

The Portland Press Herald

EST.
1862

Intervention at Augusta Wal-Mart raises questions about guns

Though two armed civilians stopped a fight, officials say people should focus on their families and safety.

Jessica Lowell

July 4, 2016

AUGUSTA — A little more than a week ago, two legally armed civilians broke up an altercation in the Wal-Mart parking lot in Augusta, halting a fight between two men who had been shooting at each other from cars parked next to each other only moments before and keeping the two people at the scene until Augusta Police arrived.

Four people were identified and arrested on a range of charges; following the fight that police say was about money. A large quantity of heroin was also seized.

One of the civilians, Daniel Chavanne, said he acted on instinct when he stepped into the volatile situation. The identity of the second man has not been made public.

But in the aftermath of the event, it's unclear how many times armed civilians intervene in instances like these.

The Cato Institute, a Libertarian think tank based in Washington, D.C., has studied media reports from across the country that recount instances when regular people have used their guns to protect themselves, their families and their homes, but it's hard to tell based on that how many times that's happened.

“Someone pulls a gun to scare off a robber or a would-be attacker, it doesn't get reported,” Jonathan Blanks, a research associate for the Cato Institute Project on Criminal Justice, said. “I think it happens fairly often, but we don't know about it,” he said.

SHOULD PEOPLE GET INVOLVED?

In this case, the details of the shooting and its aftermath are fairly well known across the region, and it has prompted people to wonder whether armed civilian intervention is wise and whether it will become more common.

“You hear so much these days that people are asked to step up and encouraged to get involved,” said Audrey Emery, 79. She and her husband, Bob, also 79, recently moved to Litchfield from Brunswick, and they are enjoying the slow pace in the smaller town. They were in Augusta on Monday for the Fourth of July parade.

“I don’t think too many people would get involved in an altercation,” Bob Emery said. “Thirty or forty years ago, it was not as necessary. Unfortunately, it’s a lot more possible now. There’s a lot of this around drugs.”

“Drugs or someone wanting to be in ISIS,” Audrey Emery said, referring to the terrorist organization the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

Phillip Jones, 39, of Augusta, said having armed civilians intervene is a good thing. He is a gun owner, and he has learned to shoot, but he doesn’t carry it with him.

“I wish (armed citizen intervention) were more nationally covered. They were able to stop them in the act.”

But Andres Morales has a different opinion. The native of Venezuela, now a U.S. citizen, traveled down from Waterville to watch the Augusta fireworks.

Openly carrying a gun is a provocative act, he said. “It sends a signal – don’t mess with me.”

While he agrees that Americans have the right to bear arms, he doesn’t think that everybody should have one. “(Chavanne) had training and he was able to do something good in that moment.”

But if people don’t have training, he fears a return of the old West, when people worked out their differences with guns.

MORE GUNS, FEWER OWNERS

It’s true that gun sales go up after every mass shooting, Blanks of the Cato Institute said. But more guns are now being owned by fewer people.

In 2012, the Cato Institute published “Tough Targets: When Criminals Face Armed Resistance from Citizens which examined occasions when Americans used guns to defend themselves. Among its findings are that it’s hard to get an accurate count and difficult to get an accurate view due to overstatement of some statistics and understatement of others.

“We have a country with a lot of guns,” Blanks said. But so few people, as a percentage of gun owners, carry them that finding the nexus between people carrying guns and the likelihood of coming across a violent situation is rare.

Law enforcement officials have also weighed in on both sides of the argument.

“Our citizens are force multipliers,” Gardiner Police Chief James Toman said last week. “They are our eyes and ears. We are asking them to do the right thing.” That may include intervening, he said.

“What these gentlemen did was not for everyone,” he said, noting the increase in drug-related crimes. But they saw a problem and reacted. “They assisted law enforcement and that’s what we need. We’re seeing different things now. We’ve always had concerns about guns in the hands of the wrong element, and that hasn’t changed.”

Kennebec County Sheriff Ryan Reardon said the likelihood exists that more people would intervene in volatile situations. “They are taking a risk,” he said, “especially when a situation is unfolding.”

Reardon said people should make sure that they and their families are safe and should be good witnesses when they can be.

But with violent crime increasing in frequency, he said more armed citizens and more interventions are likely. “It’s cause and effect.”