

# Law-abiding One-Man Armies

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**T**he right to bear arms is an old traditional right and many Americans historically and currently have availed themselves of the privilege. The exact number who do so is not known. In most states the carrying of a concealed weapon requires a permit, but all who carry weapons obviously do not apply for permits.

Clearly, more information is needed about guns and how they are used in our cities if we are to understand and respond to this dimension of urban violence. We lack information on the relationship between guns and violence and the type of persons who have and carry guns.

The tremendous increase in the sale of handguns in the United States in the last decade is evidence of the defensive reaction of many Americans. For a certain segment of our population, the possession of a handgun is apparently a viable reaction to the perception of threat in the environment, although it is not known whether carrying a concealed weapon actually provides protection or merely gives its bearer a psychological sense of security. George Newton and Franklin Zimring report that there are estimated to be over 24 million serviceable handguns in the possession of the civilian population of the United States, and that in the period 1962-68 the sales of handguns quadrupled. They suggest that firearms purchasers in recent years have been often motivated by fear of crime, violence, and civil disorder, as well as the fear that stricter firearms laws may make guns harder to obtain in the future.

At the same time that the civilian population is arming, the criminal use of weapons is rising. In 1968 Albert P. Cardarelli reported that the availability of weapons may be a contributing factor in homicides of police. His study showed that the offender was in possession of a firearm in almost every case and that handguns are used in at least 63 percent of all reported homicides and 37 percent of all robberies in the United States. Recent statistics suggest that these percentages are increasing.

Initiating a solution to the gun problem in the United States will require extensive resources. The National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence has proposed the confiscation of all handguns owned by the civilian population, but they estimate that the cost of this program would be very high, perhaps \$500 million. Other authorities pessimistically observe that, although man is capable of consciously

determining the nature of his environment, the possession of firearms and resistance to gun control legislation in the United States are an intransigent part of the American tradition. The lack of definition of the problem and task suggests a better knowledge of gun-carrying behavior is an essential prerequisite to its social control. Here, we report the findings of an empirical survey into one aspect of the subject which has hitherto received little serious attention—an examination of the characteristics of persons who apply for a permit to carry a concealed weapon.

The purpose of this article is to construct a preliminary model to describe and explain gun applicant behavior. Of course, there are many reasons why people carry concealed weapons. According to Robert Sherrill, people carry concealed weapons either to enhance acts of violence on their part, such as crimes against person or property, or to protect themselves from such acts. It is highly unlikely that gun applicants would state an aggressive reason on the official form filed with the police. Therefore, the data pertain to protective reasons. We hypothesize that persons who apply for protective reasons are responding to one or more of a composite of threats in their environments: (1) working in an occupation perceived to be "dangerous"; (2) fear of victimization; and (3) living in a residential environment, characterized by high crime rates (crime threat) or racial unrest (racial threat).

To be sure, not all persons who experience these threats rely on carrying a concealed weapon in order to protect themselves. In fact, this is an option that is taken by only a small proportion of the people thus threatened. Therefore, we postulate that the persons who do apply are persons who feel competent to protect themselves with a weapon. We use the term "law-abiding one-man armies" to mean persons who register to carry a concealed weapon. Although "one-man armies" is somewhat flamboyant, its choice is deliberate, and it focuses on what may be an important aspect of gun-carrying behavior. James Wright and Linda Marston suggest that weapons ownership may be a way of sustaining the "rugged, manly" self-image of the gun owner, or that it may be tied to a sense of machismo in upper middle-class Protestants that may serve many of the same functions that "tough talk" in bars and taverns serve for the urban working class.

Our study applies to gun applicant behavior in Seattle in

1972. Seattle is governed by a state ordinance on the subject. While there is no gun registration law in the State of Washington, a permit is required. Any person who is 21 years of age and a citizen of the United States without a felony record may apply for the permit. The Seattle Police Department is authorized to conduct this registration activity. The permit is issued after a 30-day waiting period, during which the qualifications of the applicant are checked, and is good for two years.

Our sample contains 400 applications covering the period from February 3, 1972 through August 15, 1972. It is based on a one-in-six sample of persons who registered with the Seattle Police Department for a permit to carry a concealed weapon. By examining the gun permit application forms we obtained the following basic information for each applicant: age, sex, race, height, weight, occupation, home address, and a statement of the reason for permit application. From the latter statement, the purpose for carrying the weapon, the location use, and the presence and type of threat perceived by the applicant can be inferred. The home address gives us an opportunity to obtain important information about the residential area in which the applicant lives concerning federal census and uniform crime statistics; it is also the key to describing the geographic pattern of permit applicants within the community.

