



Pellet guns are weapons, too

Star-Ledger Editorial Board By **Star-Ledger Editorial Board**

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Even as an isolated incident, the tragic death of a Passaic County woman shot last week with a pellet gun reminds us of the dangers of these weapons of sport.

Cheryl McDonald, a 44-year-old mother of two, was killed in side her West Milford home after, police say, she was accidentally shot in the back with a pellet gun by her husband. It was the same gun the couple used to shoot squirrels, police say. Her husband, Frank, has been charged with reckless manslaughter.

The incident is just one of many across the state in recent months involving the reckless use of a pellet or other air gun. In Budd Lake, for example, a 19-year-old was arrested after police say he fired a BB gun through his neighbor's window. Last month, Bound Brook police arrested three men, including a 16-year-old, after reportedly finding drugs and a pellet gun that resembled a 9mm pistol in the trunk of their car. Earlier last year, two boys used a pellet gun to shoot a rare white tiger and a black bear at a Cumberland County zoo. And a BB gun was the weapon of choice for a Flemington man who pleaded guilty last year to a string of bank robberies.

More than 3 million pellet guns are sold nationwide each year. Nationally, air guns cause more than 25,000 injuries each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Most of these incidents involve children under 19. They also kill an average of four Americans yearly. Proponents say that shows fatalities are rare, but four dead people are too many.

Let's face it. These are not our grandfathers' BB guns. And they're not only being used for backyard fun. Some of today's air guns -- including handguns and air rifles that fire BB's, pellets and darts -- and even paintball guns can cause damage similar to real guns. And they are widely used to commit crimes.

Passaic County officials have yet to determine whether Frank McDonald had the required documentation for his pellet gun. Possession of an unregistered air gun is a crime in New Jersey. And having one illegally means time behind bars. Some lawmakers in the state say the law is too tough and have called for amendments. But too-easy access to any dangerous weapon is always a bad idea.

New Jersey law on illegal firearms, including possession of pellet and other air guns, is strict, and the penalty, three years in prison, is stiff. We should keep it that way.

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