

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 industry hype, unintended consequences often happen when people buy guns for self-defense. Public health professionals have repeatedly found that having a family member as opposed to a criminal will be inured to the likelihood that a family member from a licensed dealer were twice as likely to die in a suicide or homicide from a licensed dealer were twice as likely 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 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. For women, who are more likely to be killed by a spouse, intimate acquaintance, or family member, the risk was even higher. An *Archives of Internal Medicine* study found that, with one or more guns in the home, the risk of homicide for women increased nearly five times and the risk of homicide increased more than three times.

These and other studies have documented repeatedly the danger of having a gun in the home. Even the gun press admits the risk in unguarded moments. Describing the danger of so-called "lintel guns," firearms hung over the door ready for use, a *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, on a nightstand, or in a bed in a night stand. When a child is hurt in a firearm accident in the bed in a nightstand, and ultimately fired by the youngster.

But how often do people use guns successfully to protect themselves? Apparently not. Most studies have found that guns play a relatively minor role in preventing crime but a major role in facilitating it. A 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, were armed with a handgun. On the other hand, criminals armed with handguns committed a record 199,000 homicides in 1992. Data from the FBI's *Crime in the United States* reveals that for every time in 1998 that a handgun was used 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 at Florida State University in Tallahassee. Kleck and his colleague, Michael Gertz, indicate that civilians use guns in self-defense up to 2.5 million times a year. Kleck and the gun industry have widely cited Kleck's work as proof of the value of handguns. Hemenway, a professor at Harvard's School of Public Health, dissected Kleck's work in *Journal of Criminal Law & Criminology*, concluding that their survey contained a huge overestimation and that their estimate is highly exaggerated. He cited a 1994 *ABC News/Washington Post* survey in which people were asked if they had ever seen a spacecraft or come into direct contact with a space alien. He demonstrated that, using 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.