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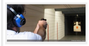
Are You Really Safer With a Gun?

To combat violence on the job, some real estate professionals advocate for carrying firearms. But law enforcement experts say that may put practitioners in greater danger.

MARCH 2015 | BY GRAHAM WOOD



As real estate agent Aaron Smith was ending an open house at a new-construction condo in Covington, Ky., last spring, one prospective buyer — a tall man who appeared disheveled — stood between Smith and the front door. The tone of their meeting suddenly took a dark turn.

Up until that point, nothing had seemed awry during the property tour, says Smith, a sales associate with Keller Williams Advisors Realty in Cincinnati, just across the Ohio River from Covington. The prospect was asking typical questions about the homebuying process. But once he was blocking the exit, his questions became personal and uncomfortable.

"He started asking me really weird questions about real estate agents," Smith recalls. "It seemed like he was planning something."

Should local real estate associations offer gun safety training? (Poll Closed)

- No, gun training is better left to other organizations. 32.86%
- Yes, an option tailored for real estate pros would be helpful. 55%
- Maybe. It depends on local laws and member demand at the association. 12.14%

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As Smith, an arguably vulnerable target at 5-foot-7-inches tall and 150 pounds, began to feel threatened, he started planning for the worst. A gun owner with a concealed-carry license since 2011, Smith had a firearm on his person the day of the open house. He says he was ready to use it if the situation with the prospect got uglier. Luckily, it didn't: Smith told the prospect to leave, and the two departed with no further incident.

But what if Smith did have to use his gun? Would that have made him any safer?

As REALTOR® safety has become a hot topic following brutal attacks on agents — most notably the September death of Beverly Carter in Arkansas at the hands of a killer posing as a home buyer — so has the issue of guns. When REALTOR® Magazine asked its Facebook followers how many carry firearms on the job, the overwhelming majority of the more than 150 respondents said they either do or would consider doing so. And in the National Association of REALTORS®' 2015 Member Safety Report, 12 percent of REALTORS® say they carry a gun in the field.

Forty percent say that they have been in a situation where they feared for their personal safety or the safety of their personal information. Only 4 percent say they have been a victim of a crime.

There's no right or wrong answer when it comes to whether practitioners should arm themselves with guns. Law enforcement officials and safety instructors who spoke to REALTOR® Magazine say they support professionals' right to retain a gun as a means of protection. But for those experts, the issue isn't simply carry or don't carry. The question is whether having a weapon actually keeps practitioners safer.

Having a gun doesn't inherently make someone better able to thwart an attack; it just means the battle has become more deadly, these experts say. Because pros don't typically go through the same kind of weapons training that police do — which goes far beyond the safety classes required to obtain a gun permit— they likely aren't truly skilled at using a gun in a life-threatening situation. Because of that, attackers — many of whom are skilled at gunplay — will have an easier time turning agents' weapons against them. The more agents who carry a gun, experts say, the more are at risk of ending up dead.

When Gun Use Isn't Legal

There are situations in which you may feel uncomfortable or even threatened, but the use of a gun is not lawful.

"An overly grabby or friendly drunk, or a purse snatcher, may deserve physical intervention, such as a physical strike or the use of pepper spray," Taylor explains. "But it doesn't justify having a firearm used on them."

Though the legal threshold varies from state to state, the victim generally needs to believe, based on a "reasonable person" standard, that their life or the life of another person is in imminent danger and that using lesser force won't stop the threat. Preventing rape, violent assault, or assault with a dangerous weapon are justified reasons for using a gun in the eyes of the law, Taylor said.

The penalty for unlawful use of a deadly weapon also varies from state to state but is often considered a felony, which may carry a mandatory prison sentence. Courts consider many circumstances when weighing a person's use of a gun, such as the size disparity between victim and perpetrator, previous encounters between the two, the availability of help during the incident, weather conditions, and location.

Are You Prepared to Kill?

