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## Media Bias Against Guns

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*The following is adapted from a speech delivered on May 25, 2004, at a Hillsdale College National Leadership Seminar in Seattle, Washington.*

People are very surprised to learn that survey data show that guns are used defensively by private citizens in the U.S. anywhere from 1.5 to 3.4 million times a year, at least three times more frequently than guns are used to commit crime. A question I hear repeatedly is: “If defensive gun use occurs so often, why haven’t I ever heard of even one story?”

Anecdotal stories published in newspapers obviously can’t prove how numerous these events are, but they can at least answer the question of whether these events even occur. Here are a few examples of the 20 cases that I found reported in newspapers as occurring during the first two weeks of May 2004:

LAWRENCEVILLE, GEORGIA – At 3 a.m., an estranged, former boyfriend kicked in Kimberly Nelson’s front door. The woman had had a protective order against the ex-boyfriend because of “a history of drug addiction, violent behavior and threats.” He was shot four times as he entered the apartment. Police said that the attacker, if he survived his injuries, would likely face charges of burglary and aggravated stalking.

ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO – At just after 5 a.m., a homeowner called police saying that someone was trying to break into his home. Police reported that while waiting for the police to arrive, the homeowner defended himself by shooting the intruder in the arm.

LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY – As a robber tried to rob a Shelby Food Mart, he was shot by a store clerk. The judge who heard the case said that the clerk had acted responsibly and that he “was viciously attacked by this animal.”

RACELAND, LOUISIANA – A man and his girlfriend offered two men a ride. One of the hitchhikers drew a gun and told the girlfriend to stop the car. The man then drew his own gun, fatally shooting the hitchhiker who was threatening them with the gun.

TOLEDO, OHIO – A store employee wounded one of two men who tried to rob a West Toledo carryout. The employee had received his concealed handgun permit just three days earlier. The



employee's father said, "My son did what he had to do. . . . Money can be replaced; lives can't."

These life and death stories represent only a tiny fraction of defensive gun uses. A survey of 1,015 people I conducted during November and December 2002 indicates that 2.3 million defensive gun uses occurred nationwide in 2001. Guns do make it easier to commit bad deeds, but they also make it easier for people to defend themselves where few alternatives are available. That is why it is so important that people receive an accurate, balanced accounting of how guns are used. Unfortunately, the media are doing a very poor job of that today.

Though my survey indicates that simply brandishing a gun stops crimes 95 percent of the time, it is very rare to see a story of such an event reported in the media. A dead gunshot victim on the ground is highly newsworthy, while a criminal fleeing after a woman points a gun is often not considered news at all. That's not impossible to understand; after all, no shots were fired, no crime was committed, and no one is even sure what crime would have been committed had a weapon not been drawn.

Even though fewer than one out of 1,000 defensive gun uses result in the death of the attacker, the newsman's penchant for drama means that the bloodier cases are usually covered. Even in the rare cases where guns are used to shoot someone, injuries are about six times more frequent than deaths. You wouldn't know this from the stories the media chooses to report.

## A Case Study in Bias

But much more than a bias toward bad news and drama goes into the media's selective reporting on gun usage. Why, for instance, does the torrential coverage of public shooting sprees fail to acknowledge when such attacks are aborted by citizens with guns? In January 2002, a shooting left three dead at the Appalachian Law School in Virginia. The event made international headlines and produced more calls for gun control.

Yet one critical fact was missing from virtually all the news coverage: The attack was stopped by two students who had guns in their cars.

The fast responses of Mikael Gross and Tracy Bridges undoubtedly saved many lives. Mikael was outside the law school returning from lunch when Peter Odighizuwa started shooting. Tracy was in a classroom waiting for class to start. When the shots rang out, chaos erupted. Mikael and Tracy were prepared to do

something more constructive: Both immediately ran to their cars and got their guns, then approached the shooter from different sides. Thus confronted, the attacker threw his gun down.

Isn't it remarkable that out of 218 unique news stories (from a Lexis-Nexis search) in the week after the event, just four mentioned that the students who stopped the shooter had guns? Here is a typical description of the event from the *Washington Post*: "Three students pounced on the gunman and held him until help arrived." New York's *Newsday* noted only that the attacker was "restrained by students." Many stories mentioned the law-enforcement or military backgrounds of these student heroes, but virtually all of the media, in discussing how the killer was stopped, failed to mention the students' guns.

