

Insights

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Editor

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EDITOR'S NOTE: A DEBATE ABOUT DEFENSIVE GUN USES

In the Summer 1997 issue, the Insights section included an article by Philip J. Cook, Jens Ludwig, and David Hemenway, "The Gun Debate's New Mythical Number: *How Many Defensive Uses Per Year?*" The article focused on how frequently Americans use a gun to defend against a criminal attack (called defensive gun uses or DGUs). Cook, Ludwig, and Hemenway argued that one published estimate of 2.5 million is a dramatic overestimate of the true incidence of defensive gun uses. This estimate of 2.5 million DGUs comes from research by Gary Kleck and Marc Gertz of Florida State University, published in the *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* [Kleck and Gertz, 1995]. Getting the estimate right is important for the policy debate over gun control. Gun control opponents argue that guns are used more often for protection than for crime; gun control advocates argue the reverse. So how frequently are guns used to protect against crime?

The *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, Volume 87 Number 4, has now published a vigorous exchange of views about defensive gun uses, which will be of considerable interest to readers of the Cook, Ludwig, and Hemenway article in *JPAM*.

In "Survey Research and Self-Defense Gun Use: An Explanation of Extreme Overestimates," David Hemenway [1997] makes many of the points that he and coauthors Cook and Ludwig made in their *JPAM* article. He estimates that the incidence of DGUs is 55,000 to 80,000 per year, based on his analysis of the National Crime Victimization Survey conducted for the U.S. Justice Department.

In "The Illegitimacy of One-Sided Speculation: Getting the Defensive Gun Use Estimate Down," Gary Kleck and Marc Gertz [1997] defend their original estimate of 2.5 million. They note that a number of independent surveys find roughly the same estimate, including a Police Foundation survey that was the basis of a book by Cook and Ludwig [1996]. The arguments against the 2.5 million estimate focus on possible sources of error in the Kleck and Gertz survey

that might lead to an overestimate of DGUs, without considering that some additional factors might lead the estimate to be too low. Kleck and Gertz [1997] point out that any critical analysis of their estimate has to consider the full range of factors that might influence the estimate in either direction, and judge the relative balance of the two. They also discuss the problems of estimating the frequency of any illegal behavior through surveys or other means. Cook, Ludwig, and Hemenway [1997] had argued that respondents might report too many cases of DGUs because it would make them look good if they told the interviewers stories in which they were featured as heroes. Kleck and Gertz [1997] argue that respondents might report too few cases of DGUs because they would not want to tell an interviewer on the phone about an incident in which they behaved illegally, for example by brandishing an unregistered gun. Although social desirability is a common problem in surveys of illegal or socially sanctioned behavior, Kleck and Gertz suggest that it might as easily lead to underreporting as to overreporting. While acknowledging that their survey is not perfect, Kleck and Gertz question whether the National Crime Victimization Survey is well suited to estimating DGUs, given that it does not ask any direct questions about DGUs.

In "A Call for a Truce in the DGU War," survey expert Tom Smith of the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago reviews the arguments on both sides, searching for reasonable common ground [Smith, 1997]. Smith explains why the National Crime Victimization Survey estimates are probably too low. He also explains why the Kleck and Gertz survey estimates may be too high, even taking into account potential sources of underreporting. Making some adjustments for various sources of error to both sets of survey results, Smith comes up with a range of 256,500 to 373,000 DGUs per year from the National Crime Victimization Survey and 1.2 million DGUs per year from the Kleck and Gertz and Cook and Ludwig surveys. This considerably narrows the gap between the two estimates. Informed adjustments are helpful, but they cannot substitute for better data and analysis. More research is needed to investigate the potential sources of error in how people answer survey questions about gun use. The debate and analyses in these articles highlight the considerable expertise needed to conduct and interpret high-quality surveys about important policy problems.

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