

“A lie can travel half way around the world  
while the truth is putting on its shoes.”

Mark Twain

Are Americans who own guns paranoid and racist?

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Media commentators often give the impression that blacks are the victims of gun violence, that Americans are trigger-happy, and that ordinary civilians who own guns are to blame because they are so easily manipulated by NRA propaganda. What are the facts?

By definition, it is not paranoia when a person has a legitimate reason for fear. The US Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that over six million Americans were victimized by criminal violence in 2013, with blacks much more likely to be victimized than whites (Truman and Langton 2014). Certainly it is irrational to cower in fear after watching frightening news reports without at least assessing the likelihood of any threat and decide what needs doing, if anything.

Guns and criminal violence

Research shows that Americans use firearms responsibly and effectively when they act to protect themselves and their families (Lott 2010). The eminent criminologist Gary Kleck has established that civilians use guns in self-defence against offenders between 1 million and 2.5 million times each year (Kleck, 1997). Further research shows that resisting criminal attack is often successful, and that firearm use is the most effective method (Tark and Kleck, 2004).

It is arrogant for any politician, particularly one who is surrounded by armed guards, to piously claim that we shouldn't take steps to protect ourselves from criminal violence or terrorist attacks. Surveys consistently find that most people, including those vehemently opposed to firearm ownership, say they would use a gun to protect themselves or their families from violent attack. A survey I conducted a few years ago found that 65% of Canadians said they would use a firearm in such a case. Even a majority (54%) of those who want all privately owned pistols confiscated said they'd use a firearm to protect themselves or their family if they were threatened with death or serious injury (Mauser and Buckner 1997).

Media reports often mislead the public by confusing self defence with retribution. It is illegal, as well as immoral, for anyone to decide unilaterally to punish another person with violence. This is what courts are for. By definition, deciding who and how to punish someone is taking the law into one's own hands. This is also called vigilantism, but it is not self defence. On the other hand, it is legally and morally justifiable to use violence, including deadly force, to protect oneself or one's family from criminal attack. Stopping

an attacker from injuring someone is not “taking the law into one’s own hands;” on the contrary, it is a natural right.

Americans who decide to arm themselves for protection are extremely law abiding. A study of over two million Florida concealed-carry permit holders found that there were 168 revocations for firearms related violations. 168/2 million, or 0.008%. For comparison: a study of American law-enforcement in 2006 found that 118 out of 683,396 full-time police members faced weapons violations, or 0.02% (Lott 2015). In other words, members of the police are more than twice as likely to face weapon charges than ordinary citizens who have a concealed carry permit.

What about racism?

This is an inflammatory but unsupportable claim. It is undeniable that race plays an extremely important role in American crime statistics. According to surveys (Morin 2015), twice as many whites legally own firearms as blacks (41% to 19%). However, gun ownership among black families is known to be under reported (Kleck 1997). Murder rates differ as well. Blacks constitute just 13% of the population, but 43% of murder victims are black (FBI 2015). That hardly constitutes racism because 90% of those accused of murdering blacks are black themselves as are 39% of all accused murderers (FBI 2015; Taylor 2015). Defending oneself or one’s family from criminal attack is not racism, even if the attacking criminal is black, and the defender is not.

The 2012 Zimmerman case is often trotted out to bolster the accusations that American gun owners are racist and paranoid. George Zimmerman shot and killed a black teenager, and was vilified by biased media reports for doing so. But all charges were dropped against Zimmerman because court testimony clearly exonerated him and contradicted claims of racism so prevalent in the media (Linder 2013).

According to court transcripts, Zimmerman confronted a suspicious stranger while on duty one night, acting as a neighborhood watch leader in a gated Florida community that had been troubled by recent break-ins. The suspicious person turned out to be Trayvon Martin, an unemployed teenager from out of the area. Zimmerman related the episode to a 9-1-1 operator as it happened, including when he was forced to defend himself with a handgun after being attacked and overpowered. The police did not initially bring charges against Zimmerman, judging the shooting as a legitimate example of self defence, but because Martin was black, race baiters such as Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton spurred the media to relentlessly paint Zimmerman as a racist vigilante. Even President Obama weighed in saying Trayvon Martin “could have been me 35 years ago.”

Under political pressure, the local District Attorney eventually brought charges against Zimmerman. In the end, a jury of six women acquitted him of all charges, accepting that the evidence was consistent with Zimmerman’s claims that he had reasonable grounds to

believe he was in danger, and acted without the “ill will, hatred and spite” necessary to prove second-degree murder.

Curiously, media reports typically referred to Zimmerman as a “white Hispanic,” even though he was “mixed race,” as his mother was Peruvian with a black parent. Zimmerman’s black ancestry was ignored while focusing on Trayvon Martin’s. It is impossible to prove that someone is not racist, but Zimmerman’s personal history showed no indication of racial bias; he had even volunteered to tutor young black teenagers.

Arguably, Zimmerman should be considered a hero, because, as a neighborhood watch volunteer, he undertook to defend his community, putting himself at risk of being injured, possibly even killed. But the media lionize victimhood, while simultaneously depicting self defence, even heroism, as paranoia and racism. Gun owners may accept and even celebrate self reliance, but the media and the general culture, particularly in Canada, act as if they are shocked by the idea that individuals can and should assume responsibility for their own lives.

## Conclusions

The short answer to the question of whether Americans are racist and paranoid is “No.” The statistics show that those Americans, of all races, who arm themselves in order to protect themselves or their family do so responsibly and effectively.

Armed Americans take seriously the tripartite division of people into “wolves,” “sheep,” and “sheepdogs,” which seems to be so disdained by journalists. But people are alive today because other people accepted the responsibility for protecting them. This was expressed perhaps somewhat bombastically by Wayne LaPierre, the NRA’s executive vice-president: “The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun.” This characterization is more realistic than many Canadians imagine.

As Interpol Secretary General Ronald Noble has publicly argued, arming a large number of responsible citizens could be an effective way to defend the public in the face of increasing threats of terrorism. It is impossible to predict where the next attack will occur, and the police cannot be everywhere. A distributed threat demands a distributed response. Armed citizens fill that gap, if well trained and responsible. This is the strategy that the United States is pursuing more broadly against crime with the concealed-carry laws (Margolin 2013).

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