



DEFENSIVE GUN USE: VENGEFUL VIGILANTE IMAGERY VERSUS REALITY: RESULTS FROM THE NATIONAL SELF-DEFENSE SURVEY

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ABSTRACT

What kinds of people engage in defensive gun use and how do they differ from others? Data from a recent national survey on the prevalence and nature of defensive gun use compare gun defenders to others with a special focus on punitive attitudes toward criminals. The evidence suggests that persons using guns for self-defense do not have extreme punitive attitudes toward criminals. The findings suggest, however, that there may be some mild indirect effects of punitive attitudes on defensive gun use through gun ownership. © 1998 Elsevier Science Ltd

INTRODUCTION

It has often been hinted that persons claiming to own guns for defensive purposes, or claiming to have used guns for defensive purposes, are concealing more aggressive motives and actions. These hints take two broad forms: (1) the claim that supposedly defensive acts are really disguised or misrepresented aggressive acts and (2) the assertion that gun owners are more aggressive or violence-prone than nonowners.

Not surprisingly, advocates of strict gun control have claimed that alleged acts of self-defense with a gun often are aggressive uses of guns

(Bakal, 1966; Sherrill, 1975). For example, Sherrill (1975:229), commenting on the “Armed Citizen” column of the National Rifle Association’s *American Rifleman* magazine, recited anecdotes of clearly aggressive uses of guns and then asserted that the typical “Armed Citizen of the private sort is the fellow who is ready with firearm and able to shoot your ass off if you try to interfere in his life. Deadly when aroused.” The claim is not, however, limited to those overtly acting as advocates of a political position. For example, Cook and Moore (1994:272) assert, without any supporting evidence, that “self-defense conjures up an image of the inno-

cent victim using a gun to fend off an unprovoked criminal assault, but in fact many 'self-defense' cases are not so commendable." McDowall and Wiersema speculate that some survey respondents (Rs) who claim to have used a gun defensively actually may have used guns aggressively "to settle arguments, believing all the while that they had thereby prevented assaults" (McDowall and Wiersema, 1994:1984). Elsewhere, McDowall (1995:138) asserts that "some defensive incidents might themselves be criminal acts. Using a gun to make an impression on rude motorists or on children trespassing across one's lawn are examples." Along the same lines, Reiss and Roth (1993:266) speculated that "some of what respondents designate as their own self-defense would be construed as aggression by others."

Another variation on the gun-defender-as-aggressor theme involves presenting gun owners, in general as being more aggressive than nonowners. Gun control advocates such as Bakal (1966) claimed that gun owners are prone to violence, are unable to control their aggressive impulses, and are paranoid. Wright, Rossi, and Daly (1983) summarized the literature on the personality traits of gun owners and concluded that it commonly advances "a tendency to violence" as an explanation of gun ownership. The authors go on to note that the majority of the "condemnatory and derogatory" literature is merely "speculative."

One means used by scholars to explore whether gun owners have elevated levels of aggressiveness toward criminals is to examine, through opinion surveys, the punitive attitudes of gun owners toward criminals. For example, Williams and McGrath (1976) described gun owners as being more violence prone than nonowners. They based this conclusion on survey data indicating that gun owners are more likely to favor the death penalty for murderers, to favor harsher sentences for criminals in general, to approve of the use of violence against burglars, and to intervene on behalf of the victims of violence. Stinchcombe (1980:105) likewise asserted that punitiveness toward criminals, as reflected by support for the death penalty and for harsher criminal courts, is a cause of gun ownership. Based on the same kind of survey

data, Young (1985:473) argues that racial prejudice causes "aggressive attitudes toward criminals," which, in turn, causes gun ownership.

Scholarship presenting an alternative view is scarce. Dixon and Lizotte (1987) analyzed national survey data to make a useful distinction between support for defensive violence and support for aggressive violence, finding that although the former was more common among gun owners, the latter was not. The Dixon and Lizotte article is a noteworthy exception to the general picture presented by both gun control advocates and sympathetic scholars—a picture of violence-prone gun owners bent on retribution and punishment of criminals who are ready to take up arms even when life and property are not at serious risk.