Preston Taylor, a police sergeant with the Sheriff's Department in Grand Traverse County, Mich., says criminals have often killed law enforcement officers by using the cops' guns against them. If a highly trained professional is vulnerable to such an attack, average citizens are doubly so, he says. Taylor, who teaches safety seminars to real estate professionals, says hesitation to use a gun in a life-threatening situation puts the gun holder's life at risk.

"The individual who carries the gun has to ask themselves what they're prepared to do," he says. "If they're not prepared to take a life, they shouldn't carry a gun."

But there are other factors at play, too. Many agents carry their guns in purses or store them in their cars. The time it takes to recognize danger, retrieve the gun, and get it ready to use could be all an attacker needs to gain the advantage.

The average adult takes eight seconds to load a gun, says Chris Sutton, a former corrections and police officer with the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office and Largo Police Department in Florida. Sutton is now the founder and CEO of the real estate–focused self-defense and safety training company COBRA Defense, based in Tampa.

"But most people would have the safety on and the magazine out," he says. "Then it takes 30 seconds to get that gun out. Imagine what I can do to you in 30 seconds."

Neither Sutton nor Taylor say real estate practitioners should avoid carrying guns. But they say that too many people who carry have a false sense of bravado just because they have a gun.

"Unless you train on a weekly or monthly basis, you are not a proficient user," Sutton says. "It's like when you get a driver's license: You take a class, and say you haven't driven in eight years. You have a license that says you can do it, but you're not skilled. When is the last time you spent five hours a month at the gun range? Most concealed-carry permit holders, you don't touch that gun again for sometimes years at a time."

Tips to Stay Safe

- If you pull a gun on an assailant, stay at least six feet away from them. "When we draw our pistol, we feel like we need to be right in the face of the attacker," Taylor says. "But if you're too close, the bad guy can take the gun." If the attacker also has a weapon, stay 21 feet away.
- Never fire warning shots. "A gun is only pulled and pointed if the victim intends on using it," Taylor says. "Shooting bad guys in the leg exists only in fantasy land."
- If you don't want to carry a gun, keep a bottle of Clorox Formula 409 in your car. "It's more [effective] than pepper spray," Sutton says.
- Do a lot of bluffing. Tell prospective clients that you'll meet them at a home with your partner; take a picture of their license plate and send it to your boss; if they object to your safety practices, tell them it's company policy. "If I'm a criminal, none of this is lining up in my favor," Sutton says.
- Get your head out of the sand. "Most people are Facebooking their clients and friends as they arrive at a home," Sutton says. "Look up and take note of your surroundings."

A Case Against Guns

Smith says he grew up around guns and goes to a shooting range once a month to make sure he remains comfortable using his firearm. And while he recognizes the risks accompanied with carrying a gun, he says he'd rather have the option to use it if his life is being threatened. But other agents who own guns or have faced danger in the field, and have no hesitation in expressing support for their colleagues' right to carry,say they would never bring a gun on the job themselves.

Even after being spooked by news of another agent's rape at a recent open house in the area, Alicia Soskawa, a sales associate with Long & Foster, REALTORS® in Richmond, Va., says she won't carry. She and her husband keep a gun at home, and they sometimes go to a shooting range to practice. But she never takes the gun with her on the job.

"I almost think of [shooting at the range] as a hobby," Soskawa says. "I don't want to take on more than I can handle. Would I really shoot at someone? It's different than shooting at a target."

Though she's taken several self-defense classes over the years, Soskawa says she recognizes that she wouldn't have the inclination to pull the trigger on someone. Instead, she carries a Taser.

"It's easier to hold and to have with me," Soskawa adds. "And I have in my head a plan of action, a safe place to go if I need to. With a gun, you have to have it with you 100 percent of the time, and have it loaded 100 percent of the time, to be safe."

Victoria Copeland, associate broker at Ming Tree, REALTORS®, in Eureka, Calif., can relate to Soskawa's reluctance to carry a gun. In December, Copeland went to do a weekly property inspection at a Fannie Mae listing and found the front door kicked in. She went back to her car, locked herself in, and called the police. When an officer arrived, he told her he was going to call for backup before entering the property.

