

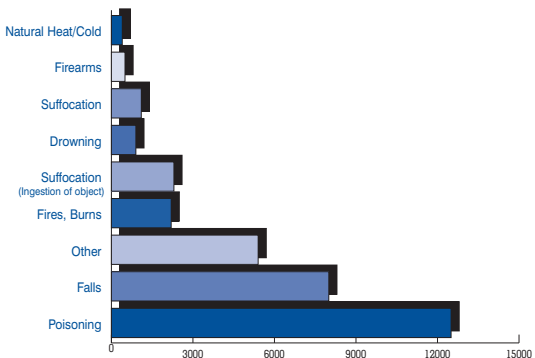
S A A M I

SPORTING ARMS AND AMMUNITION MANUFACTURERS' INSTITUTE, INC.

Since 1926

A Responsible Approach To Firearms Safety

Principal Types of Home Unintentional-Injury Deaths, United States, 2002*



*National Safety Council, Injury Facts, 2003 Edition

Background Paper #3

INTRODUCTION

Legislation has been proposed that would require the firearms industry to produce so-called “childproof” and “accident proof” firearms. The 77-year involvement of the Sporting Arms and Ammunition Manufacturers’ Institute (SAAMI) in successful safety education and firearms accident reduction and its experience and knowledge in proper design and handling of firearms compel it to seriously question this proposed legislation and its efficacy in accidental firearms accidents.

In proposing this legislation, one senator stated that the need for federal regulation of firearms safety design is demonstrated by a Government Accounting Office (GAO) study that concluded that some firearms accidents could be prevented by a “childproof safety device,” other firearms accidents could be prevented by a “chamber-loaded indicator” and that additional consumer education and observance of firearm safety rules could also prevent firearms accidents.

Although the GAO report may be well intended, its methodology is unsound, it lacks understanding of issues of firearms design and the majority of its conclusions are unfounded. Indeed, reliance on the mechanical safety devices discussed (even if they were technically feasible) could lead to an increase, rather than a decrease, in the number of firearms accidents.

CONTINUING A DOWNWARD TREND IN FIREARMS ACCIDENTS

Since its inception in 1926, SAAMI has been a leader in promoting the safe and responsible use of sporting firearms and ammunition. Due to broad-based firearms safety programs sponsored by the firearms industry, the National Rifle Association and others, accidental firearms fatalities have declined dramatically over the past several decades. According to the National Safety Council, there were 800 accidental

firearms fatalities in 2002 (the most recent year for which records are available). Between 1992 and 2002, accidental firearms fatalities declined 43%; they have declined 75% since the high of 3,200 in 1929.

This decline has occurred despite a many-fold increase in the number of available firearms and is due to industry-sponsored safety education programs. “Firearms Safety Depends on You” is the central theme of the SAAMI safety message. It emphasizes that the ultimate responsibility for firearms safety rests with the firearms user and owner. Opponents of firearms ownership, however, promote the exact opposite message, claiming that firearms safety is not the responsibility of the individual, but rather that “Firearms Safety Depends on the Gun.” This is an illogical and extremely dangerous message to send to any firearms owner or to the general public, and it is a particularly dangerous and irresponsible message to impart to children. Indeed, one of the tenets of the industry-sponsored safety program emphasizes “Don’t rely on your gun’s ‘safety,’” because such mechanical devices could possibly fail. Also, reliance on such devices may tend to give a false sense of security at the expense of ignoring the basic safety rules when handling any firearm.

The key safety rules are:

- 1.** Always keep the muzzle pointed in a safe direction.
- 2.** Firearms should be unloaded when not actually in use.
- 3.** Don’t rely on your gun’s “safety.”
- 4.** Be sure of your target and what’s beyond it.
- 5.** Use correct ammunition.
- 6.** If your gun fails to fire when the trigger is pulled, handle with care!
- 7.** Always wear eye and ear protection when shooting.

8. Be sure the barrel is clear of obstructions before shooting.
9. Don't alter or modify your gun and have guns serviced regularly.
10. Learn the mechanical and handling characteristics of the firearm you are using.

Firearms accidents invariably occur because a very small minority of firearms owners and users ignore these common-sense rules. Indeed, firearms accidents, including many of those described in the GAO report, often are caused by uncommon recklessness, such as “playing” with loaded firearms, pulling the trigger while the firearm is pointed at someone or playing Russian roulette. Education in, and adherence to, the rules of firearms safety, not mandated mechanical devices, will continue to reduce the incidence of firearms accidents.

WHY NOT A CHILDPROOF SAFETY?

There is no “childproof safety device” that can guarantee safety if a loaded firearm is left accessible to children. The GAO report simply assumes that such a device exists and will prevent children under age seven from being involved in firearms accidents.

Conceptually, such a device would have to automatically engage after each shot and be incapable of disengagement by a child, whether intentionally or by accident. Such a device would seriously impair the utility of firearms, even assuming they could be universally fitted.

Most importantly, no alteration to a firearm, such as a so-called “childproof safety device,” can guarantee safety if a loaded gun is left accessible to children by a careless adult. It is the serious concern of the members of the Sporting Arms and Ammunition Manufacturers' Institute that more adults might leave firearms loaded and accessible to children if they thought these firearms were mechanically “childproof.”

CHAMBER-LOADED INDICATOR

The “chamber-loaded indicator” – a device that protrudes from the firearm when it is loaded – is not a substitute for physically checking to be sure that a firearm is unloaded before it is handled. Many of the firearms anecdotally described in the GAO report as examples of the need for a “chamber-loaded indicator” either already have such a device or allow the user to see the ammunition in the firearm at a glance. And all firearms may be readily checked to determine whether they are loaded.

