People fear guns. Yet, while guns make it easier for bad things to happen, they also make it easier for people to protect themselves.

With the avalanche of horrific news stories about guns over the years, it's no wonder people find it hard to believe that, according to surveys (one I conducted for 2002 for my book, “The Bias Against Guns,” and three earlier academic surveys by different researchers published in such journals as the Journal of Criminal Justice) there are about two million defensive gun uses each year; guns are used defensively four times more frequently than they are to commit crimes.

The rebuttal to this claim always is: If these events were really happening, wouldn’t we hear about them on the news? Many people tell me that they have never heard of an incident of defensive gun use. There is a good reason for their confusion. In 2001, the three major television networks -- ABC, CBS, and NBC -- ran 190,000 words' worth of gun-crime stories on their morning and evening national news broadcasts. But they ran not a single story mentioning a private citizen using a gun to stop a crime.

The print media was almost as biased: The New York Times ran 50,745 words on contemporaneous gun crimes, but only one short, 163-word story on a retired police officer who used his gun to stop a robbery. For USA Today, the tally was 5,660 words on gun crimes versus zero on defensive uses.

Just take some of the 18 defensive gun uses that I found covered by newspapers around the country during the first 10 days of December:

-- Little Rock, Ark: After the assailant attacked him and his son-in-law with a poker, a 64-year-old minister shot a man dead on church grounds. The attacker had engaged in a string of assaults in an apparent drug-induced frenzy.

-- Corpus Christi, Texas: A woman shot to death her ex-husband, who had broken into her house. The woman had a restraining order against the ex-husband.

-- Tampa Bay, Fla.: A 71-year-old man, Melvin Spaulding, shot 20-year-old James Moore in the arm as Moore and two friends were beating up his neighbor, 63-year-old George Lowe. Spaulding had a concealed weapons permit.

-- Bellevue, Wash.: A man shot a pit bull that lunged to within a foot of him and his family. Police said the man’s family had been repeatedly menaced in the past by the dog.

-- Jonesboro, Ga.: A father out walking with his 11-year-old daughter was attacked by an armed robber. The police say the father shot the attacker in self-defense and will not face charges.

-- Houston, Texas: Andrea McNabb shot two of the three men who tried to rob her plumbing business on the afternoon of Dec. 1.

-- Philadelphia, Pa: A pharmacy manager fatally shot one robber and wounded another after the robbers threatened to kill workers at the store. The wounded robber escaped.

Part of the reason defensive gun use isn't covered in the media may be simple news judgment. If a news editor faces two stories, one with a dead body on the ground and another where a woman brandished a gun and the attacker ran away, almost anyone would pick the first story as more newsworthy. In 2002, some 90 percent of the time when people used guns defensively, they stopped the criminals simply by brandishing the gun.

But that doesn't explain all the disparity in coverage. It doesn't, for example, explain why, in some heavily covered public middle and high school shootings, the media mentioned in only 1 percent or fewer of their stories that the attacks were stopped when citizens used guns to stop the attacks.

The unbalanced reporting is probably greatest in cases where children die from accidental gunshots fired by another child. Most people have seen the public-service ads showing the voices or pictures of children between the ages of four and eight, never over the age of eight, and the impression is that there is an epidemic of accidental deaths involving small children. The exaggerated media attention given these particularly tragic deaths makes these claims believable.

The debate over laws requiring that people lock up their guns in their home usually concentrates on the deaths of these younger children. The trigger and barrel locks mandated by these laws are often only considered reliable for preventing the access to guns by children under age 7.

The truth is that in 1999, for children whose ages correspond with the public service ads, 31 children under the age of 10 died from an accidental gunshot and only six of these cases appear to have involved another child under 10 as the culprit. Nor was this year unusual. Between 1995 and 1999, only five to nine cases a year involved a child wounding or killing another child with a gun. For children under 15, there were a total of 81 accidental gun deaths of all types in 1999. Any death is tragic, but it should be noted that more children under five drowned in bathtubs or plastic water buckets than from guns.

The gun deaths are covered extensively as well as prominently, with individual cases getting up to 88 separate news stories. In contrast, when children use guns to save lives, the event might at most get one brief mention in a small local paper. Yet these events do occur.
In February, 2002, the South Bend, Indiana Tribune reported the story of an 11-year-old boy who shot and killed a man holding a box cutter to his grandmother’s neck. Trained to use a firearm, the boy killed the assailant in one shot, even though the man was using his grandmother as a shield.

In May, 2001 in Louisiana, a 12-year-old girl shot and killed her mother’s abusive ex-boyfriend after he broke into their home and began choking her mother. The story appeared in the New Orleans Advocate.

In January, 2001, in Angie, Louisiana, a 13-year-old boy stopped for burglars from entering his home by firing the family’s shotgun, wounding one robber and scaring off the other three. The four men were planning on attacking the boy’s mother—an 85-pound terminal cancer patient—in order to steal her pain medication.

As a couple of reporters told me, journalists are uncomfortable printing such positive gun stories because they worry that it will encourage children to get access to guns. The whole process snowballs, however, because the exaggeration of the risks—along with lack of coverage of the benefits—cements the perceived risks more and more firmly in newspaper editors and reporters minds. This makes them ever more reluctant to publish such stories.

While all this coverage affects the overall gun-control debate, it also directly shapes perceptions of proposed legislation. Take the upcoming debate over renewing the so-called assault-weapons ban. This past summer CNN repeatedly showed a news segment that starts off with a machine gun firing and claims that the guns covered by the ban do much more damage than other guns. CNN later attempted to clarify the segment by saying that the real problem was with the ammunition used in these guns. But neither of these points is true. The law does not deal at all with machine guns (though the pictures of machine guns sure are compelling)—and the "assault weapons" fire the same bullets at the same rate, and accomplish the exact same thing, as other semi-automatic guns not covered by the ban.

The unbalanced presentation dominates not just the media but also government reports and polling. Studies by the Justice and Treasury Departments have long evaluated just the cost guns impose on society. Every year, Treasury puts out a report on the top 10 guns used in crime, and each report serves as the basis for dozens of news stories. But why not also provide a report—at least once—on the top 10 guns used defensively? Similarly, numerous government reports estimate the cost of injuries from guns, but none measures the number of injuries prevented when guns are used defensively.

National polls further reinforce these biased perceptions. Not one of the national polls (as far as I was able to find) gave respondents an option to mention that gun control might actually be harmful. Probably the least biased polls still give respondents just two choices: supporting "tougher gun-control legislation to help in the fight against gun crime" or "better enforcement of current laws." Yet, both options ultimately imply that gun control is good.

But if we really want to save lives, we need to address the whole truth about guns—including the costs of not owning guns. We never, for example, hear about the families who couldn’t defend themselves and were harmed because they didn’t have guns.

Discussing only the costs of guns and not their benefits poses the real threat to public safety as people make mistakes on how best to defend themselves and their families.

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