

Four Fabrications About Firearms

According to two recent op-eds published by the *New York Times*:

- “more guns means more murder.”
- “more guns means less safety.”
- “a gun is 22 times more likely to be used in a criminal assault, an accidental death or injury, a suicide attempt or a homicide than it is for self-defense.”
- “gun-owning households were 41 percent more likely to experience a homicide and 244 percent more like[ly] to experience a suicide.”

As detailed below, all of those claims are rooted in misleading or blatantly false evidence. By spreading this misinformation, the *Times* and the authors of these pieces may deceive people into making decisions that lead to suffering and deaths.

Fabrication # 1: More Guns Means More Murder

To prove [his claim](#) that “more guns means more murder,” *Times* columnist Bret Stephens cites a [2013 paper](#) in the *American Journal of Public Health*, which found that “states with higher rates of gun ownership had disproportionately large numbers of deaths from firearm-related homicides.”

For two reasons, this study does not support Stephens’ assertion.

First, the excerpt he quoted from the paper—and the paper itself—don’t account for all murders but only for those committed with guns. This is a sure way to measure all negative effects of gun ownership while excluding most positive effects. For example, if a criminal uses a gun to

kill a woman, the study accounts for this negative outcome. However, if a woman uses a gun to prevent a would-be murderer from strangling her, the study ignores this positive outcome.

The primary benefit of gun ownership is that it dramatically changes the balance of power between criminals and potential victims. A central fact of criminology is that lawbreakers often attack “soft targets” or “easy prey.” In the words of the textbook [Forensic Science: Advanced Investigations](#), “Very often, a criminal chooses a target based on the vulnerability of the victim.” The academic book [The Psychology of Criminal and Antisocial Behavior: Victim and Offender Perspectives](#) says it like this: “Predators, irrespective of their end game, are exceptionally good at identifying the weak members of the herd.”

Firearms in the hands of law-abiding citizens transform them into hard targets, which often prevents crime without even firing a shot. This is borne out by a 1982 survey of male felons in 11 state prisons across the U.S., which [found](#) that 40% of them had decided not to commit a crime because they “knew or believed that the victim was carrying a gun.”

For all of the reasons above, to assess the true effects of gun ownership on murder, one must account for all murders, not just those committed with guns.

Second, Stephens makes a common blunder by confusing association with causation. Even if the study he cited had found that states with higher rates of gun ownership had higher levels of murder, this would not show that “more guns means more murder.” As explained in a [textbook](#) about analyzing data:

Association is not the same as causation. This issue is a persistent problem in empirical analysis in the social sciences. Often the investigator will plot two variables and use the tight relationship obtained to draw absolutely

ridiculous or completely erroneous conclusions. Because we so often confuse association and causation, it is extremely easy to be convinced that a tight relationship between two variables means that one is causing the other. This is simply not true.

The reason it's not true is because there are numerous possible factors that impact homicide rates, and without an [experimental study](#), it is extremely difficult to identify, measure, and account for the effects of all such factors. In fact, the authors of the [study](#) in question make this point three times, writing, "we could not determine causation," "we could not determine causation," and "it is not possible in a panel study such as ours to determine causality."

Despite those explicit and repeated warnings in the study, Stephens misrepresents it as though it proves causation. Coming from Stephens, [who is](#) a Pulitzer Prize winner and has a master's degree from the London School of Economics, this kind of error belies gross negligence. The fact that association does not prove causation is taught in high school statistics, and the [Common Core](#) math standards [require](#) students to "distinguish between correlation and causation."

Fabrication # 2: More Guns Means Less Safety

Stephens also contends that "more guns means less safety." As proof of this, he writes that "the F.B.I. counted a total of 268 '[justifiable homicides](#)' by private citizens involving firearms in 2015; that is, felons killed in the course of committing a felony. Yet that same year, there were 489 '[unintentional firearms deaths](#)' in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control."

Stephens' comparison of firearm accidents to justifiable firearm homicides does not prove his point, because it presumes that firearms improve safety only when they are used to kill criminals. As explained in a 300+ page [analysis of](#)

[firearms studies](#) published in 2005 by the National Academies of Science, “effective defensive gun use need not ever lead the perpetrator to be wounded or killed. Rather, to assess the benefits of self-defense, one needs to measure crime and injury averted. The particular outcome of an offender is of little relevance.”

Likewise, a [1995 paper](#) in the *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* states:

This is also too serious a matter to base conclusions on silly statistics comparing the number of lives taken with guns with the number of criminals killed by victims. Killing a criminal is not a benefit to the victim, but rather a nightmare to be suffered for years afterward.

The purpose of having a gun for self-defense is not to kill or hurt criminals but to prevent criminals from killing or hurting others. Hence, in the [vast majority](#) of cases where someone uses a gun for self-defense, a bullet is never fired because the would-be assailant retreats when he discovers that his target is armed.

Fabrication # 3: Guns Are Far More Likely to Be Used for Harm Than Self-Defense

Other bogus assertions in these *Times* editorials [come from](#) Michael Shermer, a [Ph.D. who teaches](#) a course at Chapman University entitled “Skepticism 101: How to Think Like a Scientist.” According to Shermer, “a gun is 22 times more likely to be used in a criminal assault, an accidental death or injury, a suicide attempt or a homicide than it is for self-defense.”

Shermer bases this claim on a [1998 paper](#) in the *Journal of Trauma and Acute Care Surgery*, which examined “records of all fatal and nonfatal shootings in three U.S. cities” that “occurred in or around a residence.” The study found that “for

every time a gun in the home was used in a self-defense or legally justifiable shooting, there were four unintentional shootings, seven criminal assaults or homicides and 11 attempted or completed suicides.”

