survey data on adults' attitudes about firearm policies, like high school students, adult females exhibit the strongest consistent support for more restrictive firearm policies.(15, 16) Also similar to high school students, adult gun owners are significantly less likely to support most restrictive firearm policies.(15-18) After controlling for gender, adults' attitudes regarding firearm policies vary little by region of the country, ethnicity, and income.(15, 16) Locale (i.e., degree of urbanization) predicts adults' but not adolescents' attitudes regarding firearm policies. Adults living in large cities and suburbs are more supportive and those in rural areas are less supportive of restrictive firearm policies compared with adults living in small cities, and towns.(15) Adults who own or carry a gun consistently express less support for restrictive firearm policies.(15, 17, 18) Victims of robberies and assaults are slightly more likely to favor stricter gun laws than those who haven't been exposed to gun violence.(15) Like high school students, most American adults believe that an individual has the right to own a

gun.(15, 16) Although they support most restrictive gun legislation, a majority believe that the Second Amendment guarantees the right to own a gun and does not support banning handguns.(19, 20)

There is an abundant literature examining the association of children's attitudes to those of their parents.(21-25) Adults and their children often practice similar health behaviors and have similar attitudes.(26-30) Over half (51.5%) of a national sample of 1,000 teenagers thinks that "(v)iolent teens learn their behavior from their parents."(31) Parents' voting behavior is more influential than the political attitudes of peers and teachers on the political socialization of their children;(32) and conservative fathers tend to have conservative sons and conservative mothers tend to have conservative daughters.(33) Parents have a particularly significant role in initial political party identification; their role diminishes as their children reach and continue through adulthood.(25, 34) In the absence of parent-offspring data, this paper uses two large, national samples to examine the comparability of adult and adolescent attitudes about gun policies. The data suggest that adolescents and adults have similar attitudes about gun policies.

Adults' attitudes about gun policies have been stable over the last several decades, with the exception a period in the late 1980's to the early 1990's, when they rose moderately.(16) These data support the hypothesis that attitudes about guns and gun policies are established early in life.(16, 35) Consistent with the response to past highly publicized gun violence incidents,(36) although public awareness of the problem of youth gun violence increased after the Columbine Colorado school shootings, attitudes about firearm policies remained stable.(15, 16)

Conclusions

Current firearm policies do not reflect the sentiment of U.S. teenagers. How high school students will influence firearm policy as they grow into adulthood remains to be seen. If these data are to be believed and if these ideas are taken to the polls, one could anticipate more restrictive gun policies in the future. If the status quo remains, however, there will continue to be a gap between public sentiment and law.

Acknowledgements

The Hamilton College Youth and Guns Poll was funded by the Arthur Levitt, Jr. Public Affairs Center at Hamilton College. The Poll was designed by Dennis Gilbert and his students, Scott Taylor, Stacie Fitch, Tracy Landers, Luciana Maxim, Jessica McGiff, and Alysia Mihalakos, at Hamilton College. It was administered by Zogby International, a national polling firm headquartered in Utica, New York. The Hamilton researchers are grateful for comments received from Judy Bonderman, Tracy Merrill, Stephen Teret, Susan Sorenson, and David Hemenway.

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Figure 1. Conceptual model of contributors to attitudes about firearm policy

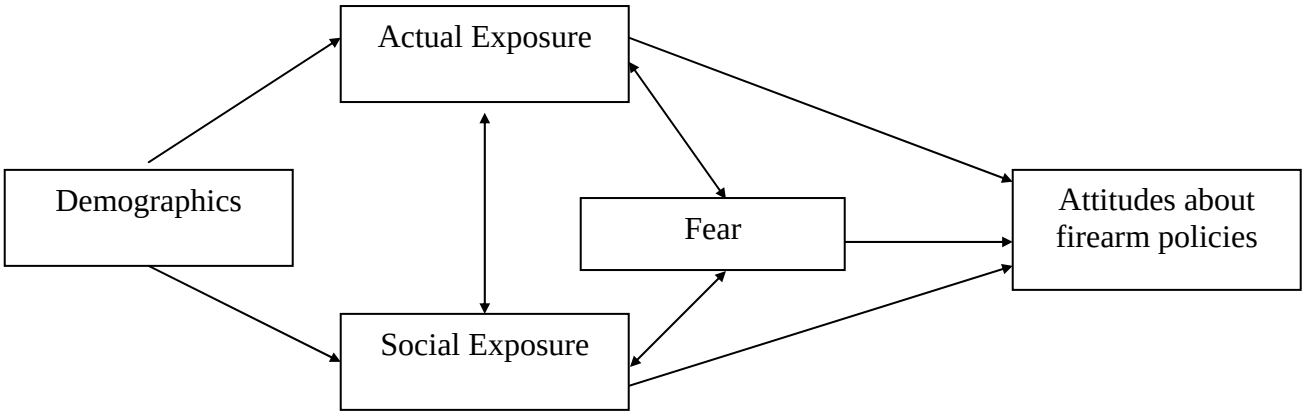

Table 1. Adolescent versus adult support for firearm policies

	Percentage	
Firearm policy questions	Adolescent	Adult[1]
Stricter gun laws	64.6	
Waiting period	88.5	
Mandatory registration	95.5	76.9
Background check for all sales	92.1	78.6[2]
License/police permit to purchase	89.7	79.0[3]
Must be 21-years old to purchase a handgun	64.4	79.9[2]
Ban on civilian handgun possession	37.6	49.1
Total ban on handgun possession	11.1	11.0
Trigger lock	85.8	
Gun-safety training to purchase	88.6	87.9
Child access prevention laws	74.7	76.2[2]
Make guns more difficult to get	82.8	69.8
Right to bear arms	80.6	
Stricter laws not in violation of Constitution	63.7	