A week and a half after the assault, I appeared on a radio program in Los Angeles along with Tracy Bridges, one of the Appalachian Law School heroes. Tracy related how he had carefully described to over 50 reporters what had happened, explaining how he had to point his gun at the attacker and yell at him to drop his gun. Yet the media had consistently reported that the incident had ended by the students "tackling" the killer. Tracy specifically mentioned that he had spent a considerable amount of time talking face-to-face with reporter Maria Glod of the *Washington Post*. He seemed stunned that this conversation had not resulted in a more accurate rendition of what had occurred.

After finishing the radio show, I telephoned the *Post*, and Ms. Glod confirmed that she had talked to both Tracy Bridges and Mikael Gross, and that both had told her the same story. She said that describing the students as pouncing, and failing to mention their guns, was not "intentional." It had been due to *space constraints*.

I later spoke with Mike Getler, the ombudsman for the *Post*. Getler was quoted in the *Kansas City Star* as saying that the reporters simply did not know that bystanders had gotten their guns. After I informed him that Glod had been told by the students about using their guns, Getler said, "She should have included it." But he said that he had no power to do anything about it. He noted that readers had sent in letters expressing concern about how the attack had been covered. But none of these letters was ever published.

It was not until February 28, 2004, after the preliminary hearing where testimony verified again what had happened, that the *Washington*

*Post* published one sentence that briefly noted: “[The killer] was subdued without incident by armed students.”

The *Kansas City Star* printed a particularly telling interview with Jack Stokes, media relations manager at the Associated Press, who “dismissed accusations that news groups deliberately downplayed the role gun owners may have played in stopping” the shooting. But Stokes “did acknowledge being ‘shocked’ upon learning that students carrying guns had helped subdue the gunman. ‘I thought, my God, they’re putting into jeopardy even more people by bringing out these guns.’”

Selective reporting of crimes such as the Appalachian Law School incident isn’t just poor journalism; it could actually endanger people’s lives. By turning a case of defensive gun use into a situation where students merely “overpowered a gunman” the media give potential victims the wrong impression about what works when confronted with violence. Research consistently shows that having a gun (usually just brandishing it is enough) is the safest way to respond to any type of criminal assault.

## Evidence of Unbalanced Coverage

I conducted searches of the nation’s three largest newspapers — *USA Today*, the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* — for the year 2001 and found that only the *Times* carried even a single news story on defensive gun use. (The instance involved a retired New York City Department of Corrections worker who shot a man attempting to hold up a gas station.) Broadening my search to the top ten newspapers in the country, I learned that the *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post* and *Chicago Tribune* each managed to report three such stories in a year.

During 2001, the *New York Times* published 104 gun crime news articles — ranging from a short blurb about a bar fight to a front-page story on a school shooting — for a total of 50,745 words. In comparison, its single story about a gun used in self-defense amounted to all of 163 words. *USA Today* printed 5,660 words on crimes committed with guns, and not a single word on defensive gun use. The least lopsided coverage

*continued on page 4*

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was provided by the *Washington Post*, with 46,884 words on crimes committed with guns and 953 words on defensive stories — again, not exactly a balanced treatment.

Moreover, the few defensive news stories that received coverage were almost all local. Though articles about gun crimes are treated as both local and national stories, defensive uses of guns are given only local coverage in the rare instances they run at all. In the full sample of defensive gun-use stories I have collected, less than one percent ran outside the local coverage area. News about guns only seems to travel if it's bad.

This helps explain why residents of urban areas favor gun control. Most crime occurs in the biggest cities, and urbanites are bombarded with tales of gun-facilitated crime. It happens that most defensive gun uses also occur in these same cities, but they simply aren't reported.

The 1999 special issue of *Newsweek* entitled "America Under the Gun" provided over 15,000 words and numerous graphics on the topic of gun ownership, but not one mention of self-defense with a firearm. Under the heading "America's Weapons of Choice," the table captions were: "Top firearms traced to crimes, 1998"; "Firearm deaths per 100,000 people"; and "Percent of homicides using firearms." There was nothing at all on "Top firearms used in self-defense" or "Rapes, homicides, and other crimes averted with firearms." The magazine's graphic, gut-wrenching pictures all showed people who had been wounded by guns. No images were offered of people who had used guns to save lives or prevent injuries.

