

# Routines, practice and mental rehearsal mitigate some – but not all – risks of armed self-defense

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U.S. consumers who buy, keep and carry handguns for self-defense assume legal, moral and safety risks that come along with owning and

potentially using a handgun to defend themselves or others.

In a study published today, Oregon State University researchers have identified ways that handgun owners attempt to mitigate those risks, including developing routines with their firearms, practicing target shooting and self-defense simulations and mentally rehearsing self-defense scenarios. The researchers conclude that while these efforts do decrease some [risk](#), they can never fully prepare someone for the risks posed in an actual self-defense situation.

"In some ways, in the U.S., handguns for self-defense are like cars. They are consumer products that present certain risks to those who decide to use them, as well as to others," said Michelle Barnhart, an associate professor in OSU's College of Business and one of the study's lead authors.

The study found that consumers who keep and sometimes carry handguns for self-defense attempt to minimize their risks in ways similar to drivers of cars. They develop routines for keeping their gun in good working order; some engage in formal training to learn to use their gun safely; many imagine what they would do in different scenarios; and some practice armed self-defense in simulations, like some drivers do in drivers' education or defensive driving classes.

"Our research indicated that the well-intentioned gun owners we interviewed and observed are trying to be safe," said Aimee Huff, an assistant professor in OSU's College of Business and the study's other lead author. "For the most part, they are trying to reduce the risks to themselves and to others."

However, the difference for the gun owners is that they cannot regularly practice using a gun to defend themselves against an actual attacker in the way that drivers can regularly drive a car. They don't have the

opportunity to become proficient at countering some of the risks posed in a self-defense situation, as one would when learning and then regularly using defensive driving skills.

"When it comes to using a gun in an actual self-defense situation, doing so is more like reacting in a natural disaster," Barnhart said. "Consumers can do a lot to prepare, but the actual event will probably occur in ways different than they imagined, and will therefore pose different risks."

The findings were published in the *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*. Additional co-authors are James McAlexander, a professor in the College of Business; and Brandon McAlexander of the University of Arkansas.

Handgun ownership is on the rise in the United States; the number of people possessing a license to carry a handgun rose from 8 million in 2013 to more than 14 million in 2016. Laws are also changing, with more states now allowing individuals to carry guns either openly or concealed on their person in public.

The existing research on [gun ownership](#) and use in the U.S. is focused on public policy around gun rights and gun control, public health in relation to gun death and injury and legal and criminal aspects of guns.

"The voice of the consumer is often overlooked in other areas of gun research," said Huff. "We wanted to know what people do with the guns they purchase and how they mitigate the inherent risks that come with gun ownership and carrying."

Risks associated with keeping or carrying a gun for self-defense include accidentally shooting themselves or others, being targeted by a criminal because one is armed and the legal and moral risks of killing another person, among a wide variety of others.

The researchers spent two years examining the complexities of handgun ownership in the U.S. Researchers visited gun trade shows, observing attendees and vendors; attended the National Rifle Association annual meeting and convention; participated in target shooting and engaged socially with gun range members; interviewed handgun owners, mostly in Texas, and monitored conversations in four online discussion forums dedicated to defensive handgun use for 12 months.

They concluded that these gun owners' efforts to mitigate risk can be categorized into three types:

- Readiness practices, including routines that do not include a simulated or imagined attacker, such as cleaning or storing one's gun at home and target shooting at a range;
- Simulated scenario practices, which typically involve practice drawing/using a weapon in simulated scenarios with inanimate targets, digital images on a screen or using actors, and may include taking armed self-defense training courses;
- Mentally-rehearsed scenarios, which are routine mental operations where gun owners construct imagined self-defense situations and develop mental routines for responding to those situations.

The findings provide insight into the risk and practices of armed self-defense in the U.S., but the consumer culture around handgun ownership and the associated risks is still developing as the market evolves, the researchers said.

The air of secrecy around gun ownership and concealed carry - when guns are concealed, no one knows who is carrying - makes it more difficult to identify and encourage responsible gun ownership and carry practices.

"It takes time for social norms around best practices to evolve," Barnhart said. "On the target shooting range, we found very clear norms related to gun safety, with a lot of self-policing among participants. We observed fewer and less compelling safety norms outside of that space."

Increasing education or training requirements could enhance safety in armed self-defense, the researchers suggested. Simulation training, with specific attention focused on how to determine if someone is actually a threat and how to avoid or de-escalate encounters, could reduce risk. Gun dealers also could encourage safe readiness practices by voluntarily providing more information about risks and safety products such as trigger locks and gun safes.

"Consistently providing a fact sheet on gun ownership risks and ways to mitigate them at the time of purchase would be a relatively easy way to try to educate new gun owners," Barnhart said.

**More information:** Michelle Barnhart et al, Preparing for the Attack: Mitigating Risk through Routines in Armed Self-Defense, *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* (2017). [DOI: 10.1086/695762](https://doi.org/10.1086/695762)

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