

certainly, part of the state's rich history - many outdoors enthusiasts and law enforcement officials point to the state's low crime rate as evidence of something different: a respect for the law and the constitutional right to keep and bear arms. Many also see owning a handgun as an engaging hobby.

"It's a way of life around here," said Steve Naatjes, co-owner of Gary's Gun Shop in Sioux Falls.

The Argus Leader compiled the names of active gun permit owners from the Secretary of State's office early this summer, shortly after the Legislature voted to close the records to the public. For decades, the names of those granted permits had been open and, in some cases, were routinely published in newspapers.

The newspaper's analysis of state permits shows that, overall, the handgun culture is more firmly entrenched in western South Dakota, although McCook County, just west of Sioux Falls, had the highest rate of permits - nearly 12 percent - of any county.

Among the study's findings:

- 6.4 percent of all West River residents have handgun permits, compared with 4.9 percent in eastern South Dakota.
- After McCook, Harding and Sanborn counties have the highest per capita rate of gun permits.
- The average age of all permit holders in the state is 48.

Not all states can be compared to South Dakota. Six states do not allow concealed weapons at all, and of those that do, the reporting varies from a centralized state record to those kept only on a city level. Some states don't require permits, and others don't tally them.

More guns than permits

Nationally, gun ownership can be linked to homicide and suicide rates. The link is tenuous at best in South Dakota, where actual ownership of guns far exceeds the number of permits granted.

Most guns don't even require permits - shotguns and rifles, for example - and a permit is required only for carrying a weapon on one's person or concealed in a vehicle. Unconcealed or unloaded handguns can be kept in a case or vehicle compartment without a permit, said South Dakota Attorney General Larry Long.

All firearm purchases are covered by national background checks.

There are many other measures of gun ownership, and a few other states lead South Dakota in those yardsticks.

In 2005, there were 50,768 FBI background checks for gun purchases in the state, making South Dakota fifth in per capita sales, behind Wyoming, Montana, West Virginia and Alaska. A 2002 survey found 60 percent of South Dakota's households have access to firearms, ranking it fourth in the nation.

Nor do the permit numbers mean that 40,000 state residents are always packing heat. Most of the permit holders contacted for this story said they rarely carry their gun on their person.

Instead, they have the permit primarily so they can legally carry it in their vehicle, take it target shooting with less hassle or skip the 48-hour waiting period on gun purchases.

"It's easier to have the permit than it is not to have the permit," said Roger Paulsen, 54, a Sioux Falls

optician who says he uses his pistol mainly for target practice.

For many Sioux Falls pistol owners, target shooting is all they do with their guns. They don't need a permit for that, but most say they have it just to be sure they're following the law.

A hunting state

South Dakota's hunting tradition is a major reason people here are comfortable with guns, and that extends to handguns, too.

A few hunters even use their pistols to hunt deer. Paulsen said he has tried it.

Scott Briggie, 43, a Sioux Falls truck driver, said he has taken one deer with his .357.

"It's a challenge, let's put it that way," he said.

In the countryside, owners cite slightly different uses for their handguns.

"Well, like targets and also in the spring, the gophers, I like to shoot at them. They're pretty safe, but once in a while, I hit one," said Elden Garrett, 77, of Montrose. "I never thought of carrying it for protection."

John Blosmo, 60, of Bison says he also does a little hunting: "just varmints, whatever.

"I just carry it in the pickup, and I'm afraid that if it's in a case in a pickup, it's considered concealed," he said.

"I very seldom carry one, but I can if I want to," said Collin Leslie, a semi-retired farmer from Lemmon. He said he has lived near violence before, so he likes having it for protection.

"I was raised in California, and it was bad there."

Firearm risks

Access to guns has a downside, of course.

"All else being equal, households that have guns are more likely to have suicides and also they are more likely to have homicides, especially among women," said Matthew Miller, a health policy researcher at Harvard University.

He said the presence of guns raises the stakes when the owner is in despair or angry at a spouse.

"A gun turns what isn't lethal into a lethal event," he said.

There were 499 suicides in South Dakota from 1999 to 2003, 101 of them committed with handguns, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. That puts the state 11th in the nation in the rate of handgun suicides.

The state's murder rate ranks much lower. Miller says one reason is the state is predominately rural, a factor that appears to outweigh the influence of handguns.

Franklin Zimring, a law professor at the University of California at Berkeley, said that means the negative consequences of handguns are greatly reduced in South Dakota.

"The last thing I worry about before I go to sleep at night is not South Dakota. I'll worry about South Dakota before I worry about North Dakota, but you're pretty far down on the violent crime food chain.

"And that means the cost of having all those handguns around is lower in that environment than it would be with a high level of propensity of violence."

Zimring said the vast majority of South Dakotans will never need a handgun for personal protection. So he favors another theory for South Dakota's high rate of pistol permits.

"People like to get these gun licenses because it validates their gun ownership," he said. "This is honorary testosterone."

A sense of safety

Yet some South Dakotans do say they feel safer carrying a concealed weapon.

Retiree Alice Braun of Sioux Falls, for example, winters in Arizona and says she takes her gun along when she travels.

"Years ago, we didn't have to worry so much when we got in a car and drove cross-country, but not any more," she said.

For others, the real threat is regulations that they fear could some day take away their gun rights.

"I've never carried concealed in my life, so I have it because I feel it's a guaranteed right in the state. If we don't use it, we're going to lose it," said David Conway of the South Dakota Shooting Sports Association.

At least one permit holder does not even own a pistol.

"I just popped in my head one day, and I happened to be in the area, so I went down and applied," said Lyle Van Hemert, a Sioux Falls chiropractor. He said he wanted to support "just the good old American right to bear" arms.

Gun control in other states has, in the view of many, reduced that right. And the benefit, according to some research, is questionable.

New York City has practically banned handguns, said Gary Kleck, a criminologist at Florida State University.

"The result in New York City is the noncriminal gun ownership rate is much lower than the U.S.," he said. "But criminals are just as likely to own guns in New York City as they are anywhere else."

S.D. isn't New York

But in Sioux Falls or Bison or even Deadwood, guns are simply not as big a problem as in New York. Nor are they even the problem they are in the rural South.

In a 2002 CDC study, South Dakota ranked fourth in a survey of "gun prevalence" - the likelihood that a given household had a gun. Sixty percent of the state's households had access to a firearm; Wyoming was first at 63 percent, and Hawaii was last at 10 percent.