Like Stephens, Shermer grossly misrepresents the findings of the study he cites. This study does not measure how often guns are used “for self-defense,” as he claims. Instead, it measures how often they are “used to injure or kill in self-defense.” Hence, it excludes every case where a gun is used for self-defense and the criminal is not shot. Again, this ignores the vast bulk of defensive gun uses and benefits.

This study also suffers from the implicit assumption that everyone who commits suicide with a gun would not take their lives by other means if they didn’t have a gun. That notion is abjectly false. As the 2005 National Academies of Science gun control analysis [says](#), “Some gun control policies may reduce the number of gun suicides, but they have not yet been shown to reduce the overall risk of suicide in any population.”

In order to measure what Shermer is driving at with his fake fact, one must compare all of the lives that would be saved if guns did not exist to all of the lives that would be lost. This is very difficult to determine, but the most solid existing data suggests that guns help save far more lives than they cost.

In 2014, roughly [14,249 murders](#) were committed with firearms in the United States, and [586 fatal firearm accidents](#) occurred. Assuming that none of these murders would have taken place if guns were unavailable in the U.S., about 15,000 lives might have been saved.

In comparison, a [1993 nationwide survey](#) of 4,977 households [found that](#) over the previous five years, at least 0.5% of households had members who had used a gun for defense during a situation in which they thought someone “almost certainly

would have been killed” if they “had not used a gun for protection.” This amounts to 162,000 such incidents per year. And it excludes all “military service, police work, or work as a security guard.”

In sum, these data suggest that civilian usage of guns costs about 15,000 lives per year and saves roughly 160,000 lives per year. Since the latter figure is based on people’s subjective views of what would have happened if they did not use a gun, it should be taken with a grain of salt. However, only 15.7% of the people who used a gun for defense said that someone “almost certainly would have been killed” if they “had not used a gun for protection.” Hence, this is not a case where a majority of defensive gun users in this study may have exaggerated the life-saving import of what they did.

Moreover, anti-gun criminologist Marvin E. Wolfgang praised this study, which was conducted by pro-gun researchers Gary Kleck and Marc Gertz and published in the *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*. In the same journal, Wolfgang [wrote](#):

- “I am as strong a gun-control advocate as can be found among the criminologists in this country.”
- “Nonetheless, the methodological soundness of the current Kleck and Gertz study is clear. I cannot further debate it.”
- “The Kleck and Gertz study impresses me for the caution the authors exercise and the elaborate nuances they examine methodologically. I do not like their conclusions that having a gun can be useful, but I cannot fault their methodology.”

Other credible studies provide evidence that the number of defensive gun uses are substantial.

Anti-gun researcher David McDowall and others conducted a [major survey](#) of defensive gun use that was published by the *Journal of Quantitative Criminology* in 2000. The authors did

not take their survey results to their logical conclusions by using the common practice of [weighting them](#) to find what the results would be for a nationally representative survey sample. But when one does this, [the results](#) imply that U.S. civilians use guns to defend themselves and others from crime at least 990,000 times per year. This figure accounts only for “clear” cases of defensive gun use and is based upon a weighting calculation designed to minimize defensive gun uses.

Likewise, a [1994 survey](#) conducted by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that Americans use guns to frighten away intruders who are breaking into their homes about 498,000 times per year.

Fabrication # 4: Owning a Gun Increases Your Risk of Homicide and Suicide

Shermer also cites a [2003 paper](#) from the *Annals of Emergency Medicine*, which he summarizes by saying that it found “gun-owning households were 41 percent more likely to experience a homicide and 244 percent more like[ly] to experience a suicide.” He follows this up by stating, “The Second Amendment protects your right to own a gun, but having one in your home involves a risk-benefit calculation you should seriously consider.”

Like Stephens, Shermer mistakes association for causation. This study, like many others in the social sciences, attempts to divine causation by using statistical techniques to “control” for the effects of certain variables. These techniques, however, cannot objectively rule out the possibility that other factors are at play. This is called [“omitted variable bias,”](#) and the study in question directly states that it omits many variables that could bias its results, including “mental illness among subjects or family members and histories of violence, illicit drug and alcohol use, time spent (exposed) at home, and lifestyle factors like gang membership and drug dealing.”

Furthermore, this study is a “case control” study, and as the above-cited National Academies of Science report [explains](#), case control studies cannot determine “causal mechanisms.” This is because gun “ownership is not a random decision,” and “homicide victims may possess firearms precisely because they are likely to be victimized.” In other words, the study may actually show a reverse causation in which vulnerability to murder causes people to buy guns.

Summary

[Journalism standards](#) give commentators “wide latitude” to express their views, but this is not a license to butcher the truth. In the words of *New York Times* deputy editorial page editor [Trish Hall](#), “the facts in a piece must be supported and validated. You can have any opinion you would like, but you can’t say that a certain battle began on a certain day if it did not.” Yet, these two *Times* op-eds do just that.

By spreading these fabrications, the *Times* editors, Stephens, and Shermer can cause tremendous harm. They may, for example, convince people who will use a gun to save their own lives or the lives of others from ever getting a gun. Their falsehoods may also convince voters to elect politicians who will [appoint judges](#) that effectively repeal the Second Amendment. Stephens actually calls for that in his op-ed. In turn, this could have widespread ripple effects on murder and other crimes.

In the realm of public policy, false information can have deadly consequences. This is not just a problem for the gun control side of this debate but for the [gun rights side also](#). When people place their viewpoints over the truth, they value their biases more than the well-being and very lives of themselves and others.

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