"When someone like a police officer, who has a gun and is trained to use it, doesn't want to go into the property without backup, that's really telling to me," Copeland says. "I think I'm better off trying to make a run for it than trying to get a gun out of my purse."

Safety has become a bigger issue in her area, Copeland says. Her local association started offering safety classes taught by police officers, and her company has instituted new safety policies. With that has come increased attention on guns.

"Recently, people have asked me, 'When are you going to get your carry license?'" Copeland says. "I just say, 'It's not my thing.'"

Other Means for Safety

The emphasis on safety in real estate has given rise to new companies and products promising to help agents, but one has found particular success in targeting practitioners who are looking for nonlethal methods of self-defense. Damsel in Defense, founded in 2011 by longtime friends Mindy Lin and Bethany Hughes, has grown into a network of 8,000 "Damsel Pros" nationwide who teach safety classes and sell the company's line of "hemergency" products, including stun guns, lipstick-shaped pepper spray, and more.

Christine Richards, a Damsel Pro based in Belmont, N.H., says the company's mission is to help people handle themselves in dangerous situations. And it's not just women they cater to: Richards says men are increasingly showing interest in Damsel products.

"It's not just about having something to carry but having confidence," Richards says. "Whether you use it sometimes is beside the point."

She adds that many are looking for something they can use as a scare tactic to ward off an attacker, and guns are far too dangerous to use for that purpose. "When you're using alarms or other safety mechanisms, it's to get yourself out of the situation, not draw yourself in, which guns tend to do. You have a chance to be more in control."

Taylor and Sutton advise considering tools like Damsel's line of nonlethal weapons before guns because most people aren't psychologically prepared to use lethal force.

"A gun makes people think they can handle more than they can," Sutton says. "They start doing things they normally wouldn't do because they think they're protected. You have to start thinking, 'Everywhere I go, there's a gun involved.' Just remember that you can't outrun a plan; if someone is planning something, they will be able to execute it before you ever know it. A gun won't stop that."

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Graham Wood
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17 Comments | REALTOR® Magazine Online | Meg White
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Scott Case · a year ago
The premise that most attackers are skilled at gunplay is a fallacy, criminals don't spend much time at the range or take advanced handgun combat classes. I do agree however that taking a ccw course at the gun show then sticking your gun in your purse or your pants is a mistake that puts you and others at risk. I tell my students that I believe unless you have put 500 rds downrange with and experienced instructor coaching you you are most likely not ready to carry. We teach alot of defensive handgun classes, reason being to instill "muscle memory" to help you during a high stress situation. I would say the majority of Realtors are not "prepared" to take a life but training will prepare you to present your gun in a quick and proficient manner to fend off an attacker without having to fire a shot. Been carrying for 15 years, only had to pull my gun once and the attacker fled without me having to use deadly force. Having said all that if you do make the decision to carry please take the appropriate training and make a trip to the range at least every three months.
2 · Reply · Share ›

THEGrnMtnBoy → Scott Case · a year ago
Excellent.
One can't just carry. One must be able to use it when needed. Practice. Practice. Practice. And be able to face the aftermath.
2 · Reply · Share ›

fran w. hoover → Scott Case · a year ago
Like the article and the discussion. How much training do you recommend? Do you recommend private lessons or with a group? Fran
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Scott Case → fran w. hoover · a year ago
I have found the training depends on the person. The goal is to draw and present in an efficient manner and each student has a different timeframe for skill set development. My opinion for what it is worth is one or two private lessons to learn the firearm you intend to use, ie loading, preparing to fire and trigger/muzzle discipline. After achieving that I think the group training is beneficial. Provides you with a look at different firearms and skill levels but also the support of the other students in the group to build your confidence hone your skills. Equally important is choosing the right firearm and that is the one you are most confident and proficient with. Make sure your instructor understands what it takes to draw and fire with an attacker within arms reach, specifically using your weak hand/arm as a barrier while your strong hand takes care of business. As another commentor stated "I exude confidence" and that is also a factor, predators look for weakness. NRA has an excellent class, Refuse To Be A Victim that I strongly recommend to hone your situational awareness. I pray I never have to take a life but I am determined to go home to my wife and daughter at the end of the day, concealed carry makes that more likely.
1 · Reply · Share ›

