

**Comments on Branas et al. 2009 Study of Self-Protective Values of
Firearms**

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September 28, 2009

Abstract

Branas et al. claimed to have found that gun possession does not confer any protective value on the possessor. This paper explains why the conclusion was wrong, and notes that the authors' did not generate any evidence that was even relevant to the topic. Instead, their findings merely confirm the already established fact that many of the same factors that put people at risk of being violently victimized also motivate some of them to acquire guns for self-protection. More relevant research has consistently found that crime victims who use guns for self-protection are less likely to be injured or lose property.

An article by Branas and his colleagues on the protective value of firearms is the very epitome of junk science in the guns-and-violence field – poor quality research designed to arrive at an ideologically predetermined conclusion. Like all articles on this topic published in the American Journal of Public Health, it concludes that guns (no matter who possesses or uses them) invariably raise the risks of violence. This is not what competent research indicates, but it is certainly what the peculiar body of poor quality research appearing in medical and public health journals invariably concludes.

The authors conclude that “on average, guns did not protect those who possessed them from being shot in an assault” and that successful defensive gun uses are unlikely. In fact, none of the evidence presented by the authors actually has any bearing on the issue of the effectiveness of defensive gun use, for the simple reason that at no point do they ever compare crime victims who used guns defensively with victims who did not. Instead, they made only the essentially irrelevant comparison between people who were shot in assaults with the rest of the population, noting whether gun possession was more common among the former than among the latter. Not surprisingly, after controlling for a handful of (badly chosen) control variables, they found that gun possession is more common among gunshot victims.

This pattern, however, says nothing about the effectiveness of defensive gun use or whether guns “protect” their possessors, but rather is merely a reflection of the fact that the same factors that place people at greater risk of becoming assault victims also motivate many people to acquire, and in some cases carry away from home, guns for self-protection. In sum, the authors found what researchers refer to as a “spurious” association – a non-causal statistical pattern due to the influence of some third factor(s)

on the purported cause (gun possession) and the effect (gunshot victimization). For example, being a drug dealer or member of a street gang puts one at much higher risk of being shot, but also makes it far more likely one will acquire a gun for protection.

Previous published research, however, has directly compared crime victims who used guns with victims who used other self-protective strategies (including doing nothing to resist), and reached precisely the opposite conclusions from those at which Branas et al. arrived (Kleck 1988; Kleck and DeLone 1993; Southwick 2000; Tark and Kleck 2004). Significantly, Branas et al. ignore all but one of these studies, and do not share with readers the main finding of the one study they do mention in passing (Kleck and DeLone 1993) – victims who resisted with guns were less likely to be injured than those who did not. Thus, guns *do* protect their possessors.

The most authoritative study (Tark and Kleck 2004) used data from large-scale surveys conducted by the federal government (the National Crime Victimization Survey), covering large samples that were representative of the entire U.S. population, compared 18 different self-protection victim strategies, and controlled for far more confounding variables than Branas et al. did. The results indicated that the probability of success (from the standpoint of avoiding injury) in defensive uses of guns approaches 100% - it is virtually unheard of for a crime victim to be injured after using a gun for self-protection. Only 2% of gun-wielding victims were injured after using a gun for self-protection (p. 878). On the rare occasions that gun-using victims were hurt, it was almost always injury that came first, followed by armed resistance – i.e., injury provoked victims into using their guns.

Strictly speaking, the results of Branas and his colleagues do not conflict with those of prior researchers; rather, they are simply irrelevant, and do not actually bear on the issue of how effective defensive gun use is. The authors draw a *non sequitur* conclusion from irrelevant evidence. They find that gunshot victimization is more common among those who have guns, and conclude that gun possession raises one's risks of being shot. It is precisely as if medical researchers found that insulin use is more common among persons who suffer from diabetes than among those who are not diabetic (something that is most assuredly true), and concluded that insulin use raises one's risk of diabetes. This silly conclusion would certainly come as a surprise to medical researchers, and is obviously wrong. So is the conclusion drawn by Branas et al.

References

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