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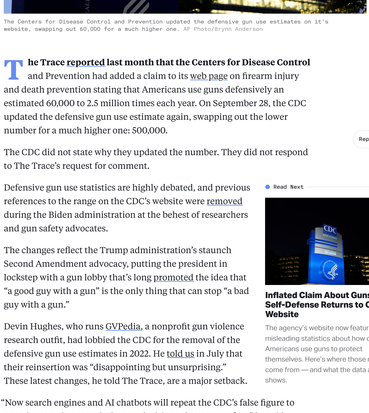
Politics

The CDC Updated the Defensive Gun Use Statistics on its Website — Again

The Trace reported in August when the CDC highlighted dubious figures on how often guns are used defensively on their website. This latest update also reflects the Trump administration's staunch Second Amendment advocacy.

By Jennifer Mascia · Oct 6, 2026



The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention updated the defensive gun use estimates on it's website, swapping out 60,000 for a much higher one. AP Photo/Brynn Anderson

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The Trace reported last month that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention had 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. On September 28, the CDC updated the defensive gun use estimate again, swapping out the lower number for a much higher one: 500,000.

The CDC did not state why they updated the number. They did not respond to The Trace's request for comment.

Defensive gun use statistics are highly debated, and previous references to the range on the CDC's website were removed during the Biden administration at the behest of researchers and gun safety advocates.

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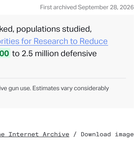

Inflated Claim About Guns and Self-Defense Returns to CDC Website

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.

The changes reflect 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,"

Devin Hughes, who runs GVPedia, a nonprofit gun violence research outfit, had lobbied the CDC for the removal of the defensive gun use estimates in 2022. He told us in July that their reinsertion was "disappointing but unsurprising." These latest changes, he told The Trace, are a major setback.

"Now search engines and AI chatbots will repeat the CDC's false figure to Americans trying to make honest decisions about gun safety," he said.

The September update was first reported by John Lott, an economist and gun researcher whose conclusions have been debunked by experts. Lott has been a strong proponent of expanding the figures on defensive gun use.

The 60,000 figure came from the National Crime Victimization Survey, a twice-yearly poll of crime victims conducted by the federal government. The 500,000 figure, as well as the 2.5 million figure, can be attributed to Florida State University professor Gary Kleck.

The CDC Raised the Low End of Its Defensive Gun Use Estimate

In late September, the agency changed a webpage's range of defensive gun uses each year.

Before

Archived July 24 – September 11, 2026

> 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.

After

First archived September 28, 2026

> 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 **500,000** to 2.5 million defensive gun uses each year.[1]
>
> [1] This page has been updated to reflect a National Academies report's discussion on defensive gun use. Estimates vary considerably depending on the data source.

THE TRACE

Alma Beauvais and Chip Brownlee / Source: CDC via the Internet Archive / Download image

Kleck 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.

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How Often Are Guns Used for Self-Defense?

Fact-checking the "good guys with guns" maxim.

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 in the newspaper," he told The Trace in 2022.

But Hughes said Kleck's work extrapolated data from highly unusual circumstances. "Surveys of rare events reliably produce wildly inflated numbers, and defensive gun use is no different," he said.

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Jennifer Mascia

Jennifer Mascia is a senior news writer and founding staffer at The Trace. She previously reported on gun violence at The New York Times and was a contributor to CNN's Guns in America team. In her dozen years on this beat she's covered community gun violence, the intersection of domestic violence and guns, and the growing role of firearms in public life. She is a graduate of Columbia Journalism School and the author of #Never Tell Our Business to Strangers, which details her investigation into her father's criminal past.

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Trace Editor in Chief Tali Woodward's conversation with Raskin, a Maryland Democrat and ranking member of the House Judiciary Committee, was the keynote conversation of 2026 Safer Together forum.

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