

Self-Defense: The Great Myth of America's Gun Industry

Guns have long been seen as tools of self-defense in the United States. But, contrary to gun industry hype, unintended consequences often happen when people buy guns for self-defense. 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. A 1997 *American Journal of Public Health* study showed that family members that had a history of buying a handgun from a licensed dealer were twice as likely to die in a suicide or homicide as were persons similarly situated 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, 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 will be killed. This risk is particularly high for women, who are more likely to be killed by a spouse, intimate acquaintance, or close relative. An *Archives of Internal Medicine* study found that, with one or more guns in the home, the risk of suicide among women increased nearly five times and the risk of homicide increased more than three times.

These and other studies have documented repeatedly the enhanced risk that comes from bringing a gun into the home. Even the gun press admits the risk in unguarded moments. Describing the demise of so-called “lintel 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.

But 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. For example, the US 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* reveals that for every time in 1998 that a civilian used a handgun to kill in self-defense, 50 people lost their lives in handgun homicides alone.

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 claim their survey research indicates that civilians use guns in self-defense up to 2.5 million times a year. Naturally enough, 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.

