

Debunking irrational fears about firearms accidents

(<http://washington.cbslocal.com/2013/05/15/guns-in-your-home-a-statistical-accident-waiting-to-happen/>)

A recent article by Corey Whelan, published by CBS May 15, 2013, repeats many of the canards about guns being accidents waiting to happen, something like ticking time bombs. Guns should be seen as powerful tools (like automobiles or chainsaws or mortgages) that responsible adults should use wisely. It's disappointing that she didn't check with Atlanta's Centers for Disease Control's WISQARS to find the actual accidental mortality statistics.

All accidental deaths are horrific and sad. Anyone who owns firearms should be hyper alert for potential problems. All hunting and firearms organizations, including of course the NRA, have never ceased repeating the primordial importance of firearms safety. Even though she doesn't credit them, Cory even quotes NRA's Eddie Eagle instructions for children when they come across an unsecured firearm:

- Stop what you're doing.
- Do not touch the gun.
- Leave the area.
- Let a grownup know right away.

Firearms accidents are not a major source of accidental death in the US. They do not even come close. In 2010, motor vehicles were involved in 33,687 accidental deaths, 33,041 individuals died by unintentional poisoning, but just 606 from accidental firearms misuse. Too many certainly, but thankfully, a very small number.

Thanks to persistent efforts made by firearms organizations, the number of gun accidents has been dropping for at least a decade. Firearms accidents per capita have fallen from 0.3 per 100,000 in 1999 to 0.2 per 100,000 in 2010 (2010 is the most-recent year data are available). (http://webappa.cdc.gov/sasweb/ncipc/mortrate10_us.html). This drop has taken place even while the number of guns and gun owners has been growing.

Corey Whelan's attempts to put accidental gun deaths into context vastly exaggerate the threat. Her first claim is quickly debunked: "Bad guys do get stopped with guns, but statistically, in a country where more than one third of households contain a working firearm, far more individuals, especially children, are accidentally shot."

Far more bad guys are stopped than children accidentally shot. According to Gary Kleck, a distinguished, non-partisan academic researcher, Americans use firearms to "stop" bad guys between 1 and 2 million times a year. According to CDC, there were 791 children between birth and 14 years of age accidentally shot to death between 1999 and 2010. This translates to about 66 per year. CDC doesn't say if the gun belonged to someone in the family or to an outsider. Cory has the statistics reversed.

She also claims that, "...women also disproportionately find themselves at the wrong end of a gun in their own homes, ...". Again she has her facts wrong. According to CDC, almost 22,000 women were shot between 1999 and 2010. But 119,000 men were shot over this same time period. This is more than five times the number of women shot. Homicides of course are quite different than accidental deaths. According to criminologists, almost all homicides involve criminals who were shot by other criminals.

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Many U.S. citizens consider their right to own a gun as basic as their right to eat, vote or go to school. Passions run high about the second amendment and, since the Newtown shootings, has served to stir a national debate about gun control, with good guys and bad guys speaking out on both sides of the equation. Newtown was more than just a national tragedy; it was also an event which polarized the American public about gun safety, child safety and our inalienable rights.

Statistics versus emotions

When stories hit the press about people victoriously defending themselves with firearms, gun sales go up. Emotion and the desire to protect your own are pretty powerful motivations. However, statistics about gun-related deaths should not be ignored. Multiple groups, like the American Academy of Pediatrics, urge Americans not to keep guns in their homes because of overwhelming evidence that homes with guns are more likely to also be homes with suicides, murders and gun-related accidents. Bad guys do get stopped with guns, but statistically, in a country where more than one third of households contain a working firearm, far more individuals, especially children, are accidentally shot. In

addition to the number of children wounded or killed by firearms, women also disproportionately find themselves at the wrong end of a gun in their own homes, with a current or former romantic partner typically pulling the trigger.

According to a report filed by the Washington State Department of Social Health Services, a child or teen is killed once every seven and a half hours with a gun, either by accident or by suicide. In 72 percent of these cases, the firearm used was housed in the victim's own residence. Many of these weapons were locked away in a secure place, yet 48 percent of those who own guns do not equip them with child safety and trigger locks.

Hidden guns may be found and used by children often, yet in a third of homes where firearms are present, that type of hide-and-seek discovery is not necessary. A full 30 percent of gun owners keep their weapons at the ready in an unlocked, loaded state. Ironically, in order for a home to be protected against an intruder, guns need to be easily and quickly accessible and it is this very accessibility which makes firearms in the home so deadly.

Gun safety basics

Whether you have guns in your home or not, it is imperative you teach your children what to do if they come across a firearm accidentally. The standard safety steps children should follow are:

- Stop what you're doing.
- Do not touch the gun.
- Leave the area.
- Let a grownup know right away.

It is also important that children be told it is not their responsibility to protect someone who has a gun or to hide this knowledge from their parent or guardian. If you yourself have a gun you no longer wish to keep, you may be able to sell it to an authorized dealer or have it melted down. You can also turn your firearms in to the local authorities, along with any ammunition.

If you are in possession of an illegal firearm, there are a number of no-questions-asked gun buy-back programs available in most states. Most importantly, don't simply throw an unwanted gun away or stow it in an attic or basement where it can be stolen or stumbled upon, years later.

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