

CRAMER: On the right side of the bullet

More Americans protect themselves with guns than you think

By Clayton E. Cramer
The Washington Times
Thursday, February 9, 2012



The Washington Times

Every so often, a local news story about a victim of crime goes national. Most recently, it was Sarah McKinley, 18, home alone with her 3-month-old son, a few days after Sarah's husband had died of lung cancer. Two men apparently looking to steal pain medicine prescribed for the husband broke in. Sarah grabbed a shotgun and a pistol and killed Justin Martin as he forced entry into her home.

How often do such incidents happen? While the results from studies vary, the numbers are large. The National Crime Victimization Survey, for various procedural reasons, is at the low end, showing 108,000 such cases a year (although this was some years back, when crime rates were higher than now). The widely reported Kleck/Gertz study, which has its own set of problems, showed a range of 830,000 to 2.45 million defensive gun uses per year. Other studies have fallen solidly in the middle, with hundreds of thousands of defensive gun uses per year.

Our study examines a variety of incident types: concealed-weapon permit holders (285 accounts); home invasions (1,227 incidents); residential burglaries (488). There are categories that we would never have thought were all that common: 172 incidents where people defended themselves from animal attacks (some wild, some dogs gone wild); 34 were incidents where pizza delivery drivers defended themselves from robbery.

Startled? You might think from how rarely stories like this go national that defensive gun use is relatively rare in America. Why don't we see these stories more often, if victims are using guns in self-defense so often? Keep in mind that the vast majority of defensive gun uses never receive even local news coverage. "Homeowner scares away burglar, no shots fired" is not exactly a major news story, unless you live in a verysmall town.

Nonetheless, from 2003 through 2011, when I collaborated in an effort to gather local news stories and official reports of civilians using guns in self-defense here in the United States, I was astonished by how many such incidents there were, the vast majority of which never received national attention. Over a period of more than seven years, we compiled almost 5,000 such accounts. Most ended happily, with a burglar, carjacker or robber held for police. Some ended in bloodshed, as in the case of Sarah McKinley. Very few ended with the victim injured or killed.

Some of the news stories that did receive national attention are unsurprising, such as that of Matthew Murray, a mentally ill young man, who walked into New Life Church in Colorado Springs in 2007, carrying two handguns, an assault rifle and 1,000 rounds of ammunition. Murray had already murdered four people in the previous 12 hours, two of them in the church's parking lot. Jeanne Assam, who was licensed to carry a concealed weapon, drew her weapon and shot Murray, preventing what could have been the most lethal mass murder in U.S. history.

Some of the news stories that stayed local, however, were dramatic stories of life and death, good and evil, that seem like the dictionary definition of "human interest story." On May 4, 2009, two masked men with guns burst into a home in College Park, Ga., while a birthday party was in progress. Ten people, some of them college students, were inside the apartment. The intruders separated the men from the women. One of the intruders started counting his bullets; the other asked how many bullets he had. "Enough," he said. It does not take much imagination to figure out that there would be no survivors. At this point, one of the students managed to reach into his backpack, pull out a gun and shoot one of the intruders, who then fled the apartment wounded. The armed student then caught the other intruder in the act of raping one of the women in the other room. The student shot the rapist as he jumped out the window. Do law-abiding adults responsibly use guns in self-defense? The evidence we have amassed says yes, and frequently.

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