

# **Historical prevalence of slavery predicts contemporary American gun ownership**

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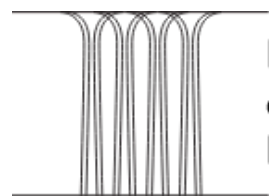
Erin Westgate



Samantha  
Heintzelman



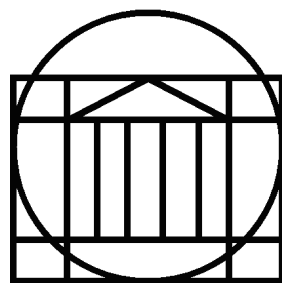
Jessica Mazen



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New Jersey Gun Violence Research Center



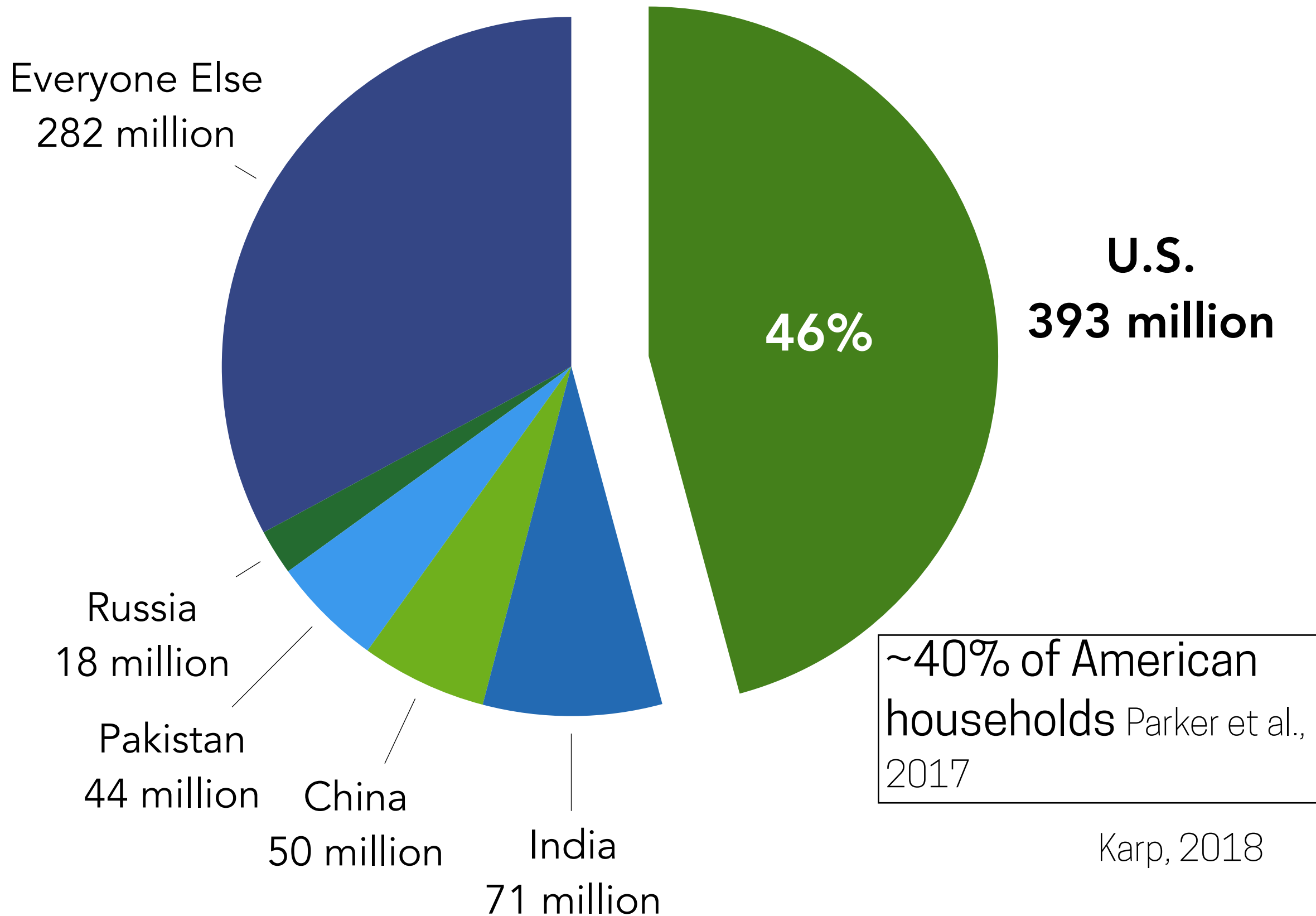
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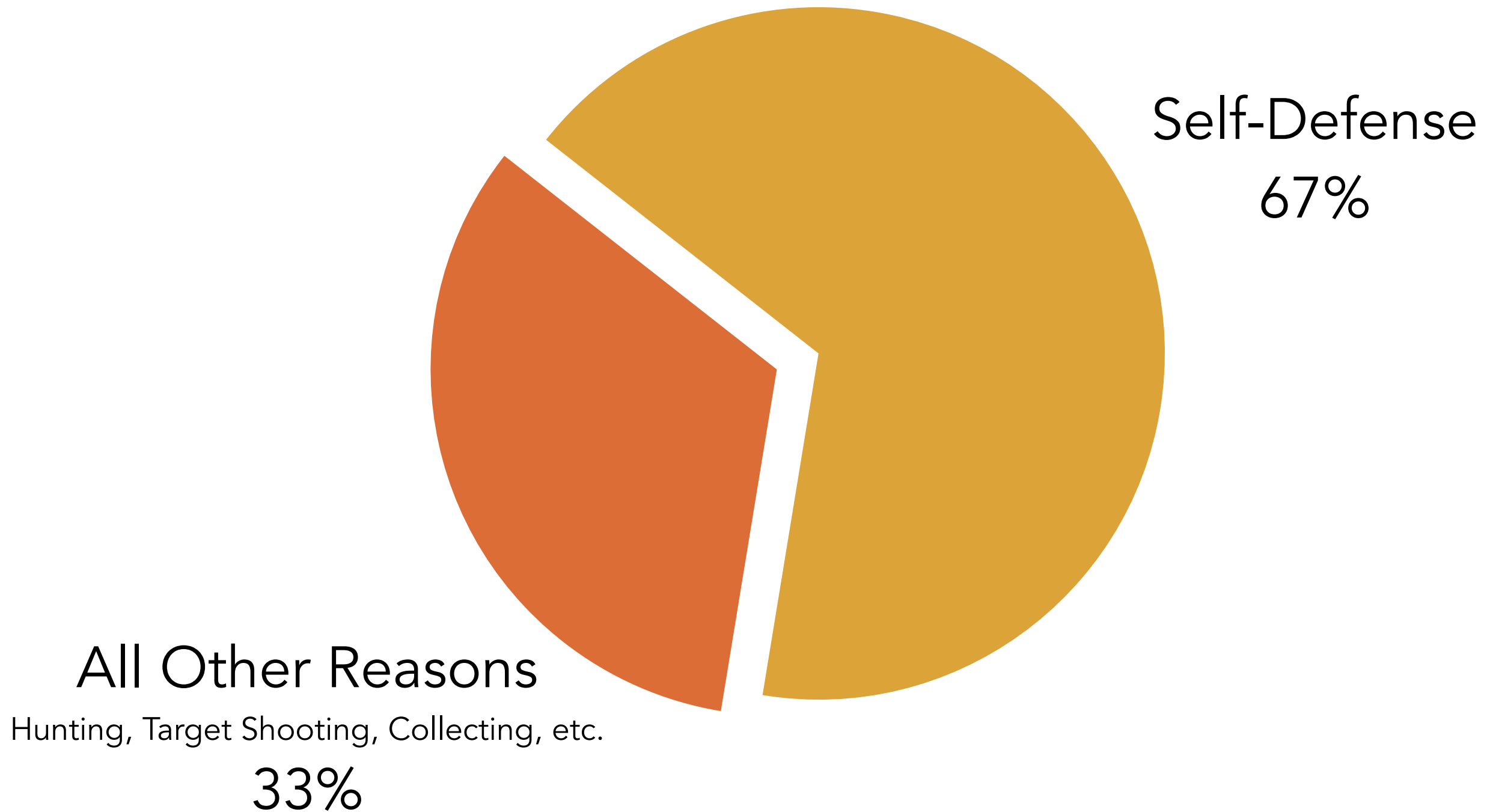
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# Civilian-Owned Guns Worldwide



# Why Own a Gun?



# Why Own a Gun?



Cooke, 2004; Kohn, 2004 Puddifoot & Cooke, 2002; Santaella-Tenorio et al., 2016; Syropoulos et al., 2020

