

# Inflated Claim About Guns and Self-Defense Returns to CDC Website

The agency's website now features misleading statistics about how often Americans use guns to protect themselves. Here's where those numbers come from — and what the data actually shows.

By Jennifer MasciaAug 24, 2026



The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's publication of defensive gun use estimates underscores the Trump administration's broader alignment with the gun lobby. Photo by Brynn Anderson/AP File

In July, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention added a claim to its web page on firearm injury and death prevention stating that Americans use guns defensively an estimated 60,000 to 2.5 million times each year. The change reflects the Trump administration's staunch Second Amendment advocacy, putting the president in lockstep with a gun lobby that's long promoted the idea that a "good guy with a gun" is the only thing that can stop a "bad guy with a gun."

Defensive gun use statistics are highly debated, and previous references to the range on the CDC's website have been staunchly disputed by gun violence researchers. The low end of the range, 60,000, derives from the National Crime Victimization Survey, a twice-yearly poll of crime victims conducted by the federal government. The high end, 2.5 million, comes from surveys conducted in the early 1990s by a criminologist and self-described "gun control skeptic." The lower stat is touted by researchers and academics, while the higher stat is favored by gun rights advocates who point to cases like the Idaho In-N-Out shooting, where an armed civilian engaged a mass shooter.

## Defensive gun use

Although definitions of defensive gun use vary, it is generally defined as the use of a firearm to protect and defend oneself, family, other people, and/or property against crime or victimization.

Estimates of defensive gun use vary depending on the questions asked, populations studied, timeframe, and other factors related to study design. The report [Priorities for Research to Reduce the Threat of Firearm-Related Violence](#) indicates a range of 60,000 to 2.5 million defensive gun uses each year.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's website now includes estimates of how often Americans use guns in self-defense each year. Researchers have contested these numbers. Screenshot of CDC website

President Donald Trump has repeatedly aligned with the gun lobby since returning to office. He has curtailed gun restrictions, gutted gun violence prevention and research funding, weakened oversight of gun dealers, and directed his Justice Department to sue cities and states to dismantle their gun laws. The administration recently allowed 92-year-old regulations on silencers and short-barreled long guns to lapse.

The "60,000 to 2.5 million" estimate appeared on the CDC's website during the first Trump administration, but the agency removed it in 2022 after lobbying by a group of researchers that included Mark Bryant, who leads Gun Violence Archive, and Devin Hughes, who runs GVPedia, a nonprofit gun violence research outfit. (GVA is a data partner of The Trace, and Hughes was an early Trace contributor.) The revised language didn't include a numerical estimate:

Estimates of defensive gun use vary depending on the questions asked, populations studied, timeframe, and other factors related to study design. Given the wide variability in estimates, additional research is necessary to understand defensive gun use prevalence, frequency, circumstances, and outcomes.

