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THE NATURE AND CIRCUMSTANCES OF DEFENSIVE GUN USE: A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF INTERPERSONAL CONFLICT SITUATIONS INVOLVING CRIMINAL OFFENDERS*

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Analyses of gun-regulation policies have recently focused on the benefits of firearms, and research has shown that guns are frequently used for defense. An important implication is that restricting gun ownership may increase the net harm in the United States. However, a more thorough understanding of gun-defense situations is required before conclusions can be drawn about the harm that is prevented or generated through defensive gun uses (DGUs). This study examined a unique subset of DGU incidents that involved convicted offenders as defenders. It found that DGUs are not likely to provide similar social benefits, implying that prevalence estimates may not simultaneously estimate social benefits and that the relationship among gun carrying, encountering risky situations, and DGU is more complex than has been portrayed.

The effects of firearms on levels of crime and violence have been studied and elaborated extensively during the past 20 years. Our understanding of the theoretical effects of guns on violence, along with the empirical reality, has increased dramatically. The

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fruits of this work are found in the body of research on firearm policies and effects. We hold broad conceptions of firearms as sources of power and understand that the role guns play in crime and violence is complex. A general question regarding gun-regulation policy is, What are the net effects of firearms on harm in the United States? To answer this question, we must weigh the costs and benefits of the availability and use of guns, as well as the effects of firearm regulation and deregulation (Cook & Ludwig, 2000; Hemenway & Azrael, 2000; Hemenway, Solnick, & Azrael, 1995; Lott, 1998; Ludwig, 2000). Attempts to answer this question will continue to advance us beyond rhetoric by adding new knowledge about the effects of guns in society. This knowledge, in turn, will provide the opportunity to craft specific harm-reduction strategies that address firearms.

We are only now beginning to assess specifically the beneficial aspects of the availability and use of guns in society. One such aspect is the defensive use of guns by crime victims. A more complete understanding of the concept of defensive gun use (DGU) and of the circumstances under which DGUs occur is required if we are to draw conclusions about the net effect of guns in this country. This study contributes to knowledge about DGUs by examining a sample that captures unique types of incidents that have traditionally been underrepresented in previous surveys. Over 290 descriptive accounts of incidents in which a criminal respondent possessed a firearm were analyzed to identify DGU situations. The characteristics of these incidents are then explored to understand the surrounding circumstances.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

*Theory*

There is good reason to believe that firearms can be used effectively for defense. A complex array of factors combine to determine the outcomes of conflict situations. The two general classes of variables that are believed to affect the outcomes of conflict situations are person-level and situation-level variables (Block, 1981; Campbell & Gibbs, 1986; Felson & Steadman, 1983; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). Although the relative influence of these classes of variables and the extent to which these variables interact has yet to be settled, it is well accepted that situational factors play a substantial role in shaping the events that transpire. Included in this broad group of situational factors is the sequence of participants' behaviors (Block, 1981; Felson, 1978; Felson & Steadman, 1983, pp. 65,
People who are involved in any social interaction, conflict or otherwise, can behave in any number of ways that will allow them to carry out their intentions and achieve broader goals. Targets of threats and attacks can thwart the efforts of their opponents (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994).

The distribution of power is another situational factor that affects the dynamics and outcomes of situations. The concept of power is complex and includes, for instance, the physical power of participants, the power inherent in the relationship between participants (e.g., employee and supervisor), the number of people with the participants, and the possession of weapons (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). Firearms as a source of power increase the chances that their possessors will be able to carry out their intentions successfully and thus achieve a variety of goals (Cook, 1991; Kleck & DeLone, 1993; Kleck & McElrath, 1991; Lizotte, 1986, p. 213; Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). This general conception implies that guns can be effective tools for preventing, interrupting, and facilitating crimes and violence. Guns can be used not only offensively to injure, humiliate, and obtain property, but defensively to prevent injuries and thwart crimes.

These two notions imply that individuals who possess firearms enhance their ability to be successful in carrying out their own intentions in a situation. Specifically, targets are able to avoid any number of losses, such as property, situational identity, and physical well-being (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). The seemingly obvious prediction is that the possession and use of guns can prevent harm. Consequently, gun-control policies that generally restrict individuals' ability to possess firearms may increase the net harm in the United States because people will not be able to defend themselves effectively.

Civilian DGUs

Empirical evidence indicates that individuals use guns for defense many times each year (Cook & Ludwig, 1998; Kleck, 1988; Kleck & Gertz, 1995; McDowall & Wiersma, 1994; Smith, 1997), recent estimates being 300,000 to 1.2 million occurrences per year (Smith, 1997, p. 1468). In circumstances in which victims have the

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1 The vagueness of this statement is intended not to obscure the important controversies and the implications of imprecise estimates, but merely to point out that it is necessary to consider the benefits that guns provide to understand fully the costs of gun-control policies. For a detailed discussion of the estimates, the associated limitations, and the various controversial points associated with this body of research, see, for instance, Cook and Ludwig (1998); Cook, Ludwig, and Hemenway (1997); Duncan (2000); Hemenway (1997); Kleck and Gertz (1995, 1997); Lott (2000a); Ludwig (2000); McDowall and Wiersma (1994); and Smith (1997).
opportunity to use a gun for defense and then decide to use it, evi-
dence suggests that DGU is effective against robbers (Cook, 1991;
Kleck, 1988; Kleck & DeLone, 1993; Ziegenhagen & Brosnan, 1985),
against burglars (Cook, 1991, p. 56), and in assault situations
(Kleck, 1988). Furthermore, protection is a commonly cited reason
for gun ownership in diverse samples of individuals (Cao, Cullen, &
Link, 1997; Cook & Ludwig, 1997; Kleck, 1997, p. 74; Shetey &

Despite the evidence that DGUs occur frequently and are effec-
tive, little is actually known about the circumstances that surround
DGUs (Cook, 1991; Cook et al., 1997; Ludwig, 2000; Smith, 1997).
This limitation is largely due to the lack of adequate data on the
topic. Until recently, researchers have been forced to rely on biased
samples of events that were not gathered with the purpose of un-
derstanding DGUs. These samples included anecdotes that ap-
peared in the mass media (Lott, 2000b), incidents that were
reported to the police (Block, 1981; Hindelang, Gottfredson, &
Garofalo, 1978; Kleck & DeLone, 1993), and incidents that were de-
scribed in victimization surveys (Cook, 1985; Kleck & DeLone,
1993; Kleck & Gertz, 1995).

These samples missed not only gunshot incidents but high-risk,
nonviolent situations. These underrepresented, nonviolent situations
are sure to include a subset of successful DGU incidents
(Smith, 1997). For example, respondents in the National Crime Vic-
timization Survey (NCVS) are asked questions only about self-de-
fense when they have been threatened or have been the victims of
crimes. Furthermore, individuals who are most at risk for serious
violent victimization—those who have a great chance of using a gun
defensively and arguably have the greatest need to use a gun for
defense—tend to be underrepresented in the NCVS sample (Cook,
1985; Ludwig, 2000).