# Guns are Dangerous

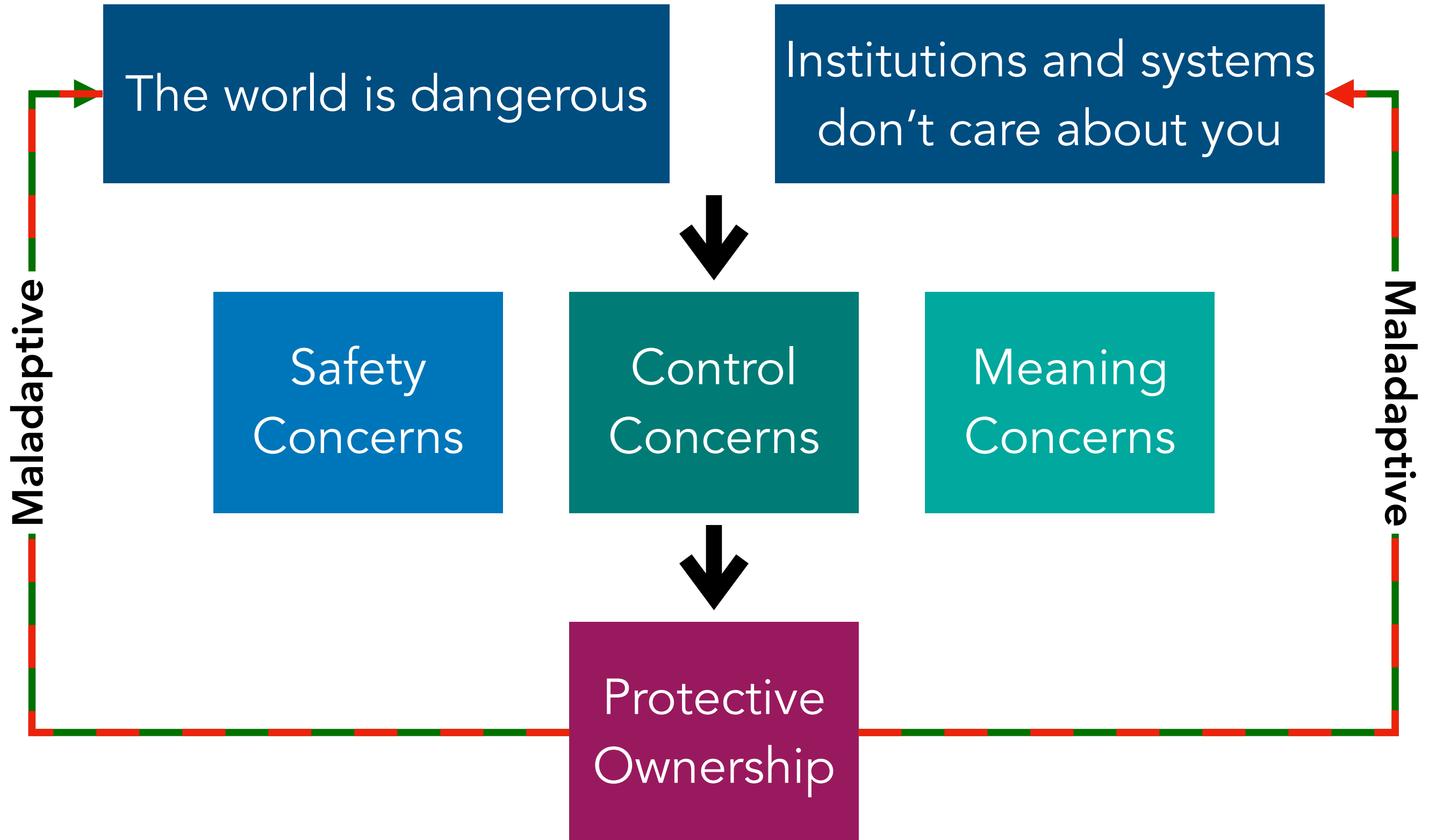
- A gun in the house **doubles** the likelihood that a household member will be murdered violently, and **triples** the likelihood of death by suicide. Anglemeyer et al., 2014

# Are Guns Protective?

- Guns are used in self-defense in **fewer than 1%** of reported crimes Hemenway & Solnick, 2015; Planty & Truman, 2013
- In 'active shooter' situations, police recommend that people carrying firearms stay holstered Blair, Nichols, Burns, & Curnutt, 2013