WHY DEFENSIVE GUN USE MATTERS

Nature and Prevalence of Defensive Gun Use

Criminologists have often treated victims as either passive targets or active, equally culpable collaborators in incidents of "mutual combat." This traditional conceptualization neglects another possible victim role, the role of the active, but largely innocent, resister (Kleck and Gertz, 1995). One of the most consequential forms of active or forceful resistance is resistance with a gun. The goal of the armed resister (gun defender) is not to precipitate or accelerate any illegitimate activity; instead, the defender takes forceful action for legitimate purposes, such as avoiding bodily injury or property loss, and often is successful. Previous research consistently shows that, in general, victims who resist with a gun or other weapon are less likely to be injured or lose their property (research reviewed in Kleck, 1991, chapter 4).

Evidence from the National Self-Defense Survey (NSDS), the first survey specifically designed to elicit detailed information regarding defensive gun use, reveals that each year adults use guns for protective purposes 2.5 million times; about four to five times the number of crimes committed with guns (Kleck and Gertz, 1995:163–72). Data from the National Crime Victimization Survey, which yielded lower esti-

mates, covered no more than 3 percent of the actual number of uses. The 2.5 million figure is not surprising in light of the frequency of various gun related phenomena. Almost one-third of U.S. households keep a gun at least partially for defensive reasons (Decision-Making-Information, 1979). Approximately 5 percent of U.S. adults regularly carry a gun for self-defense (DIALOG, 1990). Recent research by Kleck and Gertz (1995) suggests that each year in the United States there are about 980 million person-days of gun carrying on the person and about 1.8 billion person-days of carrying in vehicles. Each year, potential victims kill between 1,400 and 3,200 criminals; they wound an additional 7,700–18,500 (Kleck, 1997). Due to the commonplace nature of defensive gun use, it is important to distinguish this type of victim resistance from other forms of forceful activity aimed at criminals (e.g., vigilantism) in order to better understand the goals and actions of defensive gun users.

Who Is Involved in Defensive Gun Use?

Given the paucity of scholarly literature focusing on armed resistance in general, it is not surprising that there is little known about defensive gun users. At least fourteen surveys have shown that there are, at a minimum, hundreds of thousands of defensive gun uses each year (research reviewed in Kleck and Gertz, 1995:182–83), but, until recently, none of these surveys focused specifically on who engages in defensive gun use. The NSDS is the first survey specifically designed to estimate defensive gun use frequency and to gather detailed information about the types of individuals who engage in defensive gun use. In a brief section, Kleck and Gertz presented bivariate results about the people who used guns defensively and how they might differ from other people. The following is a summary of some of the earlier findings from the NSDS.

Gun defenders were more likely to carry a gun for self-protection. They were more likely to have been victimized by a burglary, assault, or robbery in the past year. Compared to either gun owners without a defensive gun use or non-owners, defenders also were more likely to believe that a person must be prepared to defend

his or her home against crime and violence rather than relying on the police.

One of the most surprising findings of the survey was that 46 percent of reported defensive gun uses involved women. Women have lower victimization rates and lower gun ownership rates; therefore, one would expect women to account for far less than one-half of all defensive gun uses because of lower victimization rates and lower gun ownership rates (see Kleck and Gertz, 1995:178 for a more general discussion on this finding). The NSDS also found that a disproportionate share of defenders resided in big cities (population > 500,000) and were African American or Hispanic. Gun defenders were more likely to be single. The authors suggest that these patterns are probably due to the higher rates of crime victimization among minorities, big city dwellers, and single persons.

Finally, with regard to punitiveness, the results suggest that gun defenders were no more likely to support the death penalty than those without such an experience, and were somewhat less likely to do so compared to gun owners as a group. Gun defenders also were no more likely than other people to endorse the view that the courts do not deal harshly enough with criminals.

If gun defenders are vengeful vigilantes bent on retribution and the punishment of criminals, it is expected that they would be more supportive of punitive measures, such as the death penalty and harsher courts. It is the goal of the research reported here to provide a more accurate picture of the types of individuals who make up the 2.5 million defensive gun users each year. A multivariate analysis will show how defensive gun users differ from the adult population as a whole, with a special focus on punitive attitudes toward criminals. In the original Kleck and Gertz (1995) bivariate analysis, it is possible that an association between punitiveness and defensive gun use was suppressed. For example, African Americans are less supportive than Caucasians of punitive crime control strategies, such as capital punishment, but are more likely to be involved in defensive gun use. Race, therefore, could suppress a positive association between involvement in defensive gun use and support for the death penalty. By controlling for race and

other possible confounding variables in a multivariate analysis, it is possible to better detect any impact of punitiveness on defensive gun use.