While the current data do not permit a clear and unambiguous test of all of the concepts and propositions in the hypothetical model, evidence concerning them will be examined. We stress that this is an exploratory study, limited by the nature of the sample and the limited recorded information available. It is, however, the first systematic study of the subject based on gun permit records known to the authors.

### **Prevalence and Characteristics**

What was the prevalence of one-man armies in Seattle in 1972? Not counting police officers, we estimate that there were 9,500 persons, aged 21 and over, who were legally authorized to carry concealed weapons. This is based on the actual sampling of available records, and is somewhat smaller than the unofficial estimate of the Seattle Police Department.

Expressed as a rate of Seattle adult residents, the number is 24.2 per thousand. In all, one-man armies constitute 2.4 percent of Seattle's adult population of 363,000. This must be considered a crude estimate because we did not include persons who carry a handgun without a permit, nor those who do not carry guns even though they are licensed to do so. Also, in the absence of comparative statistics, there is no sound basis for asserting that the number and rate is higher or lower in Seattle than in other cities, or whether the phenomenon is in fact increasing or decreasing.

What are the characteristics of one-man armies?

#### **Sex**

One-man armies are predominantly male. Of the sample of 400 applicants, 357 were male and 43 female. This is signifi-

cantly different from the near-even sex ratio of the adult Seattle population.

#### **Race**

One-man armies are usually white, but blacks are proportionately over-represented. The racial distribution of gun permit applicants indicated that blacks tend to apply for permits more often than their representation in the community. Seventy-nine percent of the applicants were white; blacks accounted for 16 percent; and other races 5 percent. In the general population, whites make up 87 percent of the population; blacks only 7 percent; and others 6 percent.

#### **Age**

One-man armies are middle-aged. While there are more gun applicants in the age category, 21-44, in the sample, so too is this the largest age category of Seattle residents. About 41 percent of the applicants are of this age in the sample as compared with 48 percent of the residents of the city. The median age of the male gun applicant is 46, just one year older than the female applicant. In Seattle as a whole, persons 45-64 comprise 35.4 percent of the population, whereas 41.7 percent of the male applicants and 51.8 percent of the female applicants in the sample are in this age.

#### **Physical Appearance**

One-man armies include many big, overweight people. About half of the male applicants and 57 percent of the female applicants were above the recommended weight (for height) norms established by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. Only a very small proportion—less than 3 percent—were below the recommended height-weight norms.

#### **Employment**

One-man armies are more likely to be employed as managers, service workers, and transport operatives. The census has created a 15-category system by which it classifies workers. We found that three categories—managers, service workers, and transport operatives—applied for gun permits in significant numbers beyond their distribution in the general Seattle population. On the other hand, the professional and technical category and the clerical category applied for permits far less often than their representation in the community.

#### **Location**

One-man armies are concentrated geographically, that is, there are clusters of gun permit applicants within the city. Clusters of high gun permits are evident in three geographical areas: the city's "central area" ghetto, a high-rise apartment house area north of the central business district, and along a major city arterial going through an area of government-sponsored housing development and changing population patterns.

## Why Carry Concealed Weapons?

The literature on the subject contains both reasoned explanations and scare stories about why people carry concealed weapons. Robert Sherrill's journalistic history of *The Saturday Night Special* (1973) is probably the best single account of the subject.

In the following sections, we use the reasons stated in the applicants' records as buttressed by other statistical data to clarify the subject.

We start with categories of applicants who stated that they had experienced a direct threat of violence from someone known to them, or that they had been robbed or beaten by an unknown assailant. Namely, these are the victims of violent assault, and, perhaps, those working in "dangerous" occupations. For them, there is a clear and present danger for which they need armed protection.

However, for many applicants, the threat of violence is not associated with specific experiences or persons, but rather with general fears and expectations. The research literature suggests that it is the *perceived threat* of criminal or racial violence that is a more important determiner of weapons ownership than actual experience with the phenomena. For example, following the urban riots of the mid-1960s, surveys have repeatedly demonstrated an association between perceived racial threat and gradual exodus of whites from the schools and residential areas of the central city. They have also found that those who were most fearful were more likely to consider buying guns to protect their homes. This is in accord with the conclusion of Wright and Marston that the *anticipation* and *expectation* of crime and urban degradation is a more important determinant of weapons ownership than actual experiences with crime. Following this line of reasoning, we explore hypotheses concerning the "crime threat" and the "racial threat" of these areas and associated gun applicant behavior later in this article.

