

# The Journal News

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WESTCHESTER • ROCKLAND • PUTNAM

## Debate: Do guns keep you safer?

*Self-defense concerns spur rise in ownership locally*

By: Dwight R. Worley – February 24, 2013

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Alfred Grimaldi of Ossining stands next to his firearms safe at his home Feb. 14. He is a gun advocate and a firearms instructor who thinks the state's new gun laws will make the public less safe. / Joe Larese/The Journal News

Charles Augusto's business had been a repeat target for violent criminals.

In 2009, four gunmen burst into Kaplan Brothers Blue Flame Corp. in Harlem, demanding cash and threatening and pistol-whipping an employee. The brazen daytime holdup mirrored a robbery at the commercial oven dealer 20 years earlier, which itself was followed by several muggings of employees off-site as they made deliveries and dropped off bank deposits.

But this time, Augusto, a 75-year-old Irvington resident, wasn't "defenseless." Fearing for his and his employee's lives, he grabbed a 12-gauge shotgun he purchased after the first robbery and fired on the gunmen, killing two and injuring two others.

"Either I'm going to kill them or they're going to kill me," Augusto recalled recently, sitting in his hilltop home near Irvington High School  
. "I didn't like doing that. I didn't have any choice."

By one government estimate, Americans use guns to defend themselves or thwart crimes hundreds of times a day. As gun owners and pro-gun advocacy groups say new gun-control laws in New York will swing the advantage to lawbreakers, others question whether gun ownership is an effective way for most people to protect themselves.

Alfred Grimaldi, an Ossining resident and National Rifle Association-certified firearms instructor, said new state restrictions — from making already stringent background checks more involved to reducing the number of bullets a gun clip can hold — would make it tougher for individuals and business owners like Augusto to defend themselves. He doesn't much care for President Barack Obama's gun-control proposals, either.

"You can pass all the laws you want, but (civilians) are going to be at a disadvantage," Grimaldi said. "People who are inclined to violence are not going to obey a law just because you pass it."

Leah Gunn Barrett, a board member and incoming executive director of New Yorkers Against Gun Violence, said the right to self-defense must be balanced with public safety. All gun restrictions aim to track and control the flow of weapons, since even guns purchased legally can end up being used in crimes, such as the mass murder in Newtown, Conn., in December.

“With rights come responsibilities,” Barrett said. “We don’t want our streets, our neighborhoods, our malls, our schools turning into battlefields.”

The debate goes to the heart of the Second Amendment, which guarantees an individual’s right to bear arms, and whether citizens should depend on themselves or police for protection.

“The evidence doesn’t indicate that having a gun is that protective. It probably makes your house less safe,” said David Hemenway, a professor of health policy at Harvard School of Public Health who has studied the defensive use of guns for decades. “There is virtually no evidence that a gun is better protection than running away, calling police or using a baseball bat.”

“Virtually no evidence” may be a bit strong

. Gary Kleck, a criminology professor at Florida State University whose gun-use surveys are often cited by pro-gun groups, said data from 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.

Though 30.2 percent of all individuals involved in a robbery between 1992 and 2001 were injured, only 12.8 percent of victims possessing a firearm suffered an injury, according to a 2004 report by the Committee on Law and Justice, which reviewed Kleck’s analysis. For assaults, the injury figures are 57 percent versus 28 percent for all incidents and firearms incidents, respectively.

“Tough

Targets,” a 2012 paper by the libertarian Cato Institute, highlighted hundreds of news reports nationwide where armed citizens thwarted criminals and determined that police departments underreport defensive gun uses because cases involving justifiable weapons use often are dropped. Kleck estimates defensive-gun-use incidents to be as high as 2.5 million a year, though the federal crime survey puts the figure just above 100,000.

“Guns in the hands of non-criminals is a social benefit,” Kleck said.

Hemenway’s research, including the 2000 survey “Gun use in the United States: results from two national surveys,” suggests that individuals tend to overstate defensive gun uses, wrongly classifying arguments that escalate into physical altercations as self-defense. Judges who reviewed the survey results for the study’s authors determined that at least half of reported defensive-use cases were probably illegal, though Hemenway and his researchers acknowledged the small sample size in the study and that they used only five judges from three states.

The issue of using guns for self-defense comes to the fore as more New Yorkers buy firearms and people become aware of the rising numbers of guns in their communities.

Last year, the number of individuals who obtained a handgun license in Westchester increased 204 percent to 793. A large portion are typically for self-defense uses, including unrestricted carry, employment and premises, according to permit data. Rockland license approvals rose 27 percent to 526; Putnam’s declined 19 percent to 227.

In December, The Journal News published an online map indicating the names and addresses of licensed handgun owners in Westchester and Rockland. The total number of handgun permits in Westchester, Rockland and Putnam was about 44,000 — 1 out of every 33 adults in the region

— but Putnam was not represented on the map because the county clerk would not release the names and addresses of permit-holders.