“Since a ‘sense of security’ is inherently a **psychological** trait, it does no good to argue that the sense of security afforded by owning a gun is ‘just an illusion.’” Wright, 1995, p. 65





Buttrick, 2020;  
see also Leander et al., 2019;  
Warner & Ratcliff, 2021

An Archival Study:

# The Historical Legacy of Redemption

# American Firearm History

- Firearm ownership was common in post-Revolutionary America, but guns were widely viewed as tools for pest control and hunting Burbick, 2006; Lindgren, 2002

## The Civil War

- The demobilization after the Civil War leaves the country as arguably the most heavily-armed in the world Haag, 2016
- In 1880s Alabama, the value of guns > the value of all mechanical tools & farm machinery The Nation, 1883

# “Redemption” in the Long Run

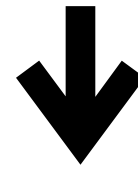
Patterns of American slavery are associated with present day...

- **Structures:** Greater inequality, greater segregation, lower rates of education, greater crime, lower income, and lower labor productivity Bertocchi & Dimico, 2014; Gouda & Rigterink, 2017; Mitchener & McLean, 2003; Nunn, 2008; O’Connell, 2012
- **Culture:** Greater conservatism & greater anti-Black racism (implicitly & explicitly) among Whites Acharya, Blackwell, & Sen, 2016; Payne, Vuletich, & Brown-Iannuzzi, 2019

“For two years, you have borne with patience and fortitude **a great wrong**. Through fraud and violence, the government of your choice has been overthrown and its power usurped...To these calamities, may be added **a corrupt and vicious legislature, ...a metropolitan police paid by the city, under the control of the usurper, quartered upon you to overawe and keep you in subjugation. Every public right has been denied you and, as if to goad you to desperation, private arms are seized** and individuals arrested. To such extremities are you driven that **manhood revolts** at further submission.”

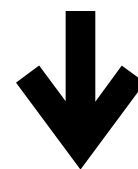
DB Penn [leader of 1874 New Orleans insurrection], 1874

Threat of  
Black Power



The world is dangerous

Institutions and systems  
don't care about you



Protective  
Ownership

# A Measurement **Aside**

- Suicides committed with a firearm as a percentage of all suicides Azrael, Cook, & Miller, 2004; Siegel, Ross, & King, 2013
- Correlates  $r = .87$  with city-level surveys,  $r = .92$  with state-level surveys,  $r = .95$  with cross-national surveys Kleck, 2004
- At the county level, not statistically distinguishable from an exact correlation measured with sampling error Cook & Ludwig, 2006

# *Data Sources*

- Every death in the United States from 1996-2016 CDC All Mortality File
- Enslavement data from the 1860 Census
- Nationally-representative survey data from over 3.5 million Americans Gallup Daily Tracking Poll



