



FACTS TO CONSIDER WHEN CONSIDERING BUYING A FIREARM FOR SELF-DEFENSE

Guns have long been seen as tools of self-defense in the United States. But, unintended consequences often happen when people buy guns for self-defense. Consider the following:

HAVING A FIREARM IN THE HOME IS MORE DANGEROUS THAN PROTECTIVE

Studies by public health professionals have repeatedly found that having a gun around for any reason increases the likelihood that a family member—as opposed to a criminal—will be injured or killed with a gun. For example, a September 17, 2001 *Associated Press* article reported that a 3 year-old boy from Virginia had fatally shot himself with a handgun his father said he brought into the house for protection after the terrorist attacks.

- A 1997 *American Journal of Public Health* study showed that family members that had a history of buying a handgun were twice as likely to die in a suicide or homicide as were persons who had no such family history of gun purchase. This increased risk persisted for more than five years after the handgun was purchased.
- Other studies have looked specifically at the more narrow question of keeping guns in the home for self-defense. One study, published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, found that **having a gun in the home made it nearly three times more likely that someone in the family would be killed.**
- The risk of firearm-related homicide is particularly high for women, who are most likely to be killed by a spouse, intimate acquaintance, or close relative. A 1997 study in the *Archives of Internal Medicine* examined risk factors for violent death of women in the home. The study found that women who were killed by a spouse, lover, or close relative usually were killed in the context of a quarrel, physical domestic fight, or assault. Homicide was frequently followed by the perpetrator committing suicide, and a handgun was the weapon most frequently used. When looking at the risk of a woman being killed at the hands of a spouse, intimate acquaintance, or close relative, the authors found that having one or more guns in the home made a woman 7.2 times more likely to be the victim of such a homicide.

Even the gun press admits the risk. Describing the demise of so-called “intel guns,” firearms hung over the door ready for immediate action in frontier times, *Shooting Sports Retailer* noted, “Today, guns in a home used for self protection are not hung over the door but are more likely in a desk drawer or beside the bed in a night stand. When a child is hurt in a firearm accident it is often the self defense gun that was found, played with, and ultimately fired by the youngster.”

FIREARMS ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE USED IN CRIME THAN TO PREVENT THEM

How often do people use guns successfully to protect themselves from criminal acts? Does it justify the deaths and damage that comes with guns? Apparently not. Most studies have found that guns play a relatively minor role in preventing crime but a major role in facilitating it.

- A U.S. Department of Justice study found that, on the average, between 1987 and 1992 only one percent of actual or attempted victims of violent crime, or about 62,000 people, attempted to defend themselves with a firearm. On the other hand, criminals armed with handguns committed a record 931,000 violent crimes in 1992.
- Data from the FBI's *Crime in the United States* reveal that for every time in 1999 that a civilian used a handgun to kill in self-defense, 48 people lost their lives in handgun homicides alone.

FIREARMS COULD HAVE SAFETY-RELATED DEFECTS

Firearms could contain defects in design or manufacture making them likely to unintentionally discharge. Guns with safety-related defects can kill or seriously injure gun owners and innocent bystanders, including children. This consequence is the result of the firearm industry's exemption from basic health and safety regulation. No federal agency has the authority to set safety standards for guns; require gun manufacturers to repair, replace, recall, or refund the purchase price of defective guns; or to mandate warnings. Currently, the only protection afforded those hurt by defective guns is to file a lawsuit after a victim is killed or injured.

RESEARCH THAT SUPPORTS THE USE OF FIREARMS FOR SELF-DEFENSE IS FLAWED

One advocate of the value of handguns for self-defense is Gary Kleck, professor of criminology at Florida State University in Tallahassee. Kleck and his colleague Mark Gertz say their survey research indicates that civilians use guns in self-defense up to 2.5 million times a year. The NRA and the gun industry have widely cited Kleck's work as proof of the value of owning a gun. But Dr. David Hemenway, a professor at Harvard's School of Public Health, dissected the work of Kleck and Gertz in *The Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology*, concluding that their survey contained "a huge overestimation bias" and that their estimate is "highly exaggerated." Hemenway applied Kleck and Gertz's methodology to a 1994 *ABC News/Washington Post* survey in which people were asked if they had ever seen an alien spacecraft or come into direct contact with a space alien. He demonstrated that, by the application of Kleck and Gertz's methodology, one would conclude that almost 20 million Americans have seen a spacecraft from another planet and more than a million have actually met space aliens.