A more general limitation of the existing data is the lack of de-
tailed information about violent and potentially violent incidents,
such as the sequence of actions and reactions (Cook, 1991; Cook et
al., 1997; Kleck & DeLone, 1993; Ziegenhagen & Brosnan, 1985).
Information about the sequence of behaviors is crucial for under-
standing the degree to which gun use is defensive and whether a
DGU is successful in defusing a situation (Ludwig, 2000, p. 384).
Detailed, incident-level data provide the opportunity to explore the
effects of DGUs and to address important questions regarding the
necessity of the gun use and the role that the defender played in
creating the situation (Cook et al., 1997, p. 467).
In addition, sequencing data can provide an understanding of whether DGU prevents or provokes offenders' attacks. The resistance-provokes-injury thesis predicts that a victim's resistance is likely to provoke an offender to attack and injure the victim. This thesis implies that it would be wise for victims to act passively, rather than to resist in some way (Kleck, 1997). Precise sequencing data are not required to test this prediction when a victim is not injured because the thesis can obviously not hold true (Kleck & DeLone, 1993, p. 60). Research has found that these types of situations frequently occur, leading to the conclusion that resistance with guns does not provoke offenders' attacks (Kleck, 1988; Kleck & DeLone, 1993). Sequencing data become more important when situations involve, for instance, victims' and offenders' attacks and victims' injuries. In these circumstances, it is necessary to understand when and how a victim resisted and when injuries occurred during the incident.

The best available information about civilian DGUs comes from sophisticated general population surveys (Cook & Ludwig, 1998; Hemenway & Azrael, 2000; Hemenway, Azrael, & Miller, 2000; Kleck & Gertz, 1995). In addition to estimating the annual prevalence of DGUs in the United States, Kleck and Gertz (1995) and Cook and Ludwig (1998) offered an initial look at the nature of DGU situations. Both studies used sophisticated sampling and survey methods to interview nationally representative samples of adults. The respondents were asked whether they or someone in the household had used a gun, but not necessarily fired the gun, to protect themselves or property. If a respondent indicated that he or she had used a gun defensively during a specified period, then the interviewers asked a series of follow-up questions to obtain information about the situation. The respondents' accounts were compared against four criteria used to define gun use as defensive. First, the gun had to be used against a person. Second, contact had to be made between individuals "rather than merely investigating suspicious circumstances" (Kleck & Gertz, 1995, p. 162). Third, the defender had to identify a crime that he or she believed was being committed at the time of the DGU. Finally, the gun had to be used in some manner. Evidence about the relative frequency of DGUs and the nature of DGU circumstances is also available from surveys conducted in 1996 and 1999 with a national sample of American adults (Azrael & Hemenway, 2000; Hemenway & Azrael, 2000; Hemenway et al., 2000).

The respondents described 213 incidents to Kleck and Gertz's (1995) interviewers that met their DGU criteria. Cook and Ludwig (1998) used methods that were similar to Kleck and Gertz's (1995),
including the criteria used to classify gun use, and identified 19 DGU incidents. Two random surveys of adults, conducted in 1996 and in 1999, uncovered 54 and 43 DGU incidents, respectively (Hemenway et al., 2000). Although the purpose of the latter two surveys was to assess the relative frequency of defensive and offensive gun uses, these surveys also provided basic information about DGU circumstances.

On the basis of this best available evidence, DGU situations can be characterized by several important variables. This information not only provides insight into DGU situations but it also focuses our attention on significant questions. Nearly half (46.8 percent) the DGU incidents reported in Kleck and Gertz’s (1995) survey and 9 of the 19 (47 percent) DGU incidents in Cook and Ludwig’s (1998) study did not involve an opponent who directly threatened or attacked the defender. Although it is possible, and perhaps likely, that the defenders were protecting another person or protecting property in about half of the DGU cases, this finding raises questions about what exactly transpired during these incidents. In addition, Kleck and Gertz found that defenders were the first to use or threaten force in approximately 15 percent of the cases that involved any use or threat of force. This evidence raises questions about the validity of labeling these gun defenders “victims” and about whether such an instance “should be counted as a social benefit” in policy debates (Cook & Ludwig, 1998, p. 126).

Kleck and Gertz (1995) stated that gun defenders were more likely to face opponents who were armed with guns (18 percent of DGU cases) than other victims and explained that this finding “is consistent with the perception that more desperate circumstances call forth more desperate defensive measures” (p. 175). It may also be the case that gun possession, particularly gun carrying away from the home, calls forth more desperate circumstances because possessors put themselves in situations that they would otherwise not enter (Ludwig, 2000). This alternative is plausible, considering the evidence that gun possessors report that firearms make them feel safe (Kleck, 1997, p. 166) and that gun-possessing offenders seem to be more confident (Jacobs, Topalli, & Wright, 2000, pp. 188, 191). Research on victims’ resistance has typically examined the effects of resistance “conditional on there being a hostile confrontation” (Ludwig, 2000, p. 387). The sort of analysis of the effect of gun carrying on entering risky situations or engaging in behaviors that may escalate situations, such as making threats, has yet to be conducted.

Kleck and Gertz (1995) and Cook and Ludwig (1998) found that defenders and opponents rarely fired their guns (16 percent and 4.5
percent of the cases, respectively). Thus, when people use their guns for defense, they do not necessarily put someone in grave danger. It is not possible to determine how frequently defenders *only* showed their guns because the gun-use categories are not mutually exclusive. This measurement scheme does not allow us to understand the effectiveness of various gun-use strategies, such as simply brandishing the gun versus firing it in the air. It may be that simply pointing the firearm or displaying it is frequently sufficient to force an offender to back down or leave.

Nearly three-quarters of DGU incidents reported to Kleck and Gertz (1995) occurred in or near the defenders’ homes, while the remainder occurred in other locations. On the other hand, less than 5 percent of the 54 DGU events that respondents described in Hemenway and Azrael’s (2000) survey occurred in their homes. Despite this discrepancy, the important point is that defenders frequently carried their guns to or obtained their guns at the scene (Kleck & Gertz, 1995, p. 174). This finding also raises doubts about the social benefits of DGUs, since a substantial portion of such instances stem from illegal gun carrying (Kleck & Gertz, 1997, p. 1447).

Approximately half the DGUs reported to Kleck and Gertz’ (1995) were in response to a burglary and/or robbery. Incidents that involved an ambiguous offender and victim composed a much smaller subset of the 19 percent of incidents in which an assault was the only reported crime. This sample of events very likely missed many of the most common DGU circumstance—assaults in and away from the home—and overstated the less frequent home-defense uses (Azrael & Hemenway, 2000; Kleck, 1988, p. 10).

Kleck and Gertz (1995) acknowledged that their sample of cases probably underrepresented certain types of incidents, such as instances of mutual combat, conflicts between family members and intimates, and less-serious incidents. Assuming that it is difficult to distinguish the victim and offender in mutual combat situations and that the dynamics are different in a two-sided event than a one-sided event (see Felson & Steadman, 1983; Luckenbill, 1977), then the DGU concept may be more complex than previous research has suggested. Studying a sample of less-serious situations that involved mutual combat by nonstrangers would expand our knowledge about civilian gun use in the United States (Cook, 1991, p. 63; Smith, 1997, p. 1469).
METHODOLOGY

Data Collection and Sample

The data used in this study were gathered as part of a larger research project (Horney, forthcoming). Although they were not gathered with the intention of studying DGUs, the data set contains detailed information about a wide variety of violent and risky, nonviolent situations. Interviews were conducted with a random sample of 704 male inmates who were admitted to a diagnostic and evaluation unit in a midwestern state between November 1997 and December 1998. Convicted male offenders sentenced in this system stay 30 to 90 days in the diagnostic unit so they can be evaluated and placed in an appropriate detention facility. Two out of every three inmates who were admitted to the unit were asked to participate. The potential respondents were told that they would be paid $5 for their time if they completed the interviews. Of the inmates who were eligible to participate, 90 percent agreed, yielding 704 respondents.