To investigate television coverage, I collected stories reported during 2001 on the evening news broadcasts and morning news shows of ABC, CBS and NBC. Several segments focused on the increase in gun sales after September 11, and a few of these shows actually went so far as to list the desire for self-defense as a reason for that increase. But despite slightly over 190,000 words of coverage on gun crimes, a mere 580 words, on a single news broadcast, were devoted to the use of a gun to block crime — a story about an off-duty police officer who helped stop a school shooting.

Another sign of bias is in the choice of authorities quoted. An analysis of *New York Times* news articles over a two-year period shows that *Times* reporters overwhelmingly cite pro-gun control academics in their articles. From February 2000 to February 2002, the *Times* cited

nine strongly pro-control academics a total of 20 times; one neutral academic once; and no academic who was skeptical that gun control reduces crime.

It's not that anti-control academics are non-existent. 294 academics from institutions as diverse as Harvard, Stanford, Northwestern, the University of Pennsylvania and UCLA released an open letter to Congress in 1999 stating that the new gun laws being proposed at that time were "ill-advised." None of these academics was quoted in *New York Times* reports on guns over a two-year period.

## Misleading Polls

While polls can provide us with important insights about people's views, they can also mislead in subtle ways. In the case of weapons, poll questions are almost always phrased with the assumption that gun control is either a good thing or, at worst, merely ineffective. The possibility that it could increase crime is never acknowledged. Consider these questions from some well-known national polls:

\* Do you think that stricter gun control laws would reduce the amount of violent crime in this country a lot, a little, or not at all? (Pew Research Center/*Newsweek*)

\* Do you think stricter gun control laws would reduce the amount of violent crime in this country, or not? (ABC News/*Washington Post*)

\* Do you think stricter gun control laws would, or would not, reduce violent crime? (CBS News)

I reviewed 17 national and seven state surveys and found that not one offered respondents a chance to consider whether gun control might increase crime. This omission of a "would increase crime" option creates a bias in two different ways. First, there is an "anchoring" effect. We know that the range of options people are offered in a poll affects how they answer, because many respondents instinctively choose the "middle ground." By only providing the choices that gun control reduces crime somewhere between "a lot" to "not at all," the middle ground becomes "a little." Second, when the possibility that gun control could increase crime is removed from polls, this affects the terms of national debate. When people who hold this view never even hear their opinions mentioned in polls and news stories, they begin to think no one else shares their view.

There are other subtle biases in the construction of these surveys. When a survey questions whether gun control will be "very important" for

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the respondent at the voting booth, the media often hear a “yes” answer as evidence that the person wants more gun control. Rarely do they consider that someone might regard a politician’s position on gun control as important because he or she opposes it. This blurring of opposite positions in one question causes gun control to be ranked more highly as an election issue than it should be.

## Debunking the Myth of Accidental Shootings

A final area strongly affected by the media’s anti-gun bias is that of accidental shootings. When it comes to this topic, reporters are eager to write about guns. Many of us have seen the public service ads showing the voices or pictures of children between the ages of four and eight, implying that there is an epidemic of accidental deaths of these young children.

Data I have collected show that accidental shooters overwhelmingly are adults with long histories of arrests for violent crimes, alcoholism, suspended or revoked driver’s licenses and involvement in car crashes. Meanwhile, the annual number of accidental gun deaths involving children under ten – most of these being cases

where someone older shoots the child – is consistently a single digit number. It is a kind of media archetype story, to report on “naturally curious” children shooting themselves or other children – though in the five years from 1997 to 2001 the entire United States averaged only ten cases a year where a child under ten accidentally shot himself or another child.

By contrast, in 2001 bicycles were much more likely to result in accidental deaths than guns. Fully 93 children under the age of ten drowned accidentally in bathtubs. Thirty-six children under five drowned in buckets in 1998. In fact, the number of children under ten who die from any type of accidental gunshot is about the same as the number of toddlers who drown in buckets. Yet few reporters crusade against buckets or bathtubs.

When crimes are committed with guns, there is a somewhat natural inclination toward eliminating all guns. While understandable, this reaction actually endangers people’s lives because it ignores how important guns are in protecting people from harm. Unbalanced media coverage exaggerates this, leaving most Americans with a glaringly incomplete picture of the dangers and benefits of firearms. This is how the media bias against guns hurts society and costs lives.



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