

PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION

It May Not Feel True, but Gunshot Deaths Are Down

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WASHINGTON
THE images are grisly. Gunshot victims surrounded by paramedics rushing to waiting ambulances outside a school, a community center, an office building. Little wonder that people worry that a gunman with an assault weapon and a grudge could loose a reign of terror on anyone, any time, anywhere.

Such incidents reinforce a widespread myth that the number of shooting deaths in the United States is increasing. In fact, the number dropped to 32,436 in 1997, the latest year for which statistics are available, from a peak of 39,595 in 1993.

But highly publicized shootings, no matter how rare, can prompt people to buy guns for self-protection, an act that, many experts say, actually increases the likelihood that the buyer or a member of his or her family will be shot.

More often the carnage occurs in thousands of small tragedies too mundane to make national headlines in a country where surveys have indicated that half the households have at least one gun.

"The odds that a home will be the scene of a homicide are substantially greater if there is a gun in the home," said Dr. Arthur L. Kellerman, head of emergency medicine at Emory University in Atlanta, who led a team that studied shootings in Memphis, Galveston and Seattle.

And those homicides will have little to do with intruders. A number of studies have concluded that very few people with guns in the home ever use them to resist an attacker. In one study, fewer than two crimes in a thousand were resisted with a gun. The most likely explanation was that few homeowners have enough warning to arm themselves with their own weapons.

Even law enforcement personnel who routinely carry weapons are often inadequately prepared to handle a shooting situation, said Philip Hayden, a retired F.B.I. supervisor who conducted the agency's law enforcement training for safety and survival program at the F.B.I. academy in Quantico, Va.

Statistics on gun use offer cold comfort during what seems like a summer of high-profile terror shootings. In Atlanta last month, Mark O. Barton, a disgruntled day trader, shot and killed nine people after murdering his wife and two children. In Los Angeles earlier this month, Buford O. Furrow Jr., a white supremacist, opened fire at a Jewish community center, wounding five people, and later shot and killed a postal

worker.

But most people are not shot by anti-social loners, assassins or even by intruders breaking into a home.

Gun violence, experts say, is overwhelmingly dependent on a single factor: easy access to a weapon. "On average, the gun that represents the greatest threat is the one that is kept loaded and readily available in a bedside drawer," Dr. Kellerman said. The vast majority of shooting victims arrive at the hospital as a result of a trivial altercation that turned deadly because the combatants could easily resort to weapons, he said.

Some facts: Most people are not shot with assault weapons, but with handguns. Most people hurt or killed by guns are not shot at schools, offices or their workplaces. In Dr. Kellerman's 1994 study of shootings in Galveston, Memphis and Seattle, nearly half took place on a street or in a parking lot, and nearly a third took place in the victim's home. Seven percent were shot in a motor vehicle and six percent in a bar or nightclub.

Of the cases for which the researchers had information about the relationship, if any, between the shooter and victim, more than a third knew each other. Eight percent were gang adversaries or romantic rivals and seven percent of the victims were shot by a spouse, close friend or family member.

Another problem with keeping guns for protection is that it is far more difficult to hit a target than television dramas and movies may lead people to believe. Even police officers under the stress of an armed encounter hit their targets with only 17 percent of their shots, Mr. Hayden said. This is true even though most encounters occur at a range of less than seven feet.

In part, the high number of misses by the police reflects new gun tactics taught by law enforcement agencies in response to higher powered weapons carried by criminals. In the past, many law enforcement agencies told recruits to aim deliberately and shoot once or twice. Now, they teach trainees to aim deliberately, but shoot until the threat no longer exists.

The average police officer, Mr. Hayden said, fires only 65 rounds a year in training, a number that is probably far more than most civilians are likely to shoot. Practice shooting and training exercises on computer simulators are inadequate preparation for real situations, he said.

In recent years, the F.B.I.'s training program has gone to greater lengths to provide what experts like Mr. Hayden said was the essential ingredient to successful firearms training — simulated scenarios that build in the heavy stress, confusion and fear inherent

in most shooting situations when officers' heart rates skyrocket and their ability to think clearly and act deliberately can diminish.

Mr. Hayden introduced the use of guns that shoot paint pellets that sting when they hit, and realistic shooting situations involving

"armed" suspects in scenarios drawn from actual experience. "It's fantasy versus reality," Mr. Hayden said. "If something happens you say, 'This is how I'll respond.' But unless you're trained, you're not going to respond the way you think you are."

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