Trained interviewers asked the respondents a battery of detailed questions about their lives during the three years before the arrests that led to their current incarcerations. A detailed life-history calendar was used to collect the month-by-month information. The calendar data were gathered with a computerized collection method whereby the interviewers directly entered responses into a database. In addition, a paper calendar of the type described by Caspi et al. (1996) was used to give each respondent visual aids to structure his recall of events. Research suggests that using life-history calendars can facilitate respondents' recall by tapping into their personal memory organization (Bradburn, Rips, & Shevell, 1987). Evidence of the validity of retrospective data collected through life-history calendars has been found in several studies that have gathered the data within a longitudinal research framework (Belli, Shay, & Stafford, 2001; Caspi et al., 1996; Freedman, Thornton, Camburn, Alwin, & Young-DeMarco, 1988).

After obtaining detailed information about the circumstances of the respondents' lives, the interviewers asked the respondents to report violent and potentially violent situations of which they were a part. The redesign of the NCVS (Bachman & Taylor, 1994) was followed to obtain incidents that the respondents might not have defined as crimes or considered important and to obtain incidents that involved intimates, family members, friends, and acquaintances and other incidents, such as bar fights and street fights. The interviewers carefully defined a category of situations and then asked the respondents if they were a part of any such events during
the calendar period and, if so, in which months. The respondents were first asked to report assaults that they committed. The interviewers asked them if they had been involved in any physical confrontation in which they attacked another person. They then specified that the respondents should report any incident in which they attacked someone with a weapon (such as a gun, a knife, or a stick), threw something (such as a rock or a bottle) at someone, punched or slapped someone, choked or kicked someone, or did something like throwing someone to the ground or against a wall but not to include incidents that involved only pushing or shoving. The interviewers next asked the respondents to report incidents in which they were attacked by someone else (in any of the ways described for the first category) but did not attack anyone in the situation. Again, the respondents were instructed to include incidents that involved intimate partners or family members and to include incidents whether or not they believed the event involved a crime.

Finally, the respondents were asked to report incidents in which there was a high risk of violence but actual violence was avoided (i.e., the respondent neither attacked another person nor was attacked by someone). The interviewers asked each respondent to report incidents in which he pushed, grabbed, or threatened someone or was pushed, grabbed, or threatened by another; witnessed a physical attack or grabbing, pushing, or threats and thought he might become involved; another person encouraged him to become involved in violence; or he was so angry he could have hurt someone; and any other incidents in which he felt there was a high risk of violence.

Distinctions between violent and avoided violent situations are somewhat arbitrary. The decision to draw the line between violent and avoided violent situations at pushing and shoving was motivated by the sampling strategy and the ability to gather information on a limited number of incidents (up to 10 of each type). Individuals who were involved in serious violence might also have been involved in a large number of minor incidents that involved pushing and shoving, and if these pushing and shoving incidents were included in the definition of violent incidents, they might dominate the sample. Thus, more serious encounters would be missed because details were gathered about a limited number of incidents, up to 10 of each type. Examples of these avoided violent encounters are listed in Appendix A.

Once these incidents were entered on the three-year calendar, the interviewers asked the respondents to describe each incident in their own words. They inputted the narrative into a laptop computer and then used a structured survey instrument to ask about
the particular details of the incident, such as the location, the weapons that the respondent and the opponent or opponents possessed, the injuries they sustained, and whether law enforcement officers intervened. Some respondents described serial incidents—incidents that could not be meaningfully distinguished from other, similar events. For this study, the most recent occurring serial incident was included, and the remainder were excluded, on the assumption that the respondent was best able to recall the details of the most recent event. The sample of incidents is broad and includes situations in which the respondents engaged in verbal arguments with significant others, were the victims of robberies, and attacked strangers.

Criminal sample. Criminal samples are particularly appropriate for studying gun use because evidence indicates that this group is more familiar than the general public with crimes, as victims and as offenders, and with gun-related incidents, including gun carrying, defensive use, offensive use, and a combination of both purposes (Cook, 1985; Hindelang et al., 1978; Jacobs et al., 2000; Kleck, 1997; Lizotte, Krohn, Howell, Tobin, & Howard, 2000; Ludwig, 2000; May, Hemenway, Oen, & Pitts, 2000; Singer, 1981). In a sample of 835 juvenile offenders held in state detention facilities, 84 percent reported having been shot at or threatened with a gun and approximately half reported being stabbed (Sheley & Wright, 1993). Loeber, De Lamatre, Cohen, Southamer-Loeber, and Farrington (1999) found that juveniles in Pittsburgh who were the victims of gun violence were significantly more likely to have delinquent histories, such as involvement in serious delinquency, gang fights, and drug sales, than were juveniles who had never been the victims of gun violence. Singer (1981) examined the victimization experiences of crime victims who participated in Wolfgang, Figlio, and Sellin’s (1972) Delinquency in a Birth Cohort Study and found that individuals who had been shot or stabbed were more involved in criminal activity than were those who had been victims of minor assaults and property damage. Singer found a strong relationship between committing a serious assault and having been shot or stabbed. Furthermore, many DGUs are carried out by people who are at least willing to violate gun possession laws (Kleck & Gertz, 1995, p. 156; 1997, p. 1447).

Measures and Analysis

The data gathered with structured questions were used to identify the situations in which the respondents possessed firearms. Of
the 704 respondents, 127 reported possessing guns in 297 incidents, for an average of 2.3 incidents per respondent. The data gathered in the structured interviews, rather than in the narrative accounts, were used to identify these incidents because the respondents did not always mention guns they possessed in the narratives. The respondents explicitly referred to their guns in 166 incidents, slightly more than half the incidents in which they reported possessing firearms. These situations were described by 91 respondents.

Content analysis was used to analyze the 166 incidents in which respondents referred to their guns. Only the explicit actions described in each narrative were coded; no inferences about intentions or motivations were made. The narrative was the recording unit (Weber, 1990) and provides the text that was coded. An initial step involved defining the categories that would be used to reduce the narrated information and summarize gun use. Once the DGU incidents were identified, several aspects of the incidents were explored, including the way the defender used his gun, the location of the incident, the degree to which the incident was one sided, the behaviors that immediately preceded the DGU, and the injuries that resulted from the incident.

DGU. The criteria used to classify DGUs are based on Kleck and Gertz's (1995) and Cook and Ludwig's (1998) definitions. The following definition of a DGU was adopted: "Gun use is broadly defined to mean firing a gun (in the air or at someone), hitting someone with the gun, referring to the gun, showing the gun, and so forth." For the respondent's gun use to be considered a DGU, the following conditions had to be met:

1. The gun had to be "used" by the respondent, not someone else at the scene and
2. The respondent had to indicate that some opponent (a) made a threat (verbal or nonverbal, implicit or explicit), attacked, or acted in an aggressive manner toward someone in the situation or location just before the respondent used the gun or (b) was committing some crime, such as a burglary or auto theft, in the situation or location just prior to the respondent's gun use. Gun use was not considered defensive if a threat was made through a third party or on the telephone and then followed by a respondent's attack.