Controlling for: 1860s

Ruggedness

Longitude & Latitude

Area

Inequality of Land Holdings

Population

Improved Acres

% Free Black

Transport Access

## 21c Feeling of “Unsafety”

Controlling for: 2010s

Education Inequality

Poverty Rate

Degree of Segregation

Population Density

Residual Proportion Black

Per-Capita Income

Income Inequality

Crime Rate

Labor Force Participation

Gov’t Expenditures

Police Spending

Unemployment Rate

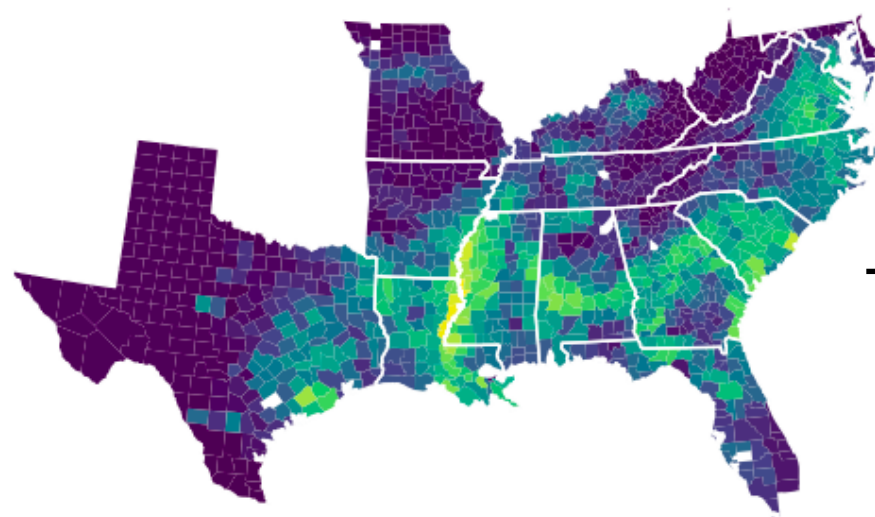
Social Capital Index

2016 Trump Vote

State Gun Laws

$B = 0.49 [0.40, 0.59]^{***}$

$B = 0.15 [0.07, 0.23]^{***}$

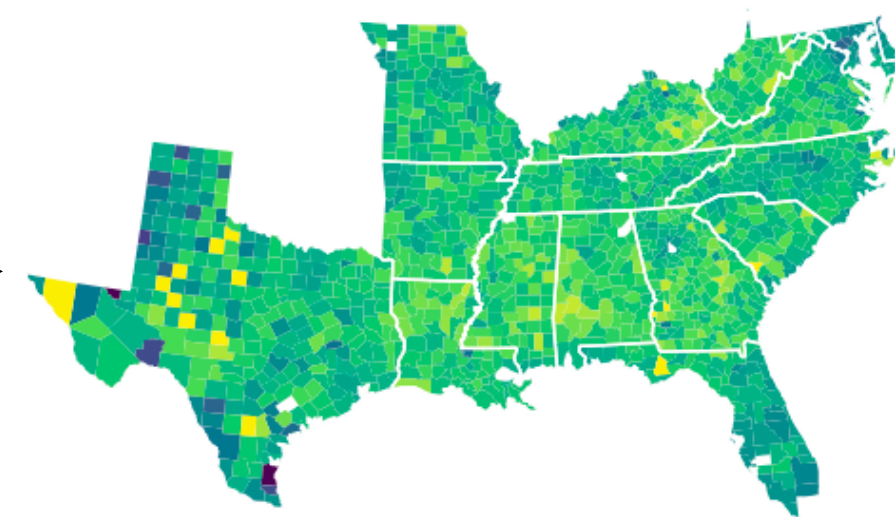


**Slavery in 1860**

Total Effect  
 $B = 0.30 [0.18, 0.42]^{***}$

Mediation  
 $ab = 0.32 [0.15, 0.51]^{***}$

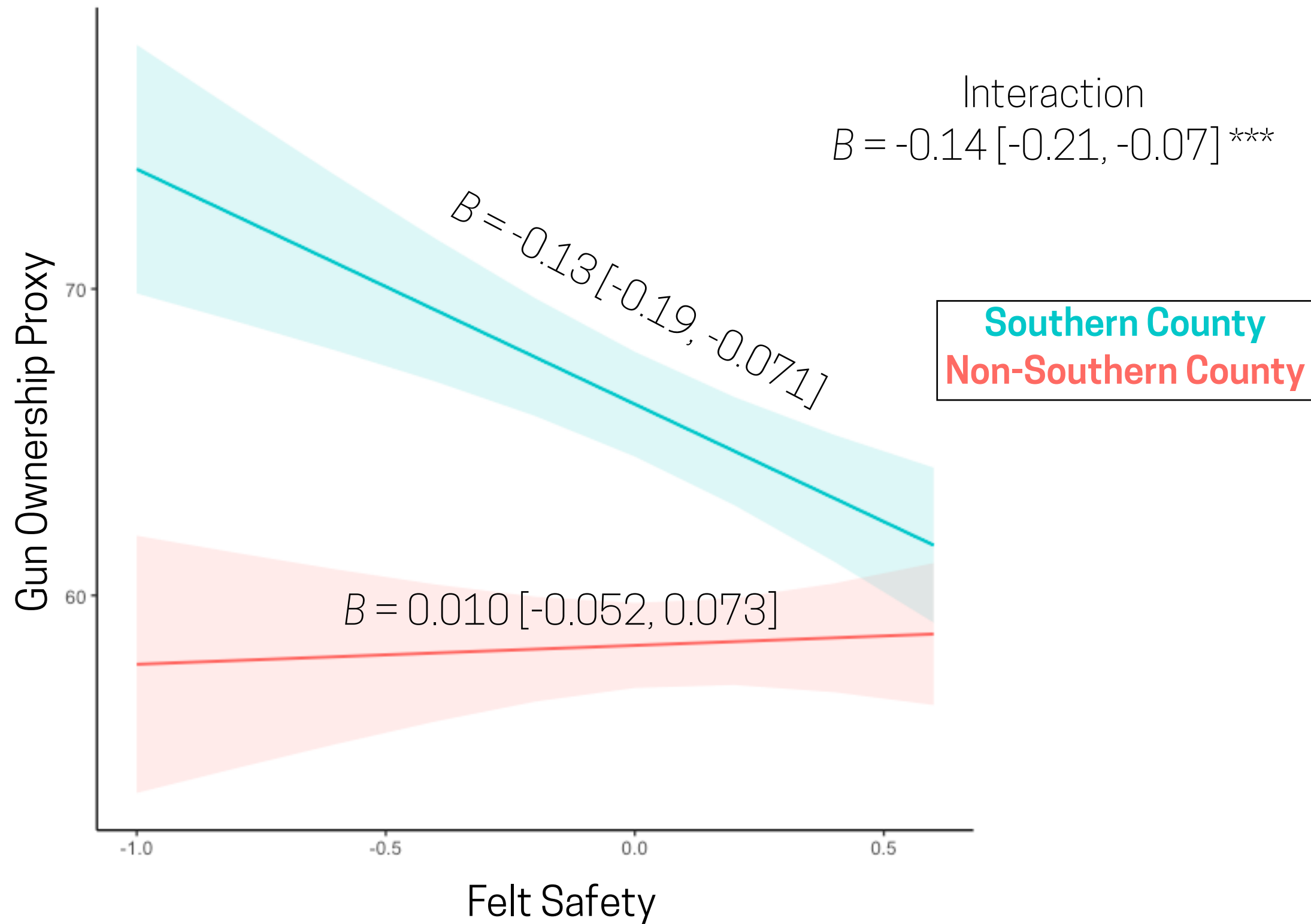
Proportion Mediated  
22% [10%, 41%]



**21c Gun Ownership**

n = 1,044 Southern Counties

# Southern Protective Uniqueness



n = 2,308 Counties, all controls

# Belief Diffusion

- Facebook Social Connectedness Index
  - County-to-county relationships of every friendship on Facebook
- One index for social connection to patterns of historical enslavement
- One index for social connection to patterns of contemporary gun ownership

	<i>Predicting Gun Ownership</i>
Social Connection to Slaveholding Counties	<i><b><math>B = 0.08 [0.01, 0.15]^*</math></b></i>
Social Connection to Gun-Ownng Counties	<i><math>B = 0.02 [-0.11, 0.15]</math></i>

