

Defensive Strategies



By Lyn Bates,
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In 2003, the ten-year-old daughter of a Clark County (Vancouver, WA) Deputy Sheriff was accidentally shot and killed by her brother, who had gotten his hands on his father's service weapon. As a direct result of that tragedy, the department began to require that all department-issued guns must be locked when not being carried on duty. The department even issued lockboxes, Stack-On Strong Boxes, for this purpose.

Detective Ed Owens of that department followed this policy to the letter, keeping his loaded service handgun in that box in the master bedroom of his home, believing it to be safe from his youngsters. On September 14, 2010, however, one of his four children managed to get into that lockbox and get the gun out. Then the worst thing imaginable happened. Three-year-old Eddie Ryan Owens was shot and killed with his dad's weapon.

Part of the aftermath of that

Is Your Gun Lockbox NOT Safe?

tragedy was to investigate how secure the lockbox really was. Marc Weber Tobias and his company, Security Labs, were enlisted to help.

Here's a summary of Tobias' background and expertise, from a *Forbes* article: "I'm both an investigative attorney and physical security expert. For the past 40 years, I have worked investigations both criminal and civil, first for government agencies and then private corporate clients...I consult with the largest lock manufacturers of the world. I have a team of experts that figure out how to break their high security locks and then how to fix them so guys like us cannot breach security....My story was pretty much summed up by *Wired* Magazine in a feature article in 2009 when I was dubbed the 'Keymaster'."

Tobias quickly determined that Stack-On's Strong Box had design flaws that allowed it to be easily compromised. He decided to extend his investigation to other brands and models.

What he found will dismay you.

What he found dismayed me enough to rescind my previous endorsement of one of these lockboxes, from GunVault.

AMSEC, Stack-On, Bulldog, and GunVault were the brands examined. These are major brands of lockboxes widely sold

in the US today. While not every model was tested, representatives from each brand were. The lockboxes from these companies are available through many major retailers including Walmart, Dick's Sporting Goods, Cabela's, Scheels, and Amazon.

The tools Tobias used to get into these boxes included: a screwdriver, a drinking straw, a piece of coat hanger wire, a paperclip, and a thin strip of brass. The type of lock didn't matter much—key lock, numeric keypad, biometrics, push buttons or fingerprints—the best attacks bypassed those and went straight to the internals of the locking mechanism. All the safes tested had design flaws or manufacturing defects that made them vulnerable.

I'm not listing the specific boxes he tested because there are doubtless dozens of different models on the market, many of which surely have the same design flaws. By studying Tobias' videos, you can learn how to test your own lockbox to see whether it has these security flaws.

Here are some links to Tobias' work.

His detailed report on the insecurity of lockboxes: <http://in.security.org>

His *Forbes* article: <http://forbes.com/sites/marcwebertobias/2012/07/27/unsafe-gun-safes-can-be-opened->

by-a-three-year-old/

There are YouTube videos of his attacks on every safe he examined, at youtube.com, search Marc Webber Tobias.

If you want to see something really unsettling, look at the video of a 3-year-old boy opening an AMSEC safe and a Stack-On safe by lifting one side a few inches and dropping it on the floor: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=erGOJxQlf5c>

OK, the child was told "Try to move it" as a hint what to do to those funny looking boxes, but it is certainly credible that a kid might come across this method himself or herself, deliberately or entirely by accident.

As I've been saying for a very long time, lockboxes are pretty good ways to keep guns out of the hands of very young children, but the older a child is, the more ways they might think of to try to defeat the box. Any middle schooler or teenager these days may well search the Internet for advice about defeating their parent's lockbox, and might find these videos, or others.

Tobias has made the result of his investigation available to all the manufacturers and major retailers. Most made no response at all. Walmart said, in essence, that they rely on the suppliers of their products such as Stack-On safes. Stack-On said that "While Stack-On respects Mr. Tobias' proven ability to pick the most complex of security locks, we strongly stand behind the safety of our products. Stack-On Personal Safes are certified by the California Department of Justice (DOJ). This certification involves testing, by an independent laboratory approved by California DOJ for compliance

with adopted standards. We are proud of this designation and the protection we provide."

In other words, Walmart says Stack-On is responsible for the safety of their products, Stack-On says their products are safe because they are certified by the California DOJ, and clearly that certification can't be worth much since a box that passed it was involved in the Eddie Owens tragedy. The litigation will go on for years.