The gun uses in the following two incidents were categorized as defensive:

Me and Trevor, my friend, were drinking in a bar, and Trevor said that he had to meet someone there to make a
drug deal and he was talking to some guy in the back by
the pool table and I was by the front door. He came up to
me and said he was going to go out back and if he wasn’t
back in five minutes to go out there and see what was go-
ing on. I waited and went out back, and there were three
guys that were beating the shit out of Trevor. Two of them
had baseball bats, beating him down. Trevor looked help-
less. I pulled out my gun and fired a shot in the air, and all
three of them stopped. Another guy (one of the three)
started to pull a gun out. I shot him in the leg, and he fell
down. The other two guys with the baseball bats took off.
The guy that was shot also took off. I went over to Trevor
and saw that he needed to go to the hospital. He was bleed-
ing a lot. The ambulance showed up and cops showed up,
and they asked me what happened and I tried to tell them.
That was it.

There was an assault in April that was with some people I
didn’t know. My codefendant was with me, he’s in here. It
started over them getting mouthy with him. One of them
put their hands on him and that started a fight. That’s how
I got involved. I got into it with one guy. We didn’t say any-
thing to each other before hand. It was just a fist fight. I
had pulled a gun, and they walked away.

When the instrument was pretested, it became apparent that
there was important variation within the category of DGU inci-
dents. Several incidents stood out as involving gun use that fit the
definition of a DGU, but also involved gun use that extended be-
yond the mere purpose of self-defense or defense of property. One of
the unanswered questions about DGU situations is the extent to
which the actual gun use is necessary (Cook & Ludwig, 1998, p.
128). For instance, approximately 30 percent of the DGUs that
Cook and Ludwig (1998) studied involved a DGU that occurred near
the respondent’s home when the gun was originally located in the
home. This finding suggests that some portion of these respondents
could have remained inside, rather than returned and used their
guns (Cook & Ludwig, 1998, p. 127; Ludwig, 2000, p. 387). In addi-
tion, Hemenway et al. (2000) found that the majority of five crimi-
nal court judges rated approximately half the 35 DGU incidents
reported in 1996 and 1999 gun-use surveys as probably illegal.
These notions complicate the DGU concept and, in turn, cast doubt
on the idea that the estimated number of annual DGUs, whatever
that number may be, reflects the social benefits of guns.

I created a subcategory of respondents’ DGUs to measure uses
that may not have been necessary or that turned into offensive uses
that I labeled “DGU-Plus.” The following criteria were used to de-
fine DGU-Plus incidents within the more general DGU category:
"The respondent had to use his gun in a defensive manner (according to the criteria defined earlier) and one or both of the following:

1. The respondent continued to use the gun after the opponent backed down, stopped the crime, stopped an attack, or attempted to leave the scene.
2. It is unclear whether it was "necessary" for the respondent to use the gun to defend himself.

The following elements were used to determine whether the gun use was "necessary":

* Attacks are made from substantial "distances," such as when combatants are not face to face (e.g. across the street).
* Attacks are made between physical barriers (e.g., into houses and apartments).
* Attacks are made from moving vehicles or toward vehicles moving away from the defensive gun user.

The incidents presented next illustrate these situations. The first is categorized as a DGU-Plus because the opponent was fleeing the scene before the respondent fired his gun at the opponent. The second is classified as a DGU-Plus because the respondent did not fire his weapon until he was in a car some distance from his opponent.

This was late, probably 11:30 or 12:00. I heard my car alarm, and my brother yelled that someone was breaking into my dad's truck. We ran downstairs and when we flung the door open, the dude ran down the street so I shot at him. I did not hit him.

I was in [city] and we were at this guy's house and we had an argument over a drug deal. He wanted more money for meth than what we usually paid for it. He chased us out of the house with a gun, and me and two of my friends ran out of the house. My friends started shooting at him when we were running to the car, and I started shooting at them once we were in the car. We took off.

Defining a DGU as "unnecessary" poses problems not only because this is a subjective process, but because the most precise details are not captured in the data. For instance, what distance makes a DGU more necessary or less necessary, and from what distance did the attack occur? Is returning fire from a porch toward someone standing on a sidewalk more necessary than toward someone in a vehicle that is moving away from the shooter? The data used in this study were not gathered with the intention of studying DGUs. Thus, the respondents were not asked to determine the distances from which they fired their guns or their perceived degree of
threat. Although this is an important limitation, it does not preclude drawing important conclusions. The interrater reliability results, presented in Appendix B, indicate that the DGU and DGU-Plus measures are sufficiently consistent across coders (over 80 percent consistent). Once the narratives were read and categorized into mutually exclusive DGU, DGU-Plus, and non-DGU groups, the non-DGU situations were excluded from the sample, yielding a sample of 88 incidents that fit the DGU criteria. Of the 59 respondents who described these 88 incidents, 11 were involved in three DGU incidents each, 7 were involved in two incidents each, and the remaining 41 were involved in one DGU situation each.

**How the respondent used his gun.** Using the narrative accounts, the author coded the explicit way that the respondent described using his gun with the following mutually exclusive categories: (1) the respondent shot at the opponent; (2) the respondent fired his gun in the air or fired a warning shot; (3) the respondent hit the opponent with his gun; (4) the respondent merely brandished and/or pointed the gun at an opponent; and (5) the respondent used the gun in other ways, such as threatening to use a gun without actually showing the gun and indicating that he had a gun on him. Mutually exclusive categories gave me the opportunity to understand how frequently the distinct uses of guns occurred. For instance, I could compare the frequency with which the respondents merely pointed a gun at someone to the frequency with which they pointed a gun and shot at an opponent. Only the most deadly gun use by the respondent was coded.

**Initiating events.** One way to understand whether DGU incidents are more or less two-sided events is to examine the actions that occurred early in the situation. A measure of the events that initiated these incidents was created to explore whether these DGUs stemmed from one-sided or two-sided events. I read each narrative and summarized the events that launched the particular incident. I then collapsed these events into parsimonious, mutually exclusive categories that summarized the early events of each situation: (1) an opponent attacked someone at the scene; (2) an opponent attempted to take money, drugs, or property belonging to someone else; (3) there was a verbal exchange between the respondent or someone with the respondent and another person at the scene; and (4) other events precipitated the situation. The first two categories are more indicative of one-sided events in which an opponent preyed on some target, and the latter two categories are assumed to indicate more ambiguous circumstances in which events were not clearly one sided. I frequently used the “other” category because
many of these situations were unique and did not fit neatly into specific groups. These two incidents were categorized as involving "other" precipitating events:

A barroom brawl. Bunch of my friends and I were sitting at a table and there was a guy sitting at the bar and he looked just like John Schneider and he hadn't done anything or said anything, but my friends thought he looked like him and were harassing him wanting him to sing a song. My buddy said “Phil, duck,” and he had soaked a napkin with beer and hit the guy with it. The guy had no choice and he had to get up and do something about it. The whole bar went nuts. For some reason, someone took a swing at me, and so I hit him with my gun. I think he was a bouncer. My buddy got his leg broke and another guy had some stitches, but I didn't get hurt. They finally left us alone, and we just walked out. Well, I had a gun and that discourages people.

I was at a nightclub. I was driving out of the parking lot when someone was blocking traffic; I honked my horn and they didn't move. I drove into a gas station and got out of the car with my pistol hoping to avoid a fight, since I had my gun with me. Several guys got out of a van, and one of the guys came over and hit me. I shot him because the other guys were advancing as if to take the gun away from me. I got back into my car and drove away. I was arrested for this the next day. When I went around them in the parking lot initially, I bumped the van.