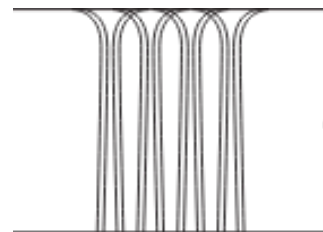
*n = 1,341 Non-Southern Counties*

- Historical patterns of enslavement predict contemporary patterns of firearms ownership
- Contemporary residents of counties with higher rates of enslavement are more likely to feel unsafe, and these feelings of safety predict contemporary firearms ownership (but only in the South)
- Social connection to slaveholding counties predicts firearm ownership, above and beyond social connection to other gun-owning counties

# Historical prevalence of slavery predicts contemporary American gun ownership

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# Southern Culture of Honor

	<i>Predicting Gun Ownership</i>
Historical Patterns of Enslavement	$B = 0.30 [0.18, 0.42]^{***}$
Geographic Ruggedness (Culture of Honor)	$B = 0.09 [0.03, 0.15]^{**}$

Chu, Rivera, & Loftin, 2000; Nisbett, 1993

$n = 1,123$  Southern Counties

No evidence for mediation from ruggedness -> unsafety -> gun ownership  
No evidence for alternate mediation through feelings of anger or self-respect

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## The Lore of the Frontier

	<i>Predicting Gun Ownership</i>
Social Connection to Slaveholding Counties	$B = 0.26 [0.17, 0.35]^{***}$
Social Connection to Gun-Owning Counties	$B = -0.03 [-0.11, 0.04]$
Social Connection to Frontier Counties	$B = 0.02 [-0.02, 0.06]$

Bazzi et al., 2020

$n = 2,609$  American Counties