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CRIME

Belleville man shot with air rifle while cycling. He’s the latest in a national trend

By Bruce Darnell

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What The Belleville News-Democrat Covered Last Week

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Dale Becker, a Belleville native, was riding his custom-built bicycle when a car pulled up next to him and fired upon him with an airsoft gun. While Becker received welts and relatively minimal injury, one of the pellets hit his dog, which was riding in a specially-built crate on the back. "I just don't know why someone would do something like that," Becker said, "just no reason." By Joshua Carter| Bruce Darnell

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Dale Becker neared the end of his usual bike route when he felt a sudden sharp pain. Someone from a passing car shot at him from their window, hitting him and possibly one of his dogs.

The car drove away, leaving Becker in shock. He thought he and his dog had just taken a bullet, only to see a big, bloody splotch on his side caused by an air rifle.

“I looked back to see if I was all right, and I just kind of froze,” Becker said. “I thought, ‘Did that really just happen’ ... and, ‘Oh my god, is this the end?’”

Becker didn’t know what type of air rifle shot him. He initially believed it to be a BB gun, but the automatic firing he described is more of a characteristic in airsoft guns or gel blasters, which shoot rubber pellets and water beads.

Becker said the car at first passed him slowly and he didn’t think much of it. When it

circled around again near the intersection of East A Street and North Missouri Avenue, someone inside landed three hits to Becker's legs and torso. He couldn't find any marks on his dogs the day after the shooting, but thinks one of them may have been hit too.

The shooter's car drove by two more times before the police arrived. Becker didn't see the license plate or the people driving. He said the police patrolled until 6 a.m., but didn't find the suspect.

Becker goes on bike rides with his chihuahuas whenever he can. He modified his bicycle with an electric motor and a cage mounted on back for the dogs, a project he said he's worked on during the pandemic. They have been riding at night to avoid the daytime heat.

Becker is not the first to be randomly shot by an air rifle. Other residents in Belleville have also experienced similar random shootings, he said.

"It's just something that's gonna grow until they outlaw (air rifles) or classify them as harmful and get them out of the toy category," Becker said.

In November 2023, FOX 2 reporter Andy Banker was [hit in the head](#) by an air rifle bullet on a street in St. Louis. Before that shooting, Missouri State Representative Steve Butz was hit as he was walking to his house.

On June 22, someone pulled out a gel blaster in an AMC theater in Creve Coeur, Missouri, and [started shooting at the audience](#).

[A viral TikTok trend from 2022](#) could be the cause for an increase in air rifle shootings nationwide, specifically with gel blasters.

The trend received [media coverage](#) in outlets across the country in 2022, and it has resurfaced in 2024.



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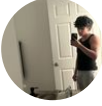
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Many videos found on TikTok display a “war” scenario, wherein friends or classmates will shoot each other at random with gel blasters.



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The shootings often happen in public places. Some videos show the shootings happening on school parking lots or playgrounds, in restaurants such as Buffalo Wild Wings, or on residential sidewalks or driveways.

Some videos show drive-bys, where people will point their blasters out of their car window and shoot — similar to what Becker said happened to him — or show people exiting their car and chasing down their target.



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It’s not known whether the people being shot in the videos are always friends consenting to a back-and-forth game. Some of the videos show two groups shooting

each other, while others show people running away as they're shot at.

Gel blasters, unlike airsoft guns or BBs, shoot water-based projectiles. Despite being made of water, they can still cause injuries, and some shooters have found ways of making the beads hit with more pain.

The gel blasters are designed with colors and patterns that make it more clear that they aren't real guns. However, all airsoft rifles, realistic or not, can create grave problems if they are misidentified.

Toy guns, deadly consequences

People are shot and killed for brandishing toy guns multiple times a year. According to the [Washington Post's fatal police shootings database](#), nine people in the United States have been killed by police this year while carrying replica weapons, three of which were minors.

Becker sees other potential dangers to brandishing toy guns, even just for fun — someone carrying a real gun may shoot back before they know the other person is just “playing.” That includes police.

“It happens all the time,” he said. “Police shoot little kids pulling out fake guns. It doesn't matter if it's fake, you're gonna get shot.

“There are also (civilians) with guns who lack the training that cops have, and they're more likely to shoot you if you pull a toy gun on them.”

A [Washington Post report](#) found that police killed about 40 people who were carrying a replica weapon between 2015 and 2016. That number has held steady every since. In nine years, 315 people with replica weapons have been killed by police — an average of 35 deaths per year.

According to the report, police said distinguishing fake weapons from real ones is “virtually impossible,” and so they have “little choice but to assume the guns are lethal.”

On June 28, a 13-year-old Myanmar refugee in Utica, New York, [was shot in the chest by police](#) during a “ground struggle” because they had a realistic-looking airsoft pistol, which the police allege was pointed at officers at the scene.

Not all replica-related shootings are lethal, and the Washington Post's database includes only data for fatal shootings.