**Behaviors that immediately preceded the DGU.** An important dimension of the necessity of DGUs is the behavior or behaviors that immediately preceded the DGU. It seems reasonable to assume that gun uses that are in response to an attack are more necessary than gun uses that are in response to threats or ambiguous statements and actions. Although the general class of events that created the situation or escalated the incident may be the same events or behaviors that immediately preceded the DGU, this does not necessarily have to be the case. It is important to distinguish the behaviors and events that *immediately* preceded the DGU from the more general class of events that occurred at the beginning of the situation because it is assumed that these measures tap different theoretical concepts: the necessity of the DGU and one-sidedness. After reading the narratives, I found that two categories summarize the majority of the incidents: (1) an opponent attacked or attempted to attack someone in the situation and (2) an opponent made some implicit or explicit threat in the situation. An "other" category was used to capture the various actions that did not fit the two categories.
Injuries. A combination of the narrative text and the data gathered with follow-up questions were used to determine when the respondents and their opponents were injured during the situations. This measure gave me the opportunity to examine the prediction that gun resistance provokes injury. First, I used the coded data to create a dichotomous variable to determine whether the respondent and/or an opponent were injured during the incident; the coded data were examined because the respondents did not always mention their injuries in their narratives. To determine when those injuries occurred, I coded the narrative text of incidents in which the respondent and/or the opponent were injured. The sequence of events explicitly contained in the text were summarized in terms of the series of actions and reactions by the respondents and their opponents. The following sequence summarizes one narrative: opponents beat and stabbed the respondent, the respondent sustained injuries, the respondent shot at the opponents, an opponent sustained a gunshot injury, and the incident ended. These summaries were then collapsed into more parsimonious categories that permitted an exploration of questions about the resistance-injury thesis: (1) the respondent was never injured, (2) the respondent was injured after the DGU, (3) the respondent was injured before the DGU, and (4) the sequence is unclear.

Situational characteristics. The data that were gathered with follow-up questions about each incident are used to describe various aspects of the DGU situations. The variables relevant for the current study included (1) whether the respondent faced opponents who were all strangers or at least some opponents who were not strangers (e.g., acquaintances the respondent knew by name or sight, friends, and family members), (2) whether the respondent indicated that the opponent possessed and fired a gun in the incident, (3) whether the respondent used a handgun or a long gun, (4) the location of the incident, (5) whether the defender was arrested as a result of the incident, (6) what the incident was primarily about, (7) whether the respondent and/or the opponent was alone in the situation, (8) how the respondent obtained the gun he possessed in the situation, (9) why the respondent carried a gun to the scene, and (10) whether the respondent would have entered the situation without a gun.

RESULTS

Over a quarter of the cases studied (n = 24, 27 percent) involved a DGU that may not have been necessary or may have involved more than simply defensive gun use. Thus, it may not be
appropriate to aggregate seemingly different types of DGU events when describing them. To indicate the complexity of incidents in which guns are used for defense, I present descriptive statistics separately for the DGU and DGU-Plus incidents. Although the description of these DGU events is emphasized, the two types of events are also compared along important dimensions.

It is not surprising that guns are used in a variety of ways for defense. Table 1 shows that the respondents fired their guns at opponents in approximately 40 percent of the DGU cases and used their guns for defense by simply displaying their guns, pointing their guns at an opponent, and making threats with their guns 36 percent of the time. In contrast, all the defenders fired their guns at an opponent in the DGU-Plus cases.

Most DGUs did not end with the defenders' arrest—in this study, only 16 percent of all defenders were arrested for the DGU incidents. One might expect that a larger percentage of defenders involved in DGU-Plus incidents would be arrested because their gun use extended beyond mere defense or was less than necessary. This expectation is not supported. Table 1 shows that a larger percentage of the DGU-only incidents (19 percent) than of the DGU-Plus incidents (8 percent) ended in the respondents' arrest. One might also predict that a larger percentage of respondents would be arrested when they used their guns in a more serious manner. This prediction is supported. A respondent was arrested in 20 percent of the cases in which he fired at his opponent, compared to 11 percent of the cases in which he did not. Finally, it seems reasonable to predict that the defender would be more likely to be arrested when someone was injured than when no one was injured. This prediction is also supported. A respondent was arrested in 37 percent of the cases in which someone was injured, compared to 7 percent of the cases in which no one was injured.

Approximately half the DGU and DGU-Plus situations occurred in public places, whereas over a quarter of each type occurred in or near the respondents' residences. According to the narratives, most incidents in the sample occurred outside. A large portion of all incidents that occurred at or near the respondents' residences took place outside (n = 10, 42 percent). Nine of these narrative accounts indicated that these events occurred on a front porch, in a yard, or on a street or sidewalk near the respondents' residences. One event involved opponents firing at the respondent's house and the respondent returning fire toward a car. A larger percentage of DGU-Plus incidents (79 percent) than DGU incidents (55 percent) occurred outside, a statistically significant difference. This difference was expected, given that one of the defining aspects of
Table 1. Situational Characteristics of DGU and DGU-Plus Incidents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables/Attributes</th>
<th>DGU (n = 64)</th>
<th>DGU-Plus (n = 24)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>How the Respondent Used the Gun</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fired the gun</td>
<td>32 (50%)</td>
<td>24 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fired at opponent</td>
<td>26 (41%)</td>
<td>24 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fired warning shot/shot in air</td>
<td>6 (9%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brandished, pointed at opponent(s), etc.</td>
<td>23 (36%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hit opponent with gun</td>
<td>5 (8%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4 (6%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Respondent Arrested</strong></td>
<td>12 (19%)</td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Location of the Incident</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent’s residence</td>
<td>17 (27%)</td>
<td>7 (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opponent’s residence</td>
<td>3 (5%)</td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third party’s residence</td>
<td>12 (19%)</td>
<td>4 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public places (school, park, bar, etc.)</td>
<td>32 (50%)</td>
<td>11 (46%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inside</td>
<td>17 (27%)</td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside</td>
<td>35 (55%)</td>
<td>19 (79%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>12 (19%)</td>
<td>3 (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Respondent’s Gun Type</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handgun</td>
<td>56 (89%)</td>
<td>23 (96%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long gun</td>
<td>7 (11%)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Respondent’s Injuries</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent and/or opponent(s) injured</td>
<td>23 (36%)</td>
<td>4 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent was never injured</td>
<td>15 (23%)</td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent was injured before his DGU</td>
<td>8 (13%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respondent was injured after his DGU</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attack-injury sequence is unclear</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What the Incident Was Primarily About</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dispute over money, property, drugs, or a woman</td>
<td>21 (33%)</td>
<td>5 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior judged inappropriate</td>
<td>12 (19%)</td>
<td>5 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal insult/gesture or physical affront</td>
<td>8 (13%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge to turf/territory</td>
<td>8 (13%)</td>
<td>3 (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predatory attack</td>
<td>7 (11%)</td>
<td>6 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (respondent unsure, etc.)</td>
<td>8 (13%)</td>
<td>5 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gang-related incident</strong></td>
<td>14 (22%)</td>
<td>13 (54%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Behaviors that Initiated the Incident</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opponent attacked/attempted to attack</td>
<td>9 (14%)</td>
<td>16 (67%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opponent stealing from/robbing someone</td>
<td>7 (11%)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verbal exchange</td>
<td>26 (41%)</td>
<td>6 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other initiated/ambiguous</td>
<td>22 (34%)</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Behaviors that Immediately Preceded the DGU</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opponent attacked/attempted to attack</td>
<td>26 (41%)</td>
<td>20 (83%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opponent threatened someone</td>
<td>25 (39%)</td>
<td>4 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>13 (20%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship Between the Combatants</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All opponents were strangers</td>
<td>18 (28%)</td>
<td>11 (46%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some opponents were not strangers</td>
<td>46 (72%)</td>
<td>13 (54%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Opponent Possessed a Gun</strong></td>
<td>27 (42%)</td>
<td>20 (83%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Opponent Fired a Gun</strong></td>
<td>15 (23%)</td>
<td>20 (83%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of Combatants</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single opponent and no one with the respondent</td>
<td>12 (19%)</td>
<td>2 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single opponent and people with the respondent</td>
<td>6 (9%)</td>
<td>4 (17%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People with the opponent and no one with the respondent</td>
<td>13 (20%)</td>
<td>5 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People with the opponent and people with the respondent</td>
<td>33 (52%)</td>
<td>13 (54%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Percentages (in parentheses) reflect column percentages.

bOne case was missing data on the respondent’s gun type, resulting in 63 DGU cases with data.
DGU-Plus incidents is the greater physical distance between the combatants. Furthermore, because many incidents occurred away from the respondents' homes, it should come as no surprise that approximately 90 percent of all the defensive gun users used handguns.