The efficacy of such a device assumes that a child would know what he or she is looking at and would also possess the cognitive skills to understand the meaning of that information. Otherwise, the indicator is just a meaningless protuberance on the gun. There is strong reason to question whether or not youngsters under the age of seven can even distinguish between a real gun and a realistic toy gun. Of equal importance, such a device might also encourage certain gun owners to disregard the fundamental rule that firearms should always be unloaded before being left unattended and that firearms ammunition should be stored separately.

Most of the accidents described in the GAO study occurred among teenagers acting with total disregard for common sense safety practices. If a child, adolescent or careless adult either ignores these existing safety measures or is ignorant as to their significance, a protuberance on the firearm will not prevent careless acts and tragic results. Safety education in correct firearms handling is the only way to prevent these accidents.

Furthermore, a “chamber-loaded indicator” cannot be universally adapted to all firearms. For example, most industry professionals believe such a device could render .22 caliber handguns unsafe to use. Yet, the GAO report concludes that universal use of such a device on all firearms is a prerequisite to its efficacy and a number of bills introduced in Congress and state legislatures seek to mandate their incorporation into the design of all firearms.

“MAGAZINE DISCONNECT” DEVICES

A magazine disconnect is a device that prevents a firearm from firing when its magazine has been removed. Very few rifles and a minority of pistols have used such devices since their inception in 1900. In fact, most federal, state and local law enforcement agencies specify that firearms not be equipped with such a device.

The reasons usually given are:

- A.** The firearm is useless if the magazine is lost.
- B.** The user cannot fire the pistol if he drops the magazine during reloading.
- C.** A pistol with a cartridge in the chamber and magazine removed will not fire and may be thought to be unloaded by an inexperienced shooter (the type of shooter the device is designed for). However, when an empty magazine is placed in the gun — although thought to be empty — the gun is now ready to fire, with a live round in the chamber.
- D.** If the magazine disconnect fails as a result of fatigue, rust or debris, it usually becomes stuck in the “fire” position.
- E.** The condition of this internal device is impossible to determine from external examination.
- F.** For training, it is desirable to instruct with the firearm’s magazine out, loading and firing only one shot at a time for safety. This device makes that impossible.

The GAO report did not recommend magazine disconnects in its recommendations.

CHILD SAFETY LOCKS

Legislation has also been introduced in Congress and numerous state legislatures to require that all firearms include some form of locking device to prevent unauthorized use,

especially by children. Such devices as trigger locks, cable locks or locked boxes, however, have been provided by the vast majority of firearm manufacturers with their new firearms for years, in some cases for almost a decade. Currently at least 90% of all new firearms sold are so equipped. Additionally, beginning in 1999, the firearm industry developed “Project HomeSafe®” to provide key firearm safety education messages to nontraditional firearm owners. In conjunction with municipal governments, civic groups and police organizations, this program has distributed millions of locking devices and safety education materials across the country. Expanding on the “Project HomeSafe” campaign, the industry launched “Project ChildSafeSM” with an increased emphasis on preventing children from accessing a loaded firearm in the home. With a \$50 million grant from the U.S. Department of Justice, “Project ChildSafe” is distributing 20 million free firearm safety kits to all 50 states and the five U.S. territories.

While the industry believes these devices can play a role in the overall effort to discourage unauthorized access to firearms, it would be unsafe and irresponsible to suggest that they could overcome careless storage and handling practices. Locks in themselves are not foolproof and, again, are no substitute for proper training. Education remains a critical component, and the industry could support the mandatory inclusion of locking devices if part of a comprehensive educational program emphasizing proper gun storage in the home.

CONCLUSION

In summary, federally mandated design requirements for firearms will not result in a decrease in the number of firearms accidents and might have the opposite effect.

The number of firearms accidental fatalities is decreasing despite the fact that the number of firearms owned by private citizens has increased.

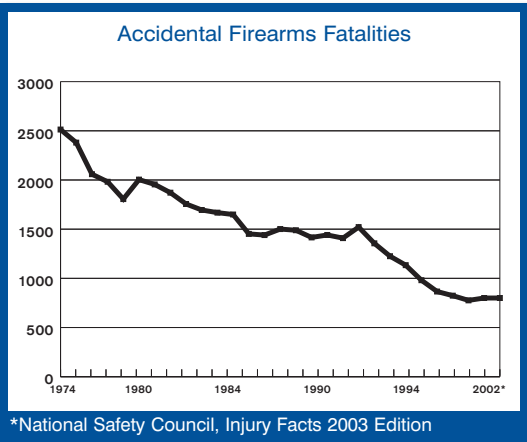
A truly “childproof safety device” does not exist.

A “chamber-loaded indicator” is unnecessary on most firearms and cannot be installed on many popular firearms.

Mechanical devices will not deter accidents

caused by reckless behavior, and their malfunction or misuse could lead to a significant increase in accidents.

The focus should be on the promotion of safe and responsible use of firearms. Resources should not be diverted by an unnecessary and, likely, costly new government regulatory program, particularly when a real concern exists that such a program might negatively affect a long-term decline in firearms accidents.



2002 figures are preliminary

The Sporting Arms and Ammunition Manufacturers' Institute is a trade association of the nation's leading manufacturers of sporting firearms and ammunition. Founded in 1926 at the request of the federal government, SAAMI has been actively involved in the publication of industry standards, coordination of technical data and the promotion of safe and responsible firearms use. SAAMI currently publishes more than 700 standards related to firearm and ammunition quality and safety. For a listing of SAAMI members, please write to:

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