

# 'CHICKS WITH GUNS'

## SOME 15 MILLION US WOMEN PACK HEAT

Photographer Lindsay McCrum explores unexpected aspects of gun ownership in new book



Lindsay McCrum

This photograph of Alexandra Knight with her son, Truett, appears in the book "Chicks with Guns." "I'm so eager to teach my boys everything I know," the Houston mom writes in the book. "Knowing that one day they will be teaching their boys or girls the same thing with the same gun makes me smile."

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Pop quiz: Name one accessory that grandmothers, moms, girls, wealthy socialites, middle-class females and low-income women might be likely to own — and cherish — all across America.

If you answered "a gun," you'd be correct.

Based on polling research and gun-sale statistics, an estimated 15 million to 20 million women in the United States own their own firearms. Dozens of those heat-packing women are documented in "Chicks with Guns," a new book by photographer Lindsay McCrum that is sure to challenge almost anyone's assumptions about gun ownership.

"Their numbers are really high but their profile is actually really low," said McCrum, who spent three and a half years capturing artistic and arresting portraits of women with their weapons of choice.

"I was so surprised by the variety and breadth and diversity of these women," McCrum said. "There are so many stereotypes about guns, mostly derived from popular culture, but the reality is so much more complex and varied than you can imagine."



Greta, the young woman pictured on the cover of "Chicks with Guns," received her first gun as an infant and completed a hunter's safety course to earn her lifetime hunting license before her 10th birthday.

The Vendome Press

"Chicks with Guns" reveals just how true that is. The book features nearly 80 portraits and captions in which women describe the role of guns in their lives in their own words. It quickly becomes apparent that rich women, poor women, young women, old women, athletic women, sedentary women and a fair number of confident girls possess guns for reasons that are peculiarly their own.

"I learned two main lessons while working on this book," said McCrum, who divides her time between New York City and California when she isn't traveling for work. "One is that on the subject of guns, *nobody* is neutral. And the other is that when you get outside of the blue-state cities, everybody has a gun."

Some women in the book work in law enforcement. Some work on ranches. Some relish the thrill of hunting birds or big game. Some are accomplished competition shooters. Some are fiercely concerned about protection and self-defense. Some have guns that have been passed down in their families for generations and have become cherished heirlooms.

Some shoot because the activity is a natural outgrowth of their relationships with their fathers, husbands or brothers. Some chuckle because they're much better shots than the men in their lives. And some delight over bringing specific guns home because the weapons make them swoon.

"I own a gold .50-cal Desert Eagle with tiger stripes, one of the largest, most powerful pistols out there," a Minnesota resident named Theresa writes in her caption in the book. "Any girl would understand when I explain it was something I saw and HAD TO HAVE. Some women experience that feeling with clothes, some with jewelry. For me it was with a large firearm."

In one memorable photograph in "Chicks with Guns," Alexandra Knight, 38, of Houston, Texas, is pictured with a gun in one hand and her naked baby boy in the other.

“As much as I have an affinity for the beauty of guns, it’s not so much about that with me, and the act of hunting I could really care less about,” Knight said in an interview. “For me it’s the camaraderie and the time spent around the idea of hunting and guns that I love. It’s about being with my children and being with my father and being with people I love in beautiful parts of the country. ... It opens up beautiful dialogue about the respect of guns and how that translates to respect of nature and respect of other humans. Ironically, it brings up a lot of things I’m passionate about.”

Knight said she knows her portrait with her then-9-month-old son Truett has the potential to generate strong reactions from the people who see it — but she had strong reasons for wanting it to look just so. The gun she’s carrying used to be her grandfather’s, and her father taught her how to use it. She’s also wearing her father’s belt buckle in the photograph.

“It was all about family and tradition,” Knight said. “Here it was the gun that was passed on to me, and I’m holding in my right hand what I’m going to pass on to my son. It was kind of that circle of life and tradition and everything else.”

## Gun safety in the home

It stands to reason that a book about women and guns would touch on the issue of gun safety in the home — particularly in households with young children. “Chicks with Guns” stays neutral on this and other highly charged subjects and allows women to share their feelings and thoughts without judgment.

One mother named Elena who lives in Roseburg, Ore., explains how her job as a 911 dispatcher led her to overcome the discomfort she felt about owning a gun.

“Dealing with the calls that we field on a daily basis made me really aware of what people are capable of doing,” Elena writes. “I’m a single mom and I’ve got two kids, so I feel like if I’m ever put in a situation where I need to protect them, I’d prefer to have a gun.

“I had to sit my kids down and talk to them. Kids are kids and they can get into things like that. They are 7 and 8, so I wanted to take them shooting so they could see how powerful guns are. It scared them at first — the loud bang and seeing the watermelon explode like it did — but they realized how important it was that you never, ever play with guns.”



Anita, a police officer pictured in “Chicks with Guns,” still remembers feeling an overpowering reverence for life when undergoing firearms training for her job. “I can never take a bullet back,” she thought to herself at the time.

Lindsay McCrum

Meanwhile, Liz, another woman featured in the book, is a former police detective who has handled cases of sexual assault, domestic violence and homicide. She, too, has been deeply affected by the inhumanity she's witnessed, but she has a different take on guns in the home if children are present.

"Since I've been in law enforcement, I've always had a gun in my nightstand that I keep loaded, no safety on, ready to go, one in the chamber, because that's the only way I feel it's effective," the San Jose, Calif., resident writes in the book. "If I had kids it would be a different story. I would never, under any circumstances, have a loaded gun in the house if there were children there. That is extremely unsafe. I can't think of a worse thing to do."

### **So 'comfortable with those firearms'**

McCrum said almost every woman she encountered while working on this project talked passionately about gun safety. Many also were completely conversant on the gun laws in their states. McCrum, who doesn't own a gun herself, was struck by the ease and confidence so many women had with their weapons after years of training with a huge emphasis on safety.



"My son Clay ... has a bear rug hanging in his room from a hunt when he was 2," a Montana resident named Jen writes. "He was with me when we spotted the bear. I took it in one shot and I waddled down the mountain with my gun on my shoulder and him on my hip."

Lindsay McCrum

Stephen L. Meagher, a former federal prosecutor who wrote the introductory essay for "Chicks with Guns," made a similar observation about the women in the book.

"I found the looks on the faces of the women themselves to be striking," Meagher said in an interview. "You just see how comfortable they are with those firearms. There are hundreds if not thousands of books about the political side of gun ownership in America, but I have never seen one that put together the artistic side and the personal side of gun ownership and women like this."

McCrum — who didn't want to reveal her age but described herself as "old enough to dislike overhead lighting" — was a painter for most of her life before 2003, when she switched exclusively to portrait photography. She still fondly remembers an art history teacher she had at age 16 who taught her that art should be a reflection of its time and should push people to think about the world around them in new and different ways.

“[Gun ownership] is a really serious and complex issue, and it deserves serious consideration,” McCrum said. “It deserves far more than sound bites geared toward people’s fear and hate. This project is not about politics or policy. I’m not interested in glorifying anyone, nor am I interested in vilifying anyone. I was just really curious.”

*To learn more about photographer Lindsay McCrum and her project,  
visit [ChicksWithGunsBook.com](http://ChicksWithGunsBook.com)*