One non-fatal shooting occurred this April in Akron, Ohio, where a 15-year-old was [shot in the hand by police](#) who saw him with what turned out to be a toy pistol. Body cam footage shows he was shot while his hands were up, and he can be heard yelling “it's fake” multiple times after he was shot.

Not only can fatal shootings be caused by misidentifying toy guns, the ammunition they use can cause injuries and other harm, some of which is unexpected.

A shot to the eye by an air rifle, no matter if they use pellets or water beads, can cause significant damage and possibly blind the victim. Shots to the body can hurt, draw blood and leave a mark for days, as is the case with Becker's injury — on some rare occasions, they [may even kill](#).

A not-so-obvious danger can be found specifically in gel guns. The Consumer Products Safety Commission said in [a press release earlier this year](#) that some water beads, especially ones produced by Jangostor and Tuladuo, contain the cancer-causing chemical acrylamide. It warned against consumption and usage of those water beads, and said to keep them out of young children's reach.



Four gel blasters were seized by St. Louis Metropolitan Police on July 2, 2024. These were confiscated after officers responded to a report from MetroLink saying a group was firing gel blasters back-and-forth. *St. Louis Metropolitan Police Department*

Air rifle laws and their enforcement

An [Illinois law from 2012 prohibits air rifles](#) — which are defined as BB guns, airsoft guns, or “any implement that is not a firearm which (shoots a ball) ... with a force that is reasonably expected to cause bodily harm” — from being used on public streets and from being sold to people younger than 13-years-old.

It's a petty offense to break this law, and doing so can result in the confiscation of the air rifle being used at the expense of the owner, according to a [summary of the statute](#) on the Illinois General Assembly website.

The law provides a general legal basis for Illinois, but allows for individual municipalities to impose stricter rules on the use of air rifles and other replica weapons.

Charges for different air rifle related crimes may vary, but according to the report filed with the Belleville Police Department, whomever shot at Becker will face charges of battery and disorderly conduct, both of which are misdemeanors, if they are caught.

Belleville Police were asked to comment on air rifle shootings and if complaints similar to Becker's are prevalent locally, but they declined.

"I do not believe it is in the Department's or the City's best interest to respond to your request for comment regarding these issues," Assistant Chief of Police Mark Heffernan wrote in an emailed reply to a BND request. "My response could potentially be tied to recent events elsewhere in the country that has nothing to do with Belleville or the Belleville Police Department."

The Belleville News-Democrat also reached out to State Sen. Chris Belt and Gov. J.B. Pritzker's office. A representative of Belt's office said the senator would be in touch, but neither he or the governor's office have responded yet.

St. Louis Police Department Sgt. Gary Wall said the use of the weapons against bystanders is considered "assault, and there are very real consequences for it," according to an article by [St. Louis Public Radio](#). "It's not appropriate to shoot any of these types of toys, if that's what we want to call them, at unsuspecting individuals."

Airsoft store owner: "responsibility and common sense needed"

Paintball Outfitters in Swansea resembles a military surplus store on the inside. Accessories such as khaki bags and chest plates, face masks and hats, and, most notably, an array of airsoft and paintball guns hang from the walls.

The paintball guns look alien compared to real weapons. They've got a large oval-shaped magazine that holds the paintballs, a canister on the bottom to propel the paintballs when the trigger is pulled, and a very simple frame and barrel, all of which makes them easily identifiable as not being a real gun.

Some of the airsoft guns, however, look almost identical to the real thing, such as one modeled after a Heckler and Koch 416 rifle. Other airsoft guns look very similar to their authentic counterparts, but, [by federal law](#), they must have orange tips to differentiate them before they can legally be sold.

Joseph Sharf, the owner of Paintball Outfitters, said he disavows using airsoft or paintball guns for violence, but added there's not a lot that can be done to regulate them.

"They're considered an air rifle, and pretty much every municipality has rules against firing air rifles in their city," Sharf said. "But how is that any different from a speed limit? The speed limit (on Illinois Street) is 45, but people still go 65.

"The problem with the legislation is that you're handicapping a mass majority of

people that use it the right way for a few that don't use it the right way ... How is that fair? Why not hold the people using them incorrectly responsible and deal with them appropriately?"

Sharf instead believes the focus should be more on the responsibility of the user, a point backed up by Becker.

"Yes, they're toys, but they look like firearms, so you have to be responsible with them," Sharf said. "You need to use common sense when you have them. (For comparison,) a baseball bat is used for hitting baseballs, not for hitting your neighbor."



Dale Becker shows comments from his post on the MetroEast Crime page outside of his Belleville, Ill. home on June 27, 2024. Becker and his dogs were fired upon by an air rifle on June 26, and he says he isn't sure what the solution to the problem is. "Some people want to go all Rambo and bring out the guns when something like this happens," Becker said. "They just don't value life." Joshua Carter *Belleville News-Democrat*

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