METHODS

The NSDS used the most anonymous national survey format, the random digit dialed telephone survey. The identities of those who were interviewed were unknown, and this was made clear to the respondents. Staff interviewed a large, nationally representative sample covering all adults, age eighteen and over, in the lower forty-eight states and living in households with telephones. They asked defensive gun use questions of all respondents in the sample, asking them separately about both their own defensive gun use experiences and those of other members of their households. They used both a five-year recall period and a one-year recall period. They inquired about uses of both handguns and other types of guns, and excluded occupational uses of guns and uses against animals.

Interviews were monitored at random by survey supervisors. A 20 percent random sample of interviews was validated by supervisors with callbacks. Among interviews that yielded a claim of defensive gun use, all were validated with supervisor callbacks. Of all eligible residential telephone numbers called where a person (rather than a facsimile or answering machine) answered, 61 percent resulted in a completed interview. Interviewing was carried out by a professional telephone firm, Research Network of Tallahassee, Florida, from February through April of 1993.

The quality of sampling procedures was well above the level commonly found in national surveys. The sample was not only large and nationally representative, it was also stratified by state. That is, forty-eight independent samples of residential telephone numbers were drawn, one from each of the lower forty-eight states, providing forty-eight random, albeit often small, state samples.

The study was designed specifically to study defensive gun use. To gain a larger raw number of sample defensive gun use cases, the South and West regions were oversampled because

previous surveys have indicated gun ownership is higher. They also oversampled within contacted households for males, who are more likely to own guns. Finally, they oversampled for persons reporting a defensive gun use by interviewing all such persons while interviewing only one in three of all other respondents. Data were later weighted to adjust for oversampling. A more complete description of the methods can be found in Kleck and Gertz (1995: 160–63). The results reported here are based on the responses of all 1,832 persons who were given the full interview.

The first question asked of respondents regarding punitiveness was phrased as follows: “Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?” Next, interviewers asked respondents: “In general, do you think the courts in your area deal too harshly, or not harshly enough with criminals?” Respondents who reported not having an opinion or who simply refused to answer the questions regarding the death penalty and harsher courts, were coded as missing on the crime punitive attitudes. Respondents also were asked a question regarding the need to rely on one’s own resources to ensure personal safety: “Do you think that people like yourself have to be prepared to defend their homes against crime and violence or can the police take care of that?”

It is possible that a traumatizing victimization incident could lead some individuals to harbor more punitive attitudes toward criminals and an increased willingness to engage in defensive gun use. In order to ensure that the relationship between punitiveness and defensive gun use was not spurious, the study controlled for three different types of prior victimization. All respondents given the full interview were asked if they had been a victim of a robbery or a burglary in the past twelve months or of an assault since becoming an adult.

RESULTS

Multivariate Analysis of Defensive Gun Use

A logistic regression analysis was performed to estimate the separate causal effects on defensive

TABLE 1
VARIABLES USED IN LOGISTIC REGRESSION ANALYSIS^a

Variable ^b	Mean	SD
Genuine defensive gun use	1.92	0.28
Respondent feels courts not harsh enough	1.74	0.44
Respondent favors death penalty for murder	1.71	0.46
Respondent feels must have to defend self rather than rely on police	1.56	0.50
Respondent is male	1.47	0.50
Respondent is African American	1.09	0.29
Age in years	42.10	15.72
Respondent is presently married	1.60	0.49
Days per month away from home at night	11.41	9.01
Carries gun for protection	1.09	0.28
Respondent lives in household with gun(s)	1.36	0.48
Respondent lives in city > 500,000 population	1.23	0.42
Employed as police officer, security guard, or in military	1.03	0.17
Victim of robbery in past year	1.03	0.16
Victim of assault as adult	1.22	0.42
Victim of burglary in past year	1.05	0.23

^aDescriptive statistics are based on weighted data for all cases with valid data on a given variable.

^bAll variables, except age, were coded 2 for cases with the indicated attribute, 1 for cases without.

gun use of the attributes discussed in the previous section. It should be stressed that all analyses included *all persons* who completed the full interview, not just gun owners. Table 1 lists the variables used in the analysis and Table 2 shows the resulting parameter estimates. Any variables shown in Table 1 and not appearing in Table 2 were found to not be statistically associated at the .20 level with any form of defensive gun use, controlling for the other variables in the equations.

