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SPORTING ARMS AND AMMUNITION MANUFACTURERS' INSTITUTE, INC.

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Close To Home

**An Overview Of
The Issues Concerning
The Use Of Firearms
For Home Protection**

Background Paper #8

INTRODUCTION

At times the question is purely academic – a debate about whether a firearm in the home is more likely to protect or endanger its owner. The question is brought closer to home when robberies or assaults in a community cause people to consider owning a firearm for personal protection. The Sporting Arms and Ammunition Manufacturers' Institute (SAAMI) neither advocates nor discourages the use of a firearm for home protection. We believe it is inappropriate for any organization to make a blanket recommendation that an individual in Maine, Montana or Massachusetts should or should not maintain a firearm for self-protection. This reference is offered as a responsible examination of the issues that you should consider when making the very serious, very personal decision about the use of a firearm for home protection. In examining whether a firearm in the home is a risk or a benefit, four issues are at the core of the debate: Is a gun in the home more likely to be used to protect its owner or to be used against a member of the household; how frequently are guns used for self-protection; how effective are they when they are used; and how safe are guns in the home?

A GUN IN THE HOME IS 43 TIMES MORE LIKELY TO BE USED AGAINST YOU — OR IS IT?

One of the most widely quoted statements about guns is that a firearm kept in the home is 43 times more likely to kill a family member than an intruder. This comes from a study first published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 1986,ⁱ following a six-year review of gunshot deaths in Seattle, Washington, conducted by Dr. Arthur Kellermann et al. The validity of this study in determining the value and risk of firearms for home protection has been questioned due to its limited focus. The Kellermann study viewed

defensive gun uses only as instances in which the criminal intruder was shot and killed. Instances in which intruders or assailants were wounded or frightened away by the use or display of a firearm were not included. Kellermann admitted that, “Studies such as ours do not include cases in which intruders are wounded or frightened away by the use or display of a firearm. A complete determination of firearm risks versus benefits would require these figures be known.”ⁱⁱ Kellermann’s approach was not unlike measuring the effectiveness of police officers solely on the basis of the number of criminals they kill.

Others argue that when people defend themselves with firearms, they are frequently disarmed by criminals and assaulted. According to findings in a National Crime Survey, less than one percent of defensive gun uses result in the offender’s taking the firearm from the victim and then using it against him or her.ⁱⁱⁱ

THE DETERRENT FACTOR — HOW EFFECTIVE IS A FIREARM IN DETERRING CRIME IN THE HOME?

There are occasions when firearms can be used as effective tools for self-defense. There are no precise statistics maintained on how many times a year firearms are used defensively, but there are a number of estimates. Polls by the Los Angeles Times, Gallup, and Peter Hart Research Associates show that there are at least 760,000, and possibly as many as 3.6 million, defensive uses of guns per year. In 98 percent of the cases, such polls show, people simply brandish the weapon to stop an attack.^{iv} Professor Gary Kleck, a criminologist at Florida State University, indicates there are upward of 2.4 million defensive uses annually.^v Kleck’s research is considered the largest national study on this topic, to date. In a follow-up survey of those who reported the defen-

sive use of a firearm, one in six respondents said they believed their intervention with a firearm prevented the loss of life.^{vi} This suggests that upward of 400,000 lives are being saved by the use of a firearm annually – a sharp contrast to Dr. Kellermann’s claims. Some argue that the presence of a gun escalates the level of violence and does little to deter crime. Common sense and statistical evidence suggest that most criminals will not knowingly attempt a crime against an armed individual. Sociologists James Wright and Peter Rossi surveyed 1,900 convicted felons and concluded that 40 percent decided to forego committing a crime at one time or another because they believed their intended victims were armed.^{vii} A 1979-1985 National Crime Survey report indicated 50.6 percent of victims who resisted physically were injured, 40.3 percent who resisted with a knife were injured, 34.9 percent who offered little resistance or tried to flee were injured, but only 17.4 percent of victims offering armed resistance were injured.^{viii}

A 1996 study by University of Chicago Law Professor John Lott and University of Chicago economics graduate student David Mustard found that firearms are overwhelmingly effective in deterring crime. The study, which focused on concealed firearms, found that states with concealed weapons laws reduced murders by 8.5 percent, rapes by 5 percent and aggravated assaults by 7 percent. According to Mr. Lott, “... criminals respond rationally to deterrence threats.”^{ix}

“Hot” burglaries, or burglaries in which the victim is home, account for nearly half of all burglaries in Canada and Britain where gun control laws are tough. Conversely, in America, where gun ownership is prevalent, only 13 percent of all burglaries are “hot.” Criminals do not behave differently by accident. Studies show that criminals are far more worried about meeting an armed victim than they are about the police.^x

INVITING AN ACCIDENT?