Bob mortensen · a year ago
I agree with Ray that you penned a nicely balanced article. I've held a concealed weapon permit in the state of Florida since the first batch was issued in 1979/1980. I've taken the karate class stuff along with my kids and a few years ago I paid a female NRA instructor to hold a self defense class for all the females in my small company. This included shooting 40 rounds at the range. All I can say is each one of the ladies took away several valuable lessons: Some were naturally excellent on the range and some of those actually enjoyed firearms. Some learned good avoidance plans like don't talk on the cell phone when you're leaving a department store for your car; always be aware and if something is not right, retreat to the store and have a security person walk you to your car. All learned about the pepper sprays and tazers. I have in my car a 5 shot 38 +P Ruger LCP which weighs in at 15 oz loaded. The best feature is it has the factory installed laser site which is probably more scary than the firearm itself pointed at you-- anyone under 40 is used to electronics through video games & toys and respects them so much they're out of there before they can question whether or not the older person can aim and shoot accurately which certainly will be a thought in their mind with just a gun without a laser; and I refer to the so called 21 foot rule mentioned in the article's excellent side bar. Specifically, this rule means don't bring a gun to a knife fight. Huh? If you have a holstered gun and your opponent has a knife and you are 21 feet apart,
see more
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Scott Case → Bob mortensen · a year ago
Interesting article on the "21 Ft Rule" http://www.policemag.com/chann...
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Raymond Ciampaglia · a year ago
Graham Wood,
Excellent article recently on Realtors and handguns. I admire the way you brought fair balance to this argument. Being a Realtor in New Jersey myself, I must say It is time we have the choice to carry a concealed weapon. Too many lives could have been saved if we had the right to carry. I fully agree with the opposition that training should be mandatory. I have no objection to such training but how many more Realtors have to die or be brutally assaulted before we get this law passed? Is anyone even trying to pass it? Is it on anyone's agenda?

Please help raise the awareness and the importance of this issue. We as Realtors must have the right to choose for ourselves what we are willing to do in these types of circumstances.

Best Regards,
Ray

—

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2 · Reply · Share ›

Joe Aponte → Raymond Ciampaglia · a year ago
Amen.. I feel your pain.. and to think we have a Republican Governor.. really? Again, like I said before, you do not have the right to defend yourself in Jersey.. If you shoot someone in self-defense you will go to jail. You are expected to run, hide or play dead until the Police gets there. No kidding.. this is ridiculous and plays into the hands of hardened criminals.. Raymond, no one is doing anything to fix this.. that is why people are leaving Jersey in droves.. Sad but true.
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Marvin Shelley · a year ago
Scott - Excellent discussion. I work only in rural areas and always carry - not necessarily for human predators, but also; rabid dogs, foxes, coons, etc.
If I have to draw the weapon, the bad guy has a split second to determine his course of action or I will determine it for him with 9 shots in the chest. There's no recovery from dead. I don't plan on being the one carried away in a body bag.
I really like the 21 foot rule. It is so true. If one is not comfortable with a firearm, carry a taser or super strength pepper spray/mace. You gotta protect yourself.
72 year old broker.
1 · Reply · Share ›

C. D. Carney · 2 months ago
I definitely agree with the last bit about people not being able to know or prevent a person with a plan from acting it out but at least you will have the option with you should you choose to carry. I also agree that if you don't have the mindset to use the weapon it can and will be used against you. But, should you understand, take on that responsibility, and choose to carry you will have one last option in the face of certain death or worse.
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Tony Perez · 2 months ago
For Chris Sutton to state that "...most people would have the safety on and the magazine out," is insulting to most who legally carry concealed.