The findings in Table 2 reflect how variables are associated with defensive gun use, controlling for gun ownership. Failing to control for gun ownership would result in findings that reflect patterns of gun ownership rather than willingness to engage in defensive gun use. Note that nine defensive gun users who did not own guns were included in the sample analyzed. It is possible that some gun owners falsely denied their ownership of the “incriminating evidence” of their defensive gun use (Kleck and Gertz, 1995:177).

In order to explore the interrelationships between gun ownership, punitive attitudes, and defensive gun use, four logistic regression analyses were conducted. In the first analysis, defensive gun use is the dependent variable. One might suspect that a prior victimization, such as a defensive gun use incident, could alter an individual’s attitude toward punitiveness. Any

change in punitiveness that occurred as the result of the victimization experience would most likely show gun defenders as more punitive toward criminals. Such a two-way relationship would tend to artificially support a hypothesis that gun defenders are more punitive than those without such an experience. A one-time survey (conducted after the defensive gun use incident) cannot satisfactorily resolve causal order issues like this. It is necessarily assumed that the punitive attitudes of respondents at the time of the present survey were a good proxy for punitive attitudes prior to the defensive gun use. This is more plausible in light of the short recall period of one and five years required of respondents who reported a defensive gun use.

Consistent with the possibility that causation runs from defensive gun use to punitive attitudes, the second analysis compared death penalty supporters with opponents to estimate the impact of defensive gun use on attitudes toward the death penalty. The third analysis compared supporters of harsher courts with opponents to estimate the impact of defensive gun use on attitudes toward harsher courts.

Of course, it may be the case that punitive attitudes, as well as the belief in defending personal safety, influence an individual’s decision to buy a gun and thereby indirectly affect a defensive gun use. In order to detect any indirect

TABLE 2
MULTIVARIATE CORRELATES OF DEFENSIVE GUN USE AND PUNITIVE ATTITUDES: LOGISTIC REGRESSION ESTIMATES^a

Independent Variable	Dependent Variable							
	Defensive Gun Use	Odds Ratio	Favors Death Penalty	Odds Ratio	Courts Not Harsh Enough	Odds Ratio	Gun in Household	Odds Ratio
Defensive gun use								
Courts not harsh enough	-0.2903** (-.795)	0.75	-0.2678** (-.788)	0.77	-0.1126** (-.339)	0.89	0.2584 (1.92)	1.29
Favors death penalty	-0.4231** (-1.21)	0.66	1.1778 (9.50)	3.25	1.1841 (9.47)	3.27	0.3013 (2.27)	1.35
Self-reliance	0.2507** (.683)	1.28	0.2952 (2.50)	1.34	0.4296 (3.58)	1.54	0.6910 (6.06)	2.00
Gun in household	1.7156 (4.50)	5.56	0.3537 (2.66)	1.42	0.3076 (2.31)	1.36		
Carries gun for protection	1.9341 (5.83)	6.92	0.5119* (1.86)	1.67			2.2390 (8.83)	9.38
Age (in years)	-0.0477 (-3.67)	0.95						
Married			0.4153 (3.49)	1.51	0.2358 (1.93)	1.27	0.4643 (3.92)	1.59
African American (1 = African American)	0.7261* (1.67)	2.07	-1.0150 (-5.34)	0.36	0.3969* (1.81)	1.49	0.7236 (3.03)	2.06
Male (1 = male)	1.5627 (3.06)	4.77	0.4863 (4.02)	1.63	-0.2664 (-2.20)	0.77	0.5739 (5.10)	1.78
Robbery victim in past year	0.8256 (2.71)	2.28	-0.5319* (-1.51)	0.59				
Assault victim in past year	1.0152 (2.41)	2.76	-0.2334* (-1.63)	0.79				
Burglary victim in past year								
Resides in city (population > 500,000)	0.5273* (1.57)	1.69			0.2704* (1.84)	1.31	-0.7408 (-5.05)	0.48
Nights away from home at night	-0.0206** (-1.29)	0.98	0.0208* (2.97)	1.02	-0.0199 (-2.84)	0.98	0.0146 (2.28)	1.01
Constant	-10.9661		-2.2017		-2.4531		-5.1188	
-2 log likelihood	368.133		1,820.745		1,772.442		1,927.523	
Sample size	1,684		1,695		1,691		1,691	

^at ratios in parentheses.

*Not significant at .05 level, 1-tailed (.05 < p < .20).

