

CounterPoint In Your House?

Guns in the Home Save Lives



By C.D. MICHEL

You have a right to choose not to own a gun. But if you don't have a gun in your home, you should thank every neighbor who does. Widespread civilian ownership of firearms deters criminals, which benefits gun owners and non-gun owners alike.

With the criminal misuse of firearms and firearm accidents now at their lowest rates ever, the personal choice to own a gun is

something that should be appreciated, not demonized. Responsible gun owners—and the vast majority are—store their firearms safely and know the rules of safe gun handling. For them, the risk of accident or misuse is practically nonexistent. And the protection a gun provides is immeasurable.

Studies for the Department of Justice have found that criminals decide to not commit certain crimes when they fear their prospective victims are armed. And because there is at least one gun owner in nearly half of American households (99 percent of these guns, according to the FBI, are never misused) most residential burglaries in the United States occur when people are not at home. That contrasts starkly with the experience in England, where the private ownership of guns has been all but eliminated and the rate of "hot" residential burglaries (those that occur when residents are at home) far exceeds the U.S. rate.

In the U.S., violent crime has decreased every year for 10 consecutive years and is now at a 22-year low, while at the same time the number of privately owned guns has increased by more than 40 million. In England, the opposite is true. Almost all guns are now outlawed, and, as reported extensively by the British media, violent crime has skyrocketed. Today, the British violent-crime rate exceeds the U.S. rate. Similar increases in crime have taken place in Australia, Canada, and Germany, which also have enacted increasingly restrictive "gun control" laws. It is no wonder that a Library of Congress study concludes, "It is difficult to find a correlation between the existence of strict firearms regulations and a lower incidence of gun-related crimes."

Guns As Deterrents

International comparisons aside, the social utility of firearms in the U.S. has been demonstrated. Criminologist Gary Kleck's survey of defensive firearms uses in the U.S. found that guns are used for protection against crime up to five times more often than to commit crime. Attesting to the validity of those findings, Kleck's research was scrutinized by the nation's most prominent anti-gun criminologist, the late Marvin Wolfgang. Although he advocated banning the civilian possession of firearms completely, Wolfgang reluctantly admitted the findings were "methodologically sound." Kleck also reviewed national crime survey data and found that people who use firearms for protection against criminal attacks are statistically

less likely to be injured in the attack than people who use other means, or no means, of defense. At least 14 similar studies confirm the conclusion: guns save lives.

Only a few Americans dispute the right of people to defend themselves and their families, and most Americans believe that people have a right to use guns for that purpose. The gun ban lobby sees things differently, of course. Handgun Control Incorporated (recently renamed "Brady Campaign") has claimed that Americans have no constitutional right to defend themselves, and that no American should have a gun for protective purposes. To discourage gun ownership, anti-self-defense advocates claim children are frequently killed by gun accidents. Most of these "children" are gang members shot when drug deals go bad.

The truth is, gun accidents among children under 13 are extremely rare. In 1996, there were only 78 fatal gun accidents in this age group, compared with 855 by drowning, 724 by fire, and 2,415 in car accidents. Gun accidents kill only 10 to 20 children under age 5 each year. Tragic as each such death is, they are only about as numerous as the equally tragic deaths of children that age who are poisoned by ingesting iron supplements that look like candy. Those few gun

accidents that do occur usually happen in irresponsible homes where substance abuse or criminal conduct is common.

Studies Don't Tell Whole Story

Studies for the Department of Justice have found that criminals decide to not commit certain crimes when they fear their prospective victims are armed.

The gun ban lobby also typically points to a 1986 study to claim that a gun in the home is 43 times more likely to be used to kill a family member than an intruder. Tossing out that figure, gun control advocates lead the public to believe that armed citizens often accidentally kill family members, mistaking them for criminals. Such incidents actually constitute less than 2% of fatal firearms accidents, or about one for every 90,000 defensive gun uses. To produce the misleading 43:1 ratio, the only defensive or protective uses of firearms that were counted were those in which criminals were actually killed by

would-be crime victims. This is the most serious of the study's flaws, since fatal shootings of criminals occur in only a fraction of 1% of defensive firearm uses nationwide. Usually the gun isn't even fired.

The next big flaw: of the 43 deaths, 37 were suicides. That's a whole different problem. And studies show that if a gun is unavailable, suicides simply use another method. The 43:1 study itself warned against drawing inappropriate policy conclusions.

If all these numbers make your head spin, try this simple test. Post a big sign on your front door: "Attention Criminals—This Is A Gun-Free Home." Think about that sign when you're lying in bed in the still of the night. Feeling safer?

C.D. Michel was a criminal prosecutor and Staff Counsel to the Christopher Commission investigating the LAPD in the wake of the Rodney King incident. His clients include gun owners, the California Rifle & Pistol Association, and the National Rifle Association.