[1] Results are from 2001 National Gun Policy Survey of the National Opinion Research Center except as marked.
[2] Results are from 1999 National Gun Policy Survey of the National Opinion Research Center.
[3] Results are from the 2000 General Social Survey of the National Opinion Research Center.

Table 2. Predicted odds ratios of adolescents' attitudes about gun policies

		Require safety class before allowing handgun purchase	All guns sold in U.S. must be sold with trigger lock	Background check on all purchasers	Mandatory registration of all handguns at time of purchase	Raise handgun purchase age (18 to 21 yrs.)	Require license to purchase handgun	Ban all handguns (even for police and other authorized persons)	Adults criminally responsible if gun not stored properly and used by child	Keep handguns away from criminals even if harder for civilians to obtain	Mandate 5-day waiting period	Ban all handguns except by police and other authorized persons	Gun laws covering sales should be stricter than they are currently
Demographics													
Gender vs. Male													
	Female	3.51***	2.20**	2.06*	4.64***	2.43***	2.79***	0.81	1.77**	2.46***	0.92	1.96***	3.09***
Ethnicity vs. White													
	Black	1.41	1.57	1.23	0.50	1.48	0.37*	1.78	1.02	1.24	0.73	1.14	0.89
	Hispanic	1.00	3.34*	2.20	11.49*	1.76	0.77	1.28	1.16	1.05	0.55	1.06	1.09
	Other	1.36	0.48*	0.89	0.80	1.45	0.47	1.98	0.53*	2.16	0.84	1.20	0.83
Political party vs. Republican													
	Democrat	1.53	1.81*	1.46	3.98*	1.00	1.94	1.88	0.87	2.21*	2.60**	1.06	2.37**
	None	1.12	1.51	0.89	0.94	0.96	1.20	1.48	0.64*	1.30	1.30	1.10	1.39
Family income vs. Below $50,000/year													
	About $50,000/year	1.74	1.29	1.28	3.77*	0.79	1.08	0.94	1.50	0.95	1.07	1.11	1.59
	Above $50,000/year	1.25	1.28	1.19	2.54*	0.85	1.28	0.67	1.37	1.24	1.89	0.89	1.65*
Locale vs. Rural													
	Suburb	0.81	0.63	1.83	0.77	1.19	0.91	0.68	0.92	0.88	0.87	0.85	0.72
	Town (pop. <100k)	0.58	0.63	0.74	0.69	1.45	0.91	0.71	1.07	0.55*	1.25	0.89	0.91
	City	1.11	0.77	1.48	1.25	1.27	1.17	1.22	1.00	0.92	0.82	0.90	1.20
Region vs. East													
	South	0.48*	1.11	0.70	0.83	0.99	0.66	0.83	0.90	0.43*	1.84	0.62*	0.59*
	Midwest	0.91	0.93	0.63	0.89	0.77	0.83	0.60	0.87	0.65	2.06*	0.72	0.52*
	West	0.63	1.05	0.61	0.51	0.70	0.72	0.80	0.66	0.37*	1.15	0.74	0.44*
Exposures													
Actual													
	Shot person close to R	-	1.11	0.74	0.77	0.95	1.41		1.33	1.00	0.64	1.35	0.97
	Shot in neighborhood	-	0.89	1.08	1.16	0.92	0.82	-	0.84	0.98	2.05*	0.98	0.98
	Carry gun in school	-	1.23	0.45*	1.09	0.84	0.92	-	0.97	0.75	1.55	0.81	1.20
	Long gun in home	-	0.42**	1.07	1.11	0.79	0.26***	-	0.63*	0.81	1.00	0.54**	0.38***
	Handgun in home	-	0.28***	0.81	0.44	0.53**	0.19***	-	0.54**	0.40***	0.51	0.38***	0.26***
Social													
	Could get handgun	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.51	1.12	1.04	1.12	-	0.87
	NRA member	-	-	-	-	-	-	2.37*	1.12	0.37**	0.58	-	0.40**
	Talk gun control	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.63	0.69	1.18	0.57	-	2.00**
	Gun control in media	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.62	0.65	0.72	4.02***	-	0.81
Fear													
	Threatened	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.10	1.08
	Thinks school safe	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	1.00	1.29
	Fear for safety	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2.08**	3.02**
	-2 log likelihood	657.18	738.30	573.71	311.97	1208.50	580.69	640.37	1075.64	796.47	311.97	1223.53	1046.60

p<.05; **p<.01; ***p<.001
Note: "Not sure" was included as a category for family income and locale. Adjusted odds ratios are not interpretable, therefore, not shown.