Opponents of firearms for home protection argue that bringing a gun into the home is inviting an accident. Any perceived or actual risk associated with a firearm in the home can be minimized or negated with education and safe handling and storage techniques. The mere presence of a gun in the home does not increase the likelihood that an accident will occur. The number of firearms in American homes has increased approximately 45 percent since 1973,^{xi} while the number of accidental firearms fatalities in the home has steadily decreased from a high of 1,400 in 1974 to 500 in 2002.^{xii}

Often, the incidents of firearms accidents in the home are exaggerated by certain special interest groups to discourage ownership of firearms. The Center to Prevent Handgun Violence (CPHV), for example, used unpublished 1994 data from the National Center for Health Statistics and reported: “Every day, 15 children, age 19 and under, are killed with guns.” Statements like this mask the issue and confuse people who are considering the purchase of a firearm for home protection. According to data from the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, the actual number of children aged one to 19 who died in firearms-related accidents was 512 in 1994, not the 5,475 claimed by the CPHV.^{xiv} These, and all accidental deaths, are tragedies best prevented by providing training and education. Even considering the number of young people murdered with firearms, the CPHV statistics are exaggerated. According to the Bureau of Statistics’ Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics (1994), 3,074 young people, aged 19 and under, were murdered with a firearm in 1993, with 2,650 of the victims aged 15-19.^{xv} In both the 14-17 and 18-24 year-old categories, nearly 90 percent of all homicide victims, regardless of how they were killed, died at the hands of someone outside of the family.^{xvi}

Much of the danger lies with firearms not in the home but in the hands of criminals on the streets. The number of young people and adults killed in firearms homicides is a national tragedy. This problem is not one-dimensional and cannot be attributed solely to the presence of a gun. Mixing the very low number of accidents with the much greater number of intentional killings distorts the facts necessary to make the personal determination regarding firearms ownership. Exaggerating or sensationalizing the problem serves no useful purpose and diverts attention from developing solutions.

SERIOUS CONSIDERATIONS

There are certain factors that argue against keeping a firearm in the home for self-protection. Firearms ownership requires an honest evaluation of personal circumstances. Are your security concerns realistic and consistent with local crime rates? Do other adults in your household support the decision to maintain a gun in the house? If they will have access to the firearm, will they join you in a firearms training and safety program? What precautions will be practiced to safeguard children? Do risk factors such as drug and alcohol abuse exist within your household? If you are not willing to accept certain basic responsibilities and adhere to important rules of firearms ownership and storage, the members of SAAMI would urge that you not purchase a firearm.

MAKE NO MISTAKE ABOUT IT

If you decide to keep a firearm in your home for self-protection, you need to take special safety measures. Keeping a gun to defend your family necessitates strict adherence to safe and responsible firearms storage and handling techniques. In keeping a firearm for self-protection, create a situation in which

the firearm is readily available to you, yet inaccessible or inoperative to others. Quick-release trigger locks, chamber/cylinder locks or special locked cases that can be instantly opened by authorized individuals are options to consider. Your most important responsibility is ensuring that children cannot encounter loaded firearms. The precautions must be completely effective. Most fatal home firearms accidents occur when youngsters – often children who do not live in the home – discover firearms that have been left loaded and unsecured.

IN CONCLUSION

The decision to maintain a firearm in the home for self-protection is a serious, personal matter. The Sporting Arms and Ammunition Manufacturers' Institute emphasizes that maintaining a firearm for home protection is not appropriate for all homes or all individuals. We believe that well-informed adults are capable of making decisions that best suit their individual needs and circumstances.

SAAMI recognizes that there is no simple “yes” or “no” answer to the question of the use of firearms for home protection. Unlike passive safety devices, such as alarm systems, firearms used for home protection require significantly more involvement by the owner. Any added safety benefit that may be derived from a firearm depends in large measure on the owner's commitment to appropriate training and a clear understanding of safe handling and storage rules. In addition, issues such as individual temperament, reaction to emergency situations and specific family circumstances should also enter into the decision. Free firearms safety information may be obtained directly from SAAMI at: Sporting Arms and Ammunition Manufacturers' Institute, 11 Mile Hill Road, Newtown, CT 06470-2359.

i Kellermann, A. L. and D.T. Reay "Protection or Peril? An Analysis of Firearms- Related Deaths in the Home" *N. Eng.J. Med.* 1986; 3 14: 1557-60. ii Ibid. iii Kleck, Gary. *Point Blank: Guns and Violence in America* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter) 1991. iv Lott, John Jr. "Childproof Gun Locks: Bound to Misfire" *The Wall Street Journal*. July 16, 1997. v Kleck, G. "Q&A: Guns, Crime, and Self Defense." *Orange County Register*. September 19, 1993. p. C-3. vi Kleck, G. *Point Blank: Guns and Violence in America* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter) 1991. vii Wright, James D. and Peter H. Rossi, *Armed and Considered Dangerous* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter) 1986. viii Kleck, G. *Point Blank: Guns and Violence in America* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter) 1991. ix Lott, John Jr. "More Guns, Less Violent Crime" *The Wall Street Journal*, Aug. 28, 1996, x Lott, John Jr. "Childproof Gun Locks: Bound to Misfire." *The Wall Street Journal*, July 16, 1997. xi Kleck, G. and E. Britt Patterson "The Impact of Gun Control and Gun Ownership Levels on Violence Rates" *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* 9 (1993) 249-287. xii National Safety Council, *Injury Facts*, 2003 Edition, Itasca, IL; p. 129. xiii Center to Prevent Handgun Violence (1995) *Firearm Facts*. Source: National Center for Health Statistics, unpublished data 4/21/94. xiv Centers for Disease Control National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, *Unintentional Firearms Deaths*, revised 07/14/99. xv U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Crime in the United States*, 1993 (Washington, DC: USGPO, 1994), p. 18, Table 2.11. xvi U.S. Department of Justice, *Source Book of Criminal Justice Statistics*, 1994; p. 341.

The Sporting Arms and Ammunition Manufacturers' Institute is a trade association of the nation's leading manufacturers of sporting firearms and ammunition. Founded in 1926 at the request of the federal government, SAAMI has been actively involved in the publication of industry standards, coordination of technical data, and the promotion of safe and responsible firearms use. SAAMI currently publishes more than 700 standards related to firearm and ammunition quality and safety. For a listing of SAAMI members, please write to:

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