The map sparked a national outcry and prompted a change in state law, allowing certain individuals to keep license information private. The map was removed last month after the law change.

Jonathan Galin, a Sloatsburg resident and licensed gun owner, said people rushed to buy guns before the enactment of laws they felt would limit their Second Amendment rights. However, many also were motivated by a rising number of burglaries and home invasions in recent years, he said. Burglaries rose 12 percent in Rockland from 2007 to 2010 before dipping sharply in 2011.

“I think everybody who qualifies should have a gun in their home,” Galin said. “I don’t know anybody who wants to break into a home knowing that person has a gun and knows how to use it.”

Grimaldi said concern about new laws was well founded. Last month, state lawmakers expanded the ban on military-style weapons, barring the sale of some popular rifles and requiring those who already own such weapons to register them. Background checks now are required for all gun sales, including private transactions, and high-capacity magazines were outlawed. No magazine can hold more than seven rounds, down from 10.

“If I have seven rounds, I’m probably not going to make it if (criminals) have guns with 20 rounds,” Galin said.

The Westchester County Firearm Owners Association and New York State Rifle & Pistol Association plan to sue, seeking to overturn New York’s new gun laws. Neither group would comment for this article, but their notice of claim filed last month said the law “violates (plaintiffs’) fundamental constitutional rights to lawfully possess, keep, bear and use firearms for self-defense and other lawful purposes.”

Hemenway, author of “Private Guns, Public Health,” said in all the defensive-gun-use surveys he’s reviewed, any shooting that occurred lasted only a few seconds and only a few rounds were fired.

In a 2011 article in the American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine, Hemenway says having a gun in the home increases the likelihood of shooting accidents, suicides and domestic-violence murders. It’s a particular danger for children, who suffer 12 times as many gun suicides and 2 1/2 times as many gun homicides in states with high gun ownership, his analysis found.

A 2010 survey by the University of Chicago’s National Opinion Research Center found that about one-third of Americans live in a household with a gun, but a 2011 Gallup survey reports that half of Americans live in homes with guns.

Hemenway said it takes exceptional training to shoot a gun in a high-stress situation, but most people get little more than basic training on handling weapons. He added that the federal crime survey shows people successfully defended themselves with blunt objects, with home alarms, by having a dog, by running away, by calling police and by other non-lethal measures.

“Two-thirds of households in the U.S. don’t have guns. People protect themselves without guns all the time,” he said. “It’s not like you have a gun or you’re helpless.”

When his life was on the line, Augusto said, he was grateful to be armed. He thinks back to that first robbery 20 years ago before he bought the shotgun. Augusto watched helplessly as robbers pointed guns at him and roughed up his employees, and he said he felt scared and vulnerable.

“At that time, I didn’t have no way of defending myself,” he said.

The fear was still present during the 2009 robbery, which was even more brutal. Augusto is thankful he was able to protect himself and his employees, but he replays the events — loud shots, blood spattering, killing two men — in his mind regularly.

“Unless you’ve done it, you don’t realize how bad it makes you feel,” he said. “I still feel bad about it, but I’d do it again if I had to.”

Despite his personal experience, Augusto said he supports some gun-control measures. He favors the ban on assault weapons and high-capacity magazines.

Yet Augusto, who keeps shotguns at his home and his business, said anyone who qualifies for a gun license should be allowed to carry his or weapon at all times. Only those with carry permits can do so now.

“I think a handgun with seven bullets is enough,” he said. “If you can’t hit a guy with seven bullets, you should run.”

Still, Grimaldi said more residents feeling a need to defend themselves without restrictions isn’t paranoia or baseless fear.

In Westchester, the number of violent crimes involving firearms increased from 303 to 346 between 2007 and 2011, up 14 percent, according to the state Division of Criminal Justice Services. Similar crimes in Rockland rose from 35 in 2007 to 61 in 2010, then fell to 44 the next year. Since 2007, there have been seven or fewer crimes involving guns yearly in Putnam.

Grimaldi said many single women, elderly individuals and parents believe they can defend themselves better with a gun in the home, particularly if an intruder is armed and there may not be enough time to call police.

“The police aren’t there as our personal bodyguards,” he said. “If we had enough police, we would probably call it Cuba or the Soviet Union.”

But simply owning a gun does not make an individual safer, said Davide Gristina, owner of two Krav Maga locations in New York, a franchise that provides self-defense classes and firearms training in Westchester and Orange counties.

“It’s not just about going to the store, buying a gun and putting it in your house. That’s not even close to being a responsible firearm owner,” Gristina said. “We teach them that firearms are the last resort. The only time you should resort to it is if you have no other choice and your life is at stake.”