Table 1 shows that a respondent and/or an opponent were injured in 36 percent of the DGU cases. The injuries did not tend to follow DGUs, however; if a respondent was injured in a DGU incident, he was injured before he used his gun for defense. In one DGU-Plus case, a respondent was injured after he used his gun for defense. This incident involved a shootout in which opponents fired at the respondent and then the respondent returned shots and was subsequently wounded. Like the findings of previous studies (Kleck, 1988; Kleck & DeLone, 1993; Kleck & Gertz, 1995), defenders rarely sustained injuries during these incidents. The evidence does not lend support to the gun defense-provokes-injury hypothesis. A larger percentage of the DGU cases (36 percent) than of the DGU-Plus cases (17 percent) ended in injuries. Although this difference is not statistically significant, it may be explained by the fact that many DGU-Plus incidents involved attacks that did not have a high probability of success. By definition, the respondents' attacks in DGU-Plus situations occurred from significant distances and when the opponents were fleeing the scene, which made injuries unlikely.

These DGU incidents were about a wide variety of issues, with most involving common disputes and arguments. Over 30 percent involved disputes about money, property, drugs, or women. DGU-Plus incidents, on the other hand, were more likely to be about the opponents' behavior. A quarter of the DGU-Plus incidents were primarily about predatory attacks, and nearly a quarter were about behavior that the respondents believed was inappropriate. Furthermore, DGU-Plus incidents were more likely to involve gang-related issues, suggesting that the guns may have been used to achieve goals in addition to defense.

Since many events grew out of common disputes and arguments, it was not surprising to find that 75 percent of the DGU incidents evolved from verbal exchanges and other or ambiguous circumstances. The remaining 25 percent appeared to be one sided, as when an opponent initiated an incident with an attack, an attempted attack, or an attempt to steal property. For instance, one case involved a respondent using his gun to stop someone from robbing a convenience store. In contrast, about two-thirds of the DGU-Plus incidents began with an opponent attacking or attempting to attack someone in the situation. Comparatively fewer incidents
grew out of verbal exchanges and ambiguous situations. The difference between the two types of incidents in terms of whether the opponent opened the event with an attack or attempted attack, rather than some other behavior, is statistically significant. DGU-Plus incidents are more likely to begin with aggressive, one-sided behaviors by an opponent.

The measure of the events that immediately preceded the DGU can also shed light on the seriousness of the opponent's actions and thus the necessity of the DGU. The DGU incidents involved a variety of actions that elicited the use of guns. Approximately the same proportion of DGUs, 40 percent, were preceded by opponents' attacks and attempted attacks as were preceded by opponents' threats. In contrast, 83 percent of the respondents' gun uses in DGU-Plus incidents were preceded by opponents' attacks, a statistically significant difference.

The respondents typically faced at least one opponent who was not a stranger. This sample of incidents involved people who shared space and were at least familiar with one another, rather than strangers. This finding cannot be interpreted to mean, however, that most DGUs involve defenders who are aware of an impending attack because any aggressor, regardless of the relationship, can take a target by surprise.

Table 1 indicates that the defenders frequently faced opponents who possessed firearms (in 42 percent of the DGU cases and 83 percent of the DGU-Plus cases). Opponents fired guns in over 80 percent of the DGU-Plus incidents, but in only 23 percent of the DGU incidents—a statistically significant difference. Most incidents involved multiple people on both sides of the conflict, rather than one-on-one events. Approximately half the DGU and DGU-Plus incidents involved a respondent who was with people at the scene and multiple opponents or an opponent who had people with him or her at the scene.

The pattern of differences between the two types of incidents suggests that defenders in DGU-Plus incidents faced more severe circumstances and that their responses were also more severe. Compared to the defenders in DGU incidents, those involved in DGU-Plus incidents were more likely to face opponents with guns, opponents who fired their guns, opponents who were strangers, and opponents who initiated the events with at least an attempted attack and to have used their guns after opponents attacked and attempted to attack. By definition, DGU-Plus incidents involve more severe violence than DGU-only incidents because the defenders

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2 This is a measure of whether an opponent fired a gun in any way during the incident, including at the respondent, at someone else, or in the air.
used their guns for something other than defense—when it was not clearly necessary or continued to use their guns in a seemingly offensive manner.

It may be the case that the defenders responded to severe circumstances with a similarly severe response, like continuing to shoot once the threat had subsided. They may have wanted not only to defend themselves, but to punish the opponents for their violent behavior. One way to examine this possibility is to examine the defenders’ intentions in these incidents. When asked whether they intended to seriously injure their opponents in the situations, 75 percent of the defenders in the DGU-Plus incidents, but half the defenders in the DGU-only incidents, reported that they intended to seriously injure their opponents in the situations—a statistically significant difference. Although this evidence does not explain why the defenders wanted to seriously injure their opponents, it does suggest that the defenders in the DGU-Plus incidents intended to do more harm to their opponents in the specific situations that did those in the DGU-only situations.

In both types of situations, the respondents often faced desperate circumstances and frequently fired their weapons. This finding does not, however, resolve questions about the degree to which gun defenses result from desperate circumstances or about the degree to which gun carrying calls forth more desperate or risky circumstances. Data that were gathered as part of the larger project shed light on this issue. Interviewers asked subsets of respondents how they obtained the guns they possessed and used during the incidents. All the respondents who possessed and used guns in violent encounters, as well as those who possessed guns in nonviolent, high-risk situations but did not use them, were asked about the nature of their gun possession. First, they were asked how they obtained the guns. Respondents who reported carrying guns into situations were then asked why they carried the guns and whether they would have gone into the particular situations if they did not have the guns. Cases that occurred at the respondents’ residences were excluded because these questions were less meaningful than when the incidents occurred elsewhere.

