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# Attitudes Toward Guns and Violence Questionnaire

AGVQ

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## INTRODUCTION

During the last 30 years, rates of youth violence have risen dramatically, and the seriousness of the problem has received widespread recognition. Violence among young people causes decreased quality of life, mental health problems, juvenile justice system involvement, physical injury, and even death. Prevention and remediation efforts are being made by professionals from a variety of youth-serving disciplines, including psychology, social work, counseling, psychiatry, education, and juvenile justice. The Attitudes Toward Guns and Violence Questionnaire (AGVQ) was designed to contribute to these efforts by providing a measurement tool for research, individual assessment, and program evaluation.

The AGVQ measures attitudes concerning guns, physical aggression, and interpersonal conflict in youths (6–18 years old) and young adults (19–29 years old). The instrument was developed and standardized with school and community samples. It can also be used with delinquent and psychiatric populations when involvement with guns and violence is of concern.

### General Description

The AGVQ is a 26-item, self-report questionnaire that can be administered to either an individual or a group in 5–10 minutes. It was standardized on a nationally representative, age-stratified sample of 1,745 individuals, and is appropriate for youths aged 6–18, as well as for young adults aged 19–29. It was written so that it can be read by anyone with at least third-grade reading ability. Younger individuals may need to have the items read to them.

The items were selected to sample, in an efficient manner, a wide range of violence-related issues relevant to young people. There is an emphasis on the issue of gun ownership and on beliefs regarding the value of violent versus nonviolent responses to conflict and disrespect.

Each item is a statement related to some aspect of violence, guns, or conflict behavior. The response format is a 3-point Likert-type scale with response options of *Agree*, *Not Sure*, and *Disagree*. Items involving antiviolence state-

ments are reverse-scored, so that high scores always indicate violence proneness. The wording of the directions and items makes it clear that, by “guns,” we are referring to handguns or pistols, not rifles. The directions also state explicitly that the questions do not pertain to hunting, but instead ask about “the kind of guns that people sometimes fight each other with.”

There are six scores that are obtained on the AGVQ: the Total score, a global measure of attitudes favorable or unfavorable to violence and guns; the Inconsistent Responding score, a validity indicator; and four subscale scores: Aggressive Response to Shame, Comfort With Aggression, Excitement, and Power/Safety. The raw score values for the Total score and the four subscales have equivalent *T*-scores and percentile scores stratified by relevant age and gender subgroupings. Scale and subscale reliability estimates are typical for a brief measure of attitudes. The median internal consistency estimate is .82 (range = .73 to .87), and the median 6-week test-retest correlation is .61 (range = .34 to .71). Results of the factor analyses and validation studies reported in this Manual provide ample support for the AGVQ’s construct, convergent, and criterion validity as a measure of the attitudes of young people toward violence and handgun ownership. The psychometric properties of the test are described in detail in chapters 5 and 6.

### Validity Indicators and Subscales

The AGVQ includes two repeated items and seven additional item pairs, which together yield the Inconsistent Responding (INC) score. The INC score indicates whether an individual’s item responses appear to be unrelated to the item content. In addition, invalid responding is indicated by skipped items and any written expression of an uncooperative approach to the assessment.

In addition to the Total score and the INC score, four subscales are scored. These factor-based scores assess more specific attitudinal components of overall attraction to guns and violence. The subscales are listed here in descending order of importance based on the amount of variance accounted for:

- The *Aggressive Response to Shame* scale assesses a two-part dynamic consisting of (a) sensitivity to disrespect from others, and (b) a belief that violence repairs damage to self-esteem.
- The *Comfort With Aggression* scale assesses an undisturbed acceptance of the occurrence of violence in everyday life.
- The *Excitement* scale measures the sense that guns are intrinsically exciting, stimulating, and fun.
- The *Power/Safety* scale measures the degree to which guns and violence are seen as a means of preserving personal safety and experiencing feelings of power.