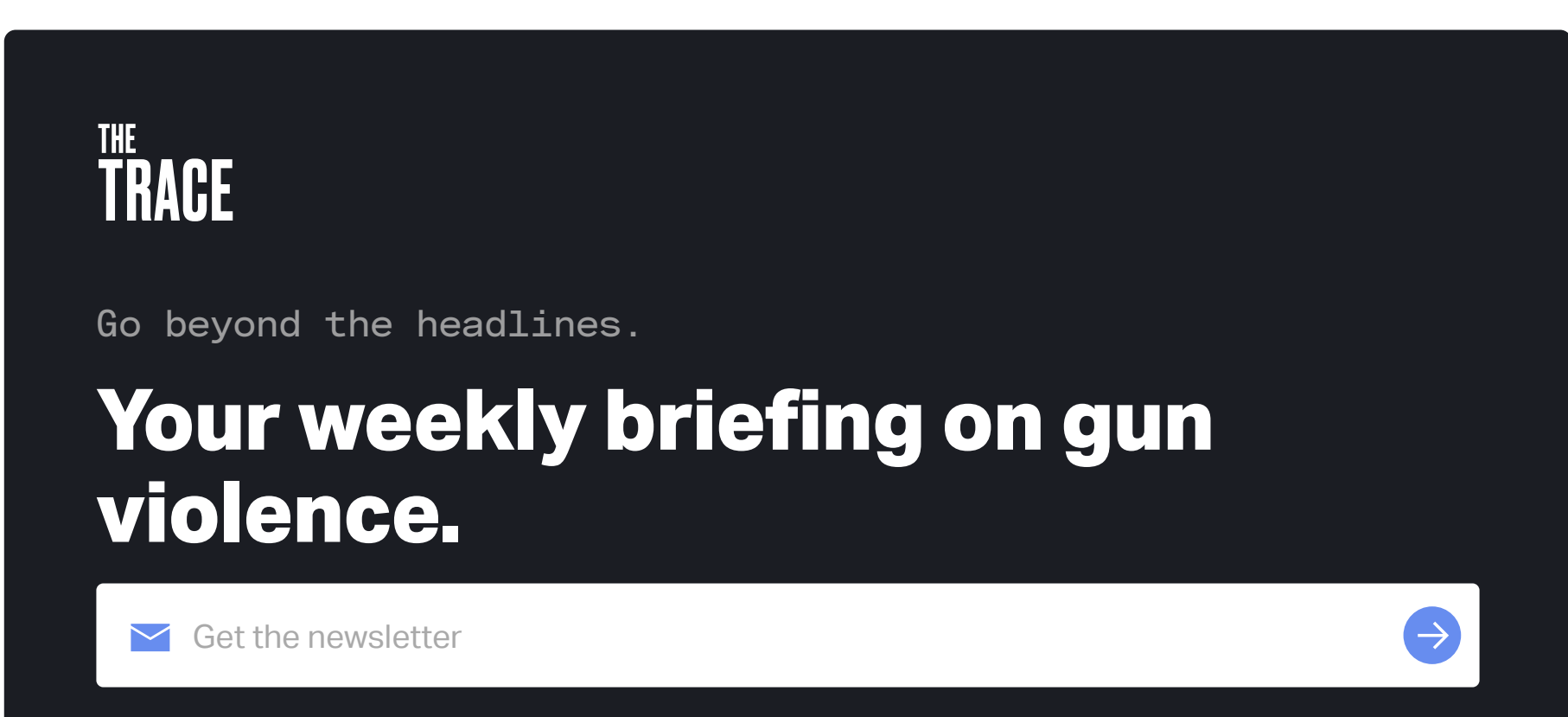
Bryant told The Trace that the CDC's decision to restore the numbers was a "shame." He dismissed the figures as "nothing more than gross estimates based on limited surveys." Hughes, meanwhile, called the agency's move "disappointing but unsurprising," adding, "It is the politically motivated laundering of disinformation that has become a hallmark of the Trump administration's approach to all scientific inquiry, and gun violence is no exception."

As of this writing, the current CDC web page is dated February 18, 2026, but archived versions show that the agency restored the "60,000 to 2.5 million" estimate months later. According to the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine, the agency republished the numbers on July 23.

## What the Data Tells Us About Defensive Gun Use

Gun Violence Archive defines defensive gun use as using a firearm to protect one's self or family. The gun could be fired or simply brandished. Examples include shooting an attacker in mid-assault or displaying a gun to discourage a burglar.

The prevalence of defensive gun use is hard to pin down. Law enforcement agencies don't typically classify it as a stand-alone category. The FBI tracks justifiable homicides, but states aren't required to submit those figures, so the data is incomplete. The FBI figures also omit brandishings and instances in which someone fights off an attack.



The most recent National Crime Victimization Survey featuring defensive gun use statistics, published in 2022, found that people used guns defensively in 166,900 nonfatal violent crimes between 2014 and 2018 — or 33,380 a year on average. Over the same period, the NCVS tallied reports of defensive gun use in 183,300 property crimes, an average of 36,660 per year. Taken together, the violent and property crimes account for 70,040 instances of defensive gun use annually.

There are some caveats: The NCVS figures exclude cases of simple assault. The interviewers ask respondents only about defensive measures if they report being victims of certain crimes, including rape, assault, burglary, larceny, and car theft. That means victims of trespassing and commercial crimes miss the opportunity to report defensive gun use. The interviewers also don't ask directly about guns — they ask what respondents did to protect themselves or their property. It's up to the respondents to supply specifics.

The higher figure, embraced by gun rights activists, comes from Florida State University professor Gary Kleck. He surveyed 5,000 adults by phone in 1993 and asked if they or their household members had used a gun for self-defense in the past five years, even if it wasn't fired. Just over 1 percent of respondents said they had. Kleck extrapolated that figure to the entire adult population of 200 million, concluding that Americans use guns for self-defense as often as 2.1 million to 2.5 million times a year.

Researchers have found issues with Kleck's estimates. While the adult population in the United States in 1993 was around 200 million people, not all of them owned guns — only about 42 percent did. So extrapolating the survey results to the entire adult population yields an overestimate.

Kleck has argued that respondents underreport defensive gun use because they fear the authorities. In some states, pointing a weapon at someone can lead to an arrest. Even if they're eventually cleared, "you've lost thousands of dollars in legal fees, had your reputation ruined, maybe had your picture and name and the newspaper," he told The Trace in 2022.

Gun Violence Archive also counts defensive gun use, but it only captures incidents that make the news or are reported to police. GVA recorded 6,534 cases of defensive gun use from 2021 to 2025, which averaged out to around 1,300 a year. But that's likely a significant undercount.

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