Table 2 shows that a large portion of the defenders involved in situations that occurred away from their residences brought their guns to the scene. Although most carriers had their guns because carrying was part of their everyday routines, 20 percent reported that they carried the guns because of the nature of the situations they were entering. A significant portion of the respondents (68 percent) indicated that they would not have entered the situations
Table 2. The Nature of Gun Possession in DGU and DGU-Plus Incidents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables/Attributes</th>
<th>DGU (n = 31)</th>
<th>DGU-Plus (n = 17)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How did the respondent obtain the gun he possessed in the situation?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brought it to the situation</td>
<td>29 (94%)</td>
<td>15 (88%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Left the scene to obtain the gun or obtained it from someone at the scene</td>
<td>2 (6%)</td>
<td>2 (13%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why did the respondent bring the gun to the situation?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carried as a matter of everyday routine</td>
<td>20 (77%)</td>
<td>11 (79%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Because of the nature of the situation</td>
<td>5 (19%)</td>
<td>3 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In case he confronted this opponent</td>
<td>1 (4%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would the respondent have gone into the situation without a gun?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>5 (19%)</td>
<td>7 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>21 (80%)</td>
<td>6 (43%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
<td>1 (7%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: These questions were posed to all men who possessed guns in violent encounters, but in near-violent encounters were posed only to men who possessed guns but never used them in any way, such as to make a threat. Cases were omitted if the incidents took place inside the respondents’ residences or outside near the respondents’ residences.

DISCUSSION

The information presented here has direct policy relevance because recognizing that guns are used to prevent and thwart crimes implies that denying guns to individuals may result in more harm, since individuals may lack the means to defend themselves and others from impending violence. Yet research has focused nearly exclusively on estimating the prevalence with which people use guns for defense. When these estimates are used in policy discussions, the assumption is that most DGUs can be counted as providing a social benefit. The results indicate that this assumption may be incorrect. Many policy-relevant questions about gun defense must be explicitly explored before cost-benefit analyses consider DGUs. For
example, were the communities in which these defenses occurred better off because some residents possessed and used guns for defense? Before claims about the benefits of gun defense are used in policy debates, a more complete understanding of the DGU phenomenon is required.

This study used a unique sample of events gathered from individuals who are often excluded from discussions of gun defense: criminal offenders. The findings may have limited policy relevance because most people agree that this is one group who should not be able to own and possess firearms. Despite this limitation, it is still reasonable to assume that a sample of offenders is uniquely suited to provide information about the use of guns. This sample of incidents is probably a portion of the 300,000 to 1.2 million DGUs that have been estimated to occur each year (Smith, 1997, p. 1468). There is good reason to suspect that this portion is large because these individuals are the most likely to become involved in violent and near-violent events. Research suggests that the overlap between victim and offender populations is substantial.

Content analysis, which was used to classify gun uses, has at least one advantage over previously used methods. Conforming to Ludwig’s (2000, p. 366) suggestion for DGU research, an outside observer coded the uses with a standard set of criteria about the situations, thus reducing the effects of self-presentation bias. Self-presentation bias, or the desire to appear favorable in the eyes of interviewers, may affect respondents' reports of gun use (see Kovandzic, Kleck, & Gertz, 1998). The respondents in the current sample were specifically asked, however, to describe violent and near-violent situations and several specific aspects of those situations, rather than to report more generally the use of guns for defense and a few aspects of each incident.

The strength of the content analysis can also be viewed as a weakness because a researcher, rather than the user, determined whether the gun was used defensively. Thus, the user's perceptions of danger and threat were not considered. Furthermore, this content analysis was not immune to self-presentation bias because the gun user described the situation. A respondent may have been inclined to portray himself as the victim and present his firearm use as defensive rather than offensive. This sample may be less susceptible to presentation bias because the respondents were asked to describe specific behaviors, rather than to answer questions with value-laden terms like defense and crime. The problem with false-positives that limits confidence in the research used to generate DGU prevalence estimates (Cook & Ludwig, 1998; Hemenway, 1997; Smith, 1997) also limits the confidence that one can have in
the results of this study. This sample contained incidents that may be most susceptible to misrepresentation because there was often not a clear victim and offender (Kleck & Gertz, 1997, p. 1450; McDowall & Wiersma, 1994, p. 1984).

Self-presentation bias is a potential problem for all surveys, including those with respondents who have serious criminal histories, respondents who do not have serious criminal histories, and respondents who have illegally carried or possessed guns. If one assumes that the respondents were attempting to disguise their offensive gun use, then they did a poor job 27 percent of the time. Anecdotally, the respondents were not apprehensive about reporting aggressive actions that portrayed them as aggressive. Thus, many clear instances of offensive gun use were included in the sample of 166 narratives in which the respondents mentioned their guns.

The results show that a nontrivial portion of DGU situations involve gun use that may be characterized as offensive. This finding may reflect the complex reality of gun use in this society. It is not surprising because there is little reason to suspect that most DGUs would be similar, considering the myriad of potential encounters and gun-possessing participants. This finding may also be due to the fact that the respondents are serious, convicted offenders who may be more willing to use violence across conflict situations, and thus their defensive actions may frequently turn offensive. This explanation acknowledges that these results reflect the complexity of civilian gun use in the United States and that a portion of DGUs are less necessary and involve an offensive element. If DGUs carried out by individuals who are generally willing to use violence are less socially beneficial, then future research and policy-related discussions should distinguish the incidents that involve these types of individuals from those that involve individuals who are less willing to use violence.

DGU and DGU-Plus incidents appear to differ in several important ways. First, DGU-Plus incidents consist of defenders' behaviors that go beyond what is necessary to prevent harm, that is, the firearms were used for something more than simple defense. For instance, over half the DGU-Plus events involved gang-related issues that may have affected the gun users' decisions about how to behave. Furthermore, the defenders in DGU-Plus events could have behaved in some other way to avoid harm, such as remaining in a house, rather than exposing themselves and firing at opponents. Second, by definition, DGU-Plus instances involve defenders' attacks that would not have been easily made without guns. This finding raises questions about the necessity of the attacks and
forces us to make judgments about the actual benefit of DGUs that were less than necessary.

Third, the differences between the two types of gun defense suggest that the DGU-Plus incidents involved opponents who were more aggressive and posed greater immediate threats to the defenders or others in the situations than did the opponents in DGU-only situations. The defenders may have been responding to the opponents' severe threats and behaviors with analogous actions. Tedeschi and Felson (1994, p. 353) explained that individuals may respond to perceived injustices with a punishment that is "directly related to the severity of the offense that led to the grievance." If gun defense in DGU-Plus instances can also be considered punishments, then the gun use may not only restore justice, but deter future offending (Tedeschi & Felson, 1994). Thus, defense may not be the only motivating factor behind DGUs.

More of the gun-defense incidents involved at least some opponents who were nonstrangers than only strangers. In addition, a significant portion of the DGUs were two-sided, ambiguous situations, rather than clear-cut, one-sided events. Thus, descriptions of DGUs and discussions of their policy implications should not overemphasize incidents that involve clear-cut robberies and burglaries by strangers but overlook the significant portion of DGU incidents that grow out of more common disputes between people who are at least familiar with one another. Guns are used for defense in a broad range of conflict situations, and these gun defenses are not easily summarized.

Confirming the findings of previous studies that used samples from the general population (Hemenway & Azrael, 2000; Kleck & Gertz, 1997), the results of this study show that defenders frequently carried their firearms into situations. Thus, discussions about the benefits of defensive gun use should be framed in terms of gun carrying away from home, rather than home defenses (Azrael & Hemenway, 2000, p. 290). The findings suggest that firearms have defensive utility away from the possessors' residences and that policies that prohibit public gun carrying may deny possessors the ability to use an effective tool to defend themselves. Yet this conclusion also raises questions about the social benefits of DGUs. Specifically, should DGUs that stem from illegal gun carrying by individuals who have been convicted of any crime and illegal carrying by individuals who have never been convicted of any crime be counted as a social benefit (see Ludwig, 2000, p. 385)? If we are truly serious about rigorously enforcing current gun laws and increasing the normative authority of gun laws, then it is necessary to consider carefully the events that should be counted as beneficial in
cost-benefit analyses. Cost-benefit analyses must consider the effects that gun carrying will have on the chances that a person will enter a risky situation. If gun possession increases the chances that the carrier will enter high-risk situations, then the net effect of gun carrying may not be as desirable as anticipated.

