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## More women pack heat

### Safety fears spark jump in concealed weapons permits

Darren A. Nichols and Iveory Perkins / The Detroit News

**CANTON TOWNSHIP** -- These days, Kirby Bunch packs more than credit cards in her purse.

Bunch carries a gun. In an age of increased awareness about violence, it makes her feel powerful.

"The first time I shot a gun was in February. I was practicing at a firing range and I felt empowered when I held it in my hand and fired," said Bunch, 24, of Canton Township, who added her father was a military man so she was always familiar with guns.

"In that instant, I knew carrying a gun was something I wanted to do. I decided to get a personal weapon because of all the craziness going on today. My mother has been armed for many years and because of the times, it's more of a necessity."

Bunch has plenty of company who are locked, loaded and ready to fire. Fueled by crime fears and fading stereotypes about gun owners, she and other women increasingly are opting to carry concealed weapons six years after Michigan reformed laws making it easier to do so.

Permit applications have steadily declined among men after a surge in the first two years the law changed.

They fell for years among women as well, but are rising again. Women may set a record for statewide applications this year, and they're flooding ranges and prompting Wayne County and other training facilities to host "women-only" permit classes.

Bunch and other women remain the vast majority of the state's 150,000 who legally carry concealed weapons, but their ranks have jumped from 10 percent of permit-holders in 2001 to 17 percent this year. Women are on pace to receive nearly 4,100 permits this year, close to double that in 2003.

Some carrying weapons say their motives aren't mysterious: Just read the news.

Detroit last week was named the most violent community in the nation, according to rankings from FBI statistics that city officials vigorously dispute. Some suburbs, such as Troy, Livonia and Sterling Heights, routinely rank as among the nation's safest.

"After being bombarded with pictures of women being assaulted and raped, I said now is the time," said Noelle Dobbs, 37, of St. Clair Shores, who recently applied for a permit.

She's sharpening her skills and bonding with her father during weekly shoots at Target Sports in Royal Oak. "Coming here and hearing the story of some of these women, drug dealers coming in and people intimidated them makes me want to protect myself," Dobbs said.

Jerry Wrage echoed the sentiment. The owner of Handgun, Shotgun and Training Specialist in Rochester Hills said business increases when crime -- or perceptions -- rise.

Debbie Saari, 52, grew up with guns and hunting. Her father, Richard Totten, died in 2000 and left her a Colt .357 Magnum. It was locked away until she took a concealed weapons permit class this fall offered by Wayne County Sheriff Warren Evans.

Now, the nurse and real estate agent said she's "hooked" and practicing regularly at ranges. Her permit should arrive soon.

"It's the increase in crime and in the bigger picture, with everything going on with terrorism and politics, we need to all take advantage of our constitutional rights," Saari said.

"If more people took advantage of their rights, we'd all be better off."

Others argue public sentiments about guns are slowly changing from an exclusively male domain. In the past 20 years, gun manufacturers have changed designs and make smaller firearms that fit easily into purses -- and they're advertising directly to women, according advocates on both sides of the issue.

Nationwide, Americans own more than 200 million firearms, more than 60 million of which are handguns, according to the National Institute of Justice. Figures vary widely about the gender breakdown of ownership, but federal statistics claim 9 percent of women own guns.

"It's becoming more socially acceptable," said Macomb County Sheriff Mark Hackel.

Brian Anse Patrick, a professor at the University of Toledo who studies gun culture, said the reforms on carrying concealed weapons helped change attitudes in part by bringing the issue into the mainstream.

Before the law changed, Michigan counties had their own boards whose standards for approval varied.

"Before the CCW laws were liberalized, the people getting trained traditionally in gun culture were the old white guys," Patrick said. "But after (2001) women said, 'I am a woman and at risk and it's a pretty sensible "□thing to do.'

Just ask Laura Herfy.

"Being a young female in this day and age, it's great thing to have. You can carry a .22 caliber in your purse," said Herfy, 25, of Troy, who got her CCW permit three years ago.

"Before I was pretty frightened, but now I train males on how to shoot. It's something I learned to love. Some people run or jog to relieve stress. I come to the shooting range."

To meet the growing demand, the Firing Line in Westland offers a women's night at least once a month. There is normally a waiting list, and at least 30 show up each night, said Larry Sullivan, a retired police officer who works at the facility.

"Few women feel comfortable with a guy showing them how to shoot," Sullivan said. "A lot of the women come and become better shooters than their husbands. Others want to defend themselves."

Other gun ranges report a surge in female customers, including Target Sports in Royal Oak, which has about 100 women at the range each week, general manager Ray Jay said.

In Wayne County, a jump from about 200 annual applications a few years ago to nearly 1,000 caused Evans, the sheriff, to host a women-only permit class. Originally only two were planned. But when 150 women showed up, the sheriff offered six classes.

"That kind of struck us as being significant," Evans said.

"Some of the feedback is that they love the class but it would be nice to have it where women can be in their own peer group, because some women have never been around a gun.

"Generally a lot of them are women who are out alone at night and they just want to feel like they have that level of protection. There are also a lot of single moms who feel it is important to protect their family and their kids in that regard."

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