The questionnaire can be administered and scored by paraprofessionals with adequate training. However, appropriate use of the instrument requires the supervision of a psychologist or other professional with an appropriate background. In particular, scores should be interpreted, and inferences made about individuals or groups, only by a professional with training in the use of quantitative measures of personality and individual attitudes.

## Applications

Because violence is a problem for a wide spectrum of young people across diverse settings, the AGVQ has several uses. As a clinical instrument for use with individuals, the AGVQ can contribute to an understanding of the attitudinal and motivational reasons for a young person's involvement with guns and violence. The questionnaire has appropriate clinical applications in mental health, juvenile justice, and school counseling settings. As a research tool, the AGVQ can be used to investigate relationships among violence-related attitudinal, behavioral, demographic, developmental, personality, and sociological variables. Finally, when administered before and after a violence prevention program, the AGVQ provides a useful assessment of the program's effectiveness at changing violence-related attitudes.

The AGVQ originated as a means of identifying attitudes associated with a desire for gun ownership and actual gun ownership. Therefore, it is a useful tool for assessing this type of serious involvement in violence and delinquency. AGVQ scores also correlate with self-reported and teacher-reported aggressive behavior, self-reported and teacher-reported interpersonal problems, aggression-related emotions, and knowledge of conflict-related psychosocial skills. Thus, this attitudes measure provides useful information about a broad range of conflict-related functioning.

### The Emphasis on Guns

One unique aspect of the AGVQ is that it measures attitudes toward guns. About half of the AGVQ's items refer to guns, and about half focus on some other violence-related issue. We placed this level of emphasis on guns for three main reasons: (a) As a practical matter, guns enormously increase the lethality of aggressive behavior (Kellermann et al., 1993; Rosenberg, 1995); (b) it is illegal for youngsters to acquire

guns; and (c) because of these two factors, youth gun ownership represents a much more serious level of involvement in aggression than that associated with more common behaviors, such as fistfighting. Thus, attraction to guns is important in and of itself, in addition to being a marker of general proclivities toward violence.

Results obtained with the AGVQ indicate that attitudes toward guns and attitudes toward violence are intertwined. Thus, attitudes toward guns do not constitute a discrete issue, but instead seem to be an integral part of general violence-related attitudes.

Handguns, as opposed to rifles, are the type of firearm most often used in homicide. Youth handgun ownership is associated with markedly elevated rates of delinquent activity. Rifle ownership, on the other hand, is generally associated with hunting or sporting purposes, and is associated with only a slight elevation in delinquency rates. Because of their different purposes, attraction to these two types of firearms appears to be associated with different attitudes and behaviors. This distinction was explicitly established from the very inception of the AGVQ. Consequently, users of the instrument need not fear that their assessments are mistakenly confounding a benign interest in hunting or other legitimate sporting activity with a specific interest in guns for use against other people.

### The Focus on Attitudes

The AGVQ is an attitudinal measure, not a behavioral one. Rather than asking for self-reports of aggressive behaviors, the instrument assesses beliefs, motives, and emotions concerning aggression and conflict. The title of the protocol completed by respondents is "What's Your Opinion?"

There is evidence that violence-related attitudes are important influences on aggressive behavior. A study including youths from juvenile detention and school settings found that conflict management skills and beliefs about the acceptability of aggression were each significant, independent predictors of aggressive behavior (Slaby & Guerra, 1988). Violence-related beliefs were related to self-reported violent behavior in a study of low-income Black youths (Cotten et al., 1994). An intervention designed to change violence-related beliefs resulted in decreased aggressive behavior in adolescents incarcerated for violent offenses (Guerra & Slaby, 1990).

Because of its focus on attitudes, the AGVQ provides information about the motivational and cognitive reasons for aggressive behavior; in particular, the subtest scores provide insight into the functions that guns and violence serve in a young person's life. This attitudinal measure complements behavioral instruments by providing information about internal processes underlying current aggressive behavior and about violence potential that may not yet be manifested in behavior. These internal factors are useful targets of intervention. When a concurrent measure of actual behaviors is desired, the Aggressive Behavior Checklist described in chapter 7 is also available.