"I've only found one gun lock in the country that I think is worth a damn, and it is made by a guy in California," Tobias said, identifying the maker as Omega Safety Systems. Omega locks consist of expandable rods that slide into gun barrels and can only be removed with special keys.

That's great, Mr. Tobias, for guns that are intended for only occasional trips to the range for target shooting. It would be useless as a way to store a loaded self-defense gun that might be needed urgently, much faster than it could be unlocked from an Omega lock or retrieved from a large gun safe.

Tobias' conclusions are harsh: "Any consumer that owns one of these containers should return it and ask for a model that has been fixed to make it secure, or demand a refund. In our view, no weapons or valuables should be stored in one of these containers."

Unfortunately, Tobias never directly addresses, or even acknowledges, the need of many gun owners to have a firearm ready for defense if needed. He is all about absolutes. A storage method is either totally safe, or totally unsafe. To him, guns are completely safe in a big gun safe

or with an Omega gun lock, completely unsafe in any lockboxes like the ones he examined.

A long time ago I came across a quote, not sure who said it: "A ship in a harbor is safe, but that's not what ships are built for." Ships are built for sailing, and that is inherently risky, though responsible people try to do it as safely as possible. A gun with a Tobias-approved Omega lock is safe, but that's not what guns are made for. Guns are made for shooting (for fun and for protection), and that is inherently risky, though responsible people try to do it as safely as possible. With a ship or a gun, absolute safety, though possible, should not be one's goal.

I'm trying not to be as sweeping as Tobias in my recommendations about lockboxes. For the record, I have always tried to distinguish between gun safes (large, very secure places to hold multiple guns, slow to access) and lockboxes (small, some portable, less secure than a safe, but designed to give fast access to a loaded gun while keeping it quite secure from very young children, less secure from older children and teens).

I pointed out in my *Women&Guns* article in 1993, comparing five early models of lockboxes, that ALL OF THEM could be rather quickly defeated by 11- and 12-year old-kids with simple tools, like a pry bar and a screwdriver.

My conclusions then were, "These boxes are just fine for temporary storage, when you are nearby. A sturdy lockbox protects guns from casual theft, and from basically good kids who might fiddle with the lock from time to time but who don't want to

risk the consequences of prying open the family gun box. It is not a good way to keep firearms out of the hands of serious juvenile delinquents, potentially suicidal teenagers, or tool-bearing burglars. In other words, a lockbox is not a substitute for a full sized gun safe...These boxes are child-resistant, not child-proof. Knowing that, use one properly, and it can provide an important extra margin of safety for you and your family.”

I stand by those conclusions today. The bottom line is child-resistant, not child-proof.

I have always recommended that lockboxes be fastened permanently to a surface such as a floor or a shelf, so that the box cannot simply be picked up and carried out of the home so the thief can break into it at leisure. That would prevent the pick-it-up-and-drop-it attack that the 3-year-old used to open a couple of models. Many lockboxes come with holes in the bottom so that it can be secured with screws from inside the box, so the screw heads are secure from tampering (or at least as secure as the contents of the box).

With some of the lockboxes, there are other things you could do to defeat some of the attacks, such as gluing holes that were used to get a wire inside to open the latch, or positioning it to make it harder to use some of the tools. Some attacks, particularly those with a folded straw or thin, long piece of brass, would be harder to prevent.

You might decide to change your lockbox to a newer model that doesn't have these problems. (If you find one, please tell me about it: bates@aware.org.)

You might decide to teach your kids much more about guns at a

much earlier age than you had planned, so that the gun in the (not entirely secure) lockbox won't be a much desired forbidden fruit but rather the familiar thing that is used frequently at the range—always with parental supervision.

I hope Tobias continues to study lockboxes, and eventually finds some that pass his stringent tests. I hope he comes up with a scoring system to rate their safety between the best and the worst, to provide more nuanced information to us consumers than just perfectly safe / completely unsafe. We need to be able to answer the question, “On a scale of 1 to 10, how child resistant is this box?”

I hope manufacturers take Tobias' work to heart and redesign their products to improve security

while still providing rapid access to authorized users.

I hope consumers like us keep complaining to these companies about their products until we are sure that they are making models that are truly safer.

And yes, I will personally continue to use both a lockbox and a gun safe, for different degrees of security, different purposes, and with more knowledge of the true risks, thanks to Marc Tobias.

Your gun is your responsibility. It is up to you to take all reasonable precautions so that your gun isn't stolen, and doesn't get into unauthorized hands. Now you have more information about what might be “reasonable” for you, and what might not be.

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