Firearm possession appears to affect individuals' decisions to enter certain situations. In addition, the expected nature of a situation affects the decision to carry a gun. Although individuals may feel compelled to use guns for defense when they face serious circumstances, the evidence suggests that gun possession also contributes to individuals' presence in such situations. The relationships among gun carrying, the circumstances that warrant DGU, and actual gun use are complex and require further theoretical and empirical elaboration. This result highlights the importance of examining the earliest stages of violent and near-violent encounters (Kleck & Gertz, 1995; Ludwig, 2000; Wells & Horney, forthcoming). Research on the effects of guns in the earliest stages of conflict encounters will move us toward a greater understanding of the net effects of gun carrying and possession.

Consistent with existing research (Kleck, 1988; Kleck & DeLone, 1993; Kleck & Gertz, 1995), the results presented here do not support the defense-provokes-injury thesis. Studies have discovered that gun defenders are not frequently injured. Thus, the thesis can hold true. Only one incident in the current sample involved a defender who sustained injuries after his gun defense. One limitation of this study is that the sample excluded incidents in which the defenders were killed. Thus, instances in which defense led to a severe response from an opponent are not captured.

Although this research has not provided clear evidence that can be used in cost-benefit analyses, it has raised important questions about the beneficial aspects of the availability and use of firearms. It highlights that we are not yet in a position to conclude that a relatively large number of DGUs implies a large social benefit derived from the availability and use of guns. The DGU concept must be more clearly elaborated and empirical evidence must continue to be gathered before these types of gun uses can be equated with clear social benefits.
APPENDIX A

I was driving at school, I drove by fast, and there was slush and I wet a couple of guys, but I did not notice it. They ran up and surrounded my car and kicked it and punched the windows. I pulled my gun and put it on my lap, and they saw it. They did not run, but they backed off a bit. I rolled down my window and asked what the problem was. They said you wetted me, and I apologized and said I did not do it on purpose. I asked what they wanted to do about it. They said no they did not want to do anything about it because it was an accident. They left after I told them I was sorry.

I was at home and a friend approached me for some money that I owed his brother. He wanted drugs or money. He didn't receive either. We were partying together with two girls that he brought over. He disappeared outside for a little while and later came back in the house with a baseball bat. That is when he started to threaten me about the money. I had my shotgun right next to me and I grabbed it, and that is when he stepped back toward the door. The girls started screaming. He started to back up toward the door and asked me not to shoot him. I told him to get the fuck out of my house, and he did and the two girls followed.

I went with Rose to drop off some heroin, and we were going to meet them in a parking lot in [store name] and we got there and the kid was going to rip me off. He was supposed to pay about $16,000 for the heroin, and there was nowhere near that much money in the envelope. He was leaning on the car window and he handed Rose the envelope, and Rose shook her head because there wasn't enough money in there. He lifted his shirt up, and I saw the butt of his gun. I got out of the car and I pulled my gun out and said, "Let's not do this." The kid was staring at me, and I said, "Let's not do this." He said, "What about the money?" and I said, "You just got ripped off."

I was in a bar in [city], and my girlfriend had a brother that I did not get a long with. Her brother came in the bar with a couple of his friends and started giving me a hard time, and me and my girlfriend left. I pulled out my pistol so they wouldn't jump us as we left.

I basically stopped a major robbery. I walked into this convenience store and I had my gun in my pants and I was getting some beer. This guy came in, and I was behind this row of stuff and he didn't see me and he tried to rob the cashier. I grabbed my gun out and I said "freeze" and I stopped the robbery. I told the lady behind the counter to grab his gun and point it on him. I got some rope off the counter and I tied his hands up, and then the lady called the police.
APPENDIX B

Interrater reliability assesses the extent to which two or more independent researchers rate the same text consistently (Weber, 1990). An independent researcher used the DGU criteria to code gun use in the 166 narratives in which the respondents explicitly mentioned their guns or made a threat to use their guns. The independent coder was given a brief, verbal description of the study and was instructed to use the DGU criteria to determine whether the gun use in each situation was defensive or not. We consistently coded 135 (81 percent) of the 166 gun-mentioned incidents. Of the 88 DGU incidents that I rated as DGUs, the independent researcher coded 74 (84 percent) of them as DGU incidents. The following are examples of incidents that I coded as DGUs but the independent coder did not:

My friends and I were at a house drinking. A friend went to another room and said that some other guys were chilling. They told him that this was the VIP section and my friend asked the owner if he was allowed to stay. He said whatever. My friend stayed in the room and the guys tried to get him out of the room. We went to get a gun and returned. But, they decided to fight one-on-one.

I was in the projects and I guess there was some bloods that moved in up there and they was just standing out with all their red on, kicking it with their hats turned to the sides and everything. We got mad, me and four other people had our guns, and we didn’t get too close, but told them they had to leave. They got in their car and drove through real slow. When they got to us, we started shooting their car up. They kept rolling real slow until they were out of the projects.

We was having a barbeque in January and my homegirl, was conversating with somebody else and her boyfriend didn’t like it. And then I walk up to him and I let him know that I had a gun, and he didn’t like that. I called my gun Seymour, and I told him I had Seymour with me. I let him know. I said, “Don’t make me have to act stupid in front of these people.” Her parents and stuff were there. He chilled it out and waited until after everybody left, and then I don’t know what happened.

The independent researcher then read the 88 incidents that I defined as DGUs and coded the gun use in these narratives using the DGU-Plus criteria. Of the 88 DGU incidents, the independent researcher and I consistently coded 77 incidents (87.5 percent) as to whether the gun use was DGU-Plus. Of the 24 incidents that I labeled DGU-Plus, the independent coder labeled 18 (75 percent) as DGU-Plus. I labeled the following incidents as DGU-Plus while the independent coder did not:
I was watching TV, and they went by and shot at the house. No one was injured. They went around and we got our guns and went out and fired back, but they were gone.

I'm on [street] and [street] and I was messing around at my neighbor's house, and there was this girl there and I liked her. I didn't know that she was seeing someone at the time, and her neighbor told her boyfriend. Her boyfriend confronted me at the gas station one day. I told him I didn't know she was dating someone and then I left. He then shot at my car, he was trying to shoot me. So I slammed on the breaks. He was gonna kill me. I got out of the car and shot back at him. I got in my car and just left.

I did not code the following incidents as involving DGU-Plus while the independent coder did:

I am asleep and my partner is out in my front yard playing with his dog. Bloods pull up and start talking to him. They said, "We caught you off guard (slipping) and don't let us catch you again." He ran to the front door and started yelling. He said, "They out here. Bring the pistols." So I get up and grab the pistols. They stood out there talking. I walk out of the house with three pistols. I give him a pistol and my little brother one, too. So now we tell them to get off from in front of the house. We start exchanging words, and this fool pulls his pistol up and shoots one time and then we get to shooting at them, and they hit the gas and drive off.

This guy and a couple of his friends came to my house. He said one of my friends had ripped him off (took his money and didn't give him any dope) and he came to my house looking for him. We got into an argument about it, and I asked him to leave and he wouldn't. He pulled a knife out, and I pulled out my gun and shot him in the shoulder. He turned around and left.

REFERENCES