**Not significant at .20 level, 1-tailed (p > .20).

effects of punitiveness on defensive gun use through gun ownership, a fourth logistic regression analysis was conducted. Household gun ownership was treated as the dependent variable and the punitive attitudinal variables (death penalty and harsher courts) were treated as independent variables.

Defensive Gun Users Compared to Other People (Analysis 1)

Defensive gun users are, other things being equal, more likely to be young, to have a gun in the household, and to have carried a gun in the past twelve months for protection. The finding of defensive gun users being more likely to carry a gun for self-protection is consistent with the original research findings from the NSDS, which reveals that a large number of defensive gun use incidents (63 percent) occur away from the defender's home.

Defenders also were more likely to have been a victim of a robbery or burglary in the previous twelve months. Of course, this finding is a tautology for any defensive gun use that was in connection with a robbery or burglary committed in the past year. Defensive gun users also were more likely to have been a victim of an assault since becoming an adult.

Once other correlated predictors are controlled, the two measures of punitiveness do not show any significant relationship with defensive gun use. In other words, gun defenders are no different than other U.S. adults when it comes to favoring the death penalty or harsher courts for criminals. This multivariate finding supports the earlier bivariate results of the NSDS.

Defenders are also no more likely than other respondents to believe that people must depend on themselves, rather than on the police, for protection. This finding contradicts earlier findings from the NSDS, which revealed a larger percentage of defenders supporting the belief that they have to depend on themselves for protection. This attitude (depending on yourself for self-protection rather than law enforcement) might affect gun ownership and thereby indirectly affect defensive gun use, but have little or no direct effect once gun ownership is

controlled. This may be the reason that there was a bivariate association between this attitude and defensive gun use in the original NSDS analysis. Indeed, other research consistently has shown that gun ownership is higher among persons who believe that they have to depend on themselves for protection rather than rely on the criminal justice system (research reviewed in Kleck, 1991, chapter 2). Thus, the self-reliance attitude might have a causal effect on defensive gun use, but indirectly through gun ownership.

Punitive Attitudes Treated as Dependent Variables (Analyses 2 and 3)

The two measures of punitiveness toward criminals were treated as dependent variables: whether the respondent supported harsher courts for criminals (analysis 2) and whether the respondent supported the death penalty for murderers (analysis 3). Neither showed any significant association with defensive gun use. Gun defenders were no more likely than other U.S. adults to support more punitive views toward criminals. As suggested earlier, it seemed possible that gun defenders might become excessively punitive toward criminals due to their victimization experience. The present findings do not lend support to the idea that the victimization experience associated with defensive gun use had any impact on gun defenders' punitive attitudes.

Those who were in favor of the death penalty were more likely to be male, to be married, to have a gun in their household, to have carried it in the past twelve months for self-protection, and to have endorsed the self-reliance attitude. African Americans were less likely to be supportive of the death penalty.

Those who favored harsher courts were more likely to be married and to have a gun in their household. Those who favored harsher courts were less likely to be male and to spend a lot of nights away from home. Finally, those who supported harsher courts for criminals also were more likely to support the death penalty and the belief that one must depend on one's self, not the police, for protection.

Indirect Effects of Punitiveness on Defensive Gun Use through Gun Ownership (Analysis 4)

The final logistic regression analysis reveals that there may, indeed, be some indirect effects of punitiveness attitudes on defensive gun use. Both of the punitive attitude variables (death penalty, harsher courts) showed modest significant positive associations with household gun ownership. These results suggest that heightened punitive attitudes do not characterize defenders in particular, but are merely characteristic of gun owners, in general. In short, punitiveness may influence gun acquisition, but it does not support an image of defenders as being more likely than other gun owners to seek out criminals or to be especially quick to resort to armed self-defense.

CONCLUSIONS

The evidence does not support the notion that gun defenders are "lone vigilantes" bent on retribution and punishment of criminals. The nonsignificant and negative coefficients for both punitive attitude variables in the first analysis and the significant association between prior victimization and defensive gun use both support the conclusion that gun defenders are not unusually intent on punishing criminals. The present evidence is more compatible with a view that defensive gun use is for self-protection rather than for the purpose of committing a punitive or aggressive act.

The issue of causal order between punitiveness and defensive gun use cannot be definitively addressed with a one-time survey. Through the use of panel study research designs over a one five-year time period, researchers should be

in a better position to detect any change in gun owner attitudes before and after a defensive gun use event. Due to the large sample sizes needed in order to measure and study rare event phenomena, such as defensive gun use, this type of research would be very expensive.

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