I would argue that most who take the proper training class to get their license are reminded consistently about the need for advanced training and practice. They are advised to not only shoot at a range but also practice drawing one's firearm and what to say once it's drawn. Like everything in our profession, practice is key. Active Realtors don't get a license and only work with one or two clients a year. Active concealed carry licensees know that keeping their skills honed requires appropriate activity to keep those skills sharp. And, who the heck would get a license or permit to carry and keep the magazine out of their firearm?! With that mentality, imagine someone who carries a revolver and keeps the bullets in their pocket? This is not a Mayberry scenario. This is serious and while some might have the gun's safety on in some situations, many will disengage the safety when they are in a scenario of increased risk. There are some good thoughts in the article but it has an anti-gun bias that we can ill afford considering recent shootings and other deadly crimes against Realtors and the general public.

Education is key. There are many who believe they should carry a firearm but once they
see more
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Scott Case · 9 months ago
One thing I forgot to mention, most LEO's are only required to qualify at the range once a year. Let that sink in for a moment, they are only required to go to the range once a year. The comment by Christine Richards in the article, "When you're using alarms or other safety mechanisms, it's to get yourself out of the situation, not draw yourself in, which guns tend to do. You have a chance to be more in control.", reeks of cheap promo to push some products.
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Tim Montoya · 9 months ago
This article and the premise of being "more safe" is really not accurate. Carry a weapon is not about being "safer", it's about having the ability to effectively defend yourself no matter what an attacker may throw at you.
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Ricardo Cobos · 10 months ago
I don't think that anyone would be surprised to learn that "criminals have often killed law enforcement officers by using the cops' guns against them" whatever OFTEN means. Although I am certain that has never been the case in the sleepy rural county of Grand Traverse Michigan.

It is equally disingenuous to conflate a police officer being disarmed by a criminal with a citizen who is armed and presumably concealed carrying because any criminal will tell you that their greatest fear is not the police but rather the lawfully armed citizen.

Therefore it is safe to assume that uniformed police officers are at greater risk than non civilians because they are the KNOWN threat to a bad guy. Whereas , and here's the caveat, the WELL TRAINED and concealed carrying citizen has the advantage over both law enforcement who are targets of the criminal because the bad guys don;t know they are armed. No, the premise of the article that and armed person is less safe than an unarmed person is about the dumbest thing I have ever heard.

Of course all of this would be a moot point if ALL citizens were armed but that's just too radical of a concept.
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LisaB · a year ago
I'm a female selling commercial real estate for 30 years and I have carried concealed for the past several years. I respect the fact that many aren't comfortable with carrying a firearm and that is okay by me, but in my case carrying a firearm has become a "lifestyle" for me. I train regularly with a firearm and also with other methods of self defense. I carry everywhere I go (unless restricted by law) and take it very seriously. I have become more aware of my surroundings, and have changed the way I show properties. I always carry on my body (never in a purse) so I'm fully aware of where my firearm is at all times. If my life is on the line I will not hesitate to use my firearm. My personal safety and that of my family is the primary reason I choose to carry. I realize that carrying a firearm doesn't make me invincible, but chances are I've improved my odds of survival significantly.
Also, I find Chris Sutton's comment "but most people have the safety on and the magazine out" and "then it takes 30 seconds to get that gun out so imagine what I can do to you in that 30 seconds" unusual. As a police officer, did he carry his firearm without a magazine inserted?? Who does that??
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Joe Aponte · a year ago
I say it is the right of every law abiding citizen to bear arms if they choose to do so. Criminals always have the upper hand and that is wrong. The problem is that most State and Local Governments want to micromanage everyone and feels that this is the only way to keep citizens safe.. I disagree .. that is why these States have the higher crime rate.. People should have the right to defend themselves in case of an emergency.. In Jersey, they will put you in jail if you defended yourself, you are expected to run, hide, or play dead until the police get there. This is not a solution.. If my family is threatened with harm, I will defend them by any means possible. I hope I would never have to face a moment like that, but the possibility is real. The Police officers are not even safe now in days.. this is reality. The criminals are becoming more and more emboldened. Yes, training is essential since a gun can go off pretty easily and it must be handled with care and respect. Realtors should be allowed to carry guns if they feel the need to so.
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Karen Allen-Johnson · a year ago
Good article, thanks for sharing this. I happen to know where you can get the Damsel products :) www.mydamselpro.net/KarenJ
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