



Editorial: Gun deaths cause heartache every day

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Spend a moment with Dwight Worley's Sunday article about guns, which with anecdotes and statistics delves into this subcategory of the firearms debate: "Do guns keep you safer?" It's an important inquiry in the aftermath of the slaughter at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Gun-buying Americans continue to crowd gun shows in anticipation of new restrictions. The news article does not fully answer the posed question, but offers food for thought as the nation's firearms arsenal swells beyond 300 million weapons and counting. The important chores for gun owners and prospective owners: to evaluate the data, consider their own circumstances and decide for themselves.

An honest inquiry should yield different answers depending upon an individual's occupation, residency, family circumstances and other considerations. As Worley reported, firearms owner and merchant Charles Augusto's self-defense rationale was borne out, in an emphatic way, in 2009. He shot and killed two would-be robbers and gunmen, and injured two others, during an attempted robbery of his Harlem business, which had been targeted before by robbers. "Either I'm going to kill them or they're going to kill me," said Augusto, who lives in Irvington, recounting his thinking at the time. "I didn't like doing that. I didn't have any choice."

Some supporting data

The self-defense argument is bolstered by some data — findings perhaps more relevant to those who live in high-crime areas.

As Worley reported, the federal National Crime Victimization Survey found that individuals with guns are much less likely to be injured or suffer a loss during a robbery or assault. Some 30.2 percent of all individuals involved in a robbery between 1992 and 2001 were injured, but only 12.8 percent of victims with firearms were injured; in the case of assaults, 57 percent of all victims were injured, but only 28 percent of those with guns were hurt.

A 2012 Cato Institute paper concluded that the authorities under-report incidents where a gun is used to thwart criminals — largely because cases of justified weapons use are often dropped. Worley cites research putting the number of thwarted-assailant cases at 2.5 million a year; the government’s own count pegged the number much lower, at 100,000.

Whatever the tally, gun owners maintain the mere threat of becoming a victim justifies ownership. “I think everybody who qualifies should have a gun in their home,” said Sloatsburg gun owner Jonathan Galin. “I don’t know anybody who wants to break into a home knowing that person has a gun and knows how to use it.”

Unsettling facts

But the unsettling fact — for society, gun owners, and those considering buying — is that the stranger assailant isn’t the only threat to personal security or family security, or even the likeliest. Not by a long shot in many households. A gun in the home is 22 times more likely to be used in a completed or attempted suicide, criminal assault or homicide, or unintentional shooting death or injury than to be used in a self-defense shooting, according to peer-reviewed research cited by the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence. Keeping a firearm in the home increases the risk of suicide by a factor of three to five and increases the risk of suicide with a firearm by a factor of 17.

Women, in disproportionate numbers, are on the losing end of the “Do guns keep you safer?” debate. Baltimore County Police Chief Jim Johnson, in his testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee last month, told lawmakers that in homes where there is a gun and a history of domestic violence there is a 500 percent increase in the chance “that that person will be victimized by gun violence.” The Violence Policy Center amplified those statistics: it has reported that 16 times as many females were murdered by a male they knew than were murdered by male strangers.

The story isn’t much better for children. About two months before the Newtown slaughter, the American Academy of Pediatrics updated its long-standing policy position on gun violence, with an eye toward reducing the 6,570 U.S. deaths of children and young people, ages 1 to 24 years, that occur each year. The AAP’s prescription, noted here previously: “The most effective measure to prevent suicide, homicide, and unintentional firearm-related injuries to children and adolescents is the absence of guns from homes and communities.”

Cannot turn away

Those are the “ordinary” deaths that cause heartache every single day. The picture is no better in the outlier cases — mass murders. USA Today, based on its own analysis, reported Friday that of the 934 people killed in mass shootings during the past seven years, 40 percent involved a suspect slaying a family member. Separate research by Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s Mayors Against Illegal Guns group, which analyzed 56 mass shootings since 2009, concluded that 57 percent involved domestic violence.

USA Today quoted Mark Glaze, director of the mayors group: “Mass shootings ... are the tragedies that capture the public’s attention. But every day, 33 Americans are being killed, mostly with handguns and distressingly often, by a family member or intimate partner.” There can be no turning away from those facts, either.