### "Dangerous" Occupation and Victimization

A total of 629 reasons were given by applicants to carry a concealed weapon. Three major reasons were identified: personal protection (50.3 percent); hunting game (21.3 percent); and protection at place of employment (26.5 percent). In general, applicants stated one or two reasons. Although 134 persons said they wanted a concealed weapon to hunt game, only 22 persons gave this as the sole or main reason. Most of the applicants also mentioned "personal protection" and/or "employment" as well.

Within the group citing reasons related to employment, there were no significant differences by race or sex, although occupational differences emerged. For example, persons engaged in white collar, managerial (34.8 percent) and service (34.4 percent) occupations were more likely to give reasons related to employment than persons working in blue collar occupations (23.7 percent) or other wise engaged (8.0 percent).

Seventy-six persons, approximately one-fifth of the total sample of gun permit applicants, could be characterized as

"victimized." As a group, the victimized include proportionally more young women, blacks, and more persons above or below the average height-weight standards than the applicant sample as a whole. The reported likelihood of having been personally threatened or otherwise experiencing or anticipating victimization produces the following kind of odds:

White male, 65 and over:	1 in 10
White male, 45-64:	1 in 8
White male, 21-44:	1 in 7
Black male, 65 and over:	1 in 6
All minority men, 21-65:	1 in 3
White women, 21-44	1 in 3
Black women, 21-65	1 in 2

Among the occupations, managerial, transport operatives, and service workers were the most likely to have experienced victimization or to have anticipated such an event. These categories comprise 24 percent of the Seattle work force. However, they constitute half of the persons with a known record of victimization in the sample, and an even larger proportion, 60 percent, of those who anticipate victimization in the future. These occupational groups comprise about 45 percent of all gun applicants, and they are the most likely to give reasons related to employment and "night work" of any category in the sample. It is from evidence of this kind that we are able to make the inference that these occupations are perceived to be "dangerous" ones that warrant gun carrying.

However, the fact that only 18.5 percent of the applicants claim prior victimization as a reason for carrying a concealed weapon suggests that this factor alone is not sufficient to explain gun application behavior in general. It does, however, appear to be a more likely explanation for women than it is for white or black males, whatever their age.

### Crime and Racial Threat

Among the threats reported in, or inferred from, the gun permit applications, were the rise in criminal activity and racial unrest in the cities. While official statistics do not provide a direct measure of "crime threat" and "racial threat," it is possible to determine rough relationships between certain types of reported crime and certain types of racial residential mix with the incidence of gun application behavior. If it should be found, for example, that gun application rates are high in census tracts with low crime rates, or that gun application rates are high in the most homogenous residential areas, then this would raise serious doubts about the reasons given for people arming themselves.

To test the relationship of the incidence of crime to the rate of application for a permit, the incidence of crimes against persons and property as reported in official police statistics were compared with the permit application rate by census tract. The results suggest a low and statistically insignificant relationship to gun application rates. Thus, the notion that a "crime threat" as a major determiner for people to arm themselves is not convincing. In general, the findings are in accord with those of Donald Murray, Wright and Marston.

The evidence supporting a perceived racial threat as the

reason for applying to carry a concealed weapon is more convincing. Three tests of threat were performed. In each, there is a slightly different indicator of assumed racial threat. In the first it is the proportion of nonwhite residents of the area; in the second it is the increasing proportion of black residents from 1960-1970; in the third it is the tempo of the increase of black residents from 1960-1970.

### *Proportion of Nonwhite Residents*

Seattle's 121 census tracts were rank ordered by the proportion of white residents living in each tract in 1970. The tracts were divided into fifths of 24 census tracts each, except for the lowest fifth, which contained 25 tracts. The lowest fifth is practically all white—97.6 percent of the residents; in contrast, the upper fifth contains only 52.2 percent white residents. The gun application rates for the two contrasting areas are 5.7 and 14.0. In the most racially mixed areas, gun applicant rates are not only higher, but they are twice as high for blacks as they are for whites, 20.2 per thousand for blacks versus 10.6 per thousand for whites.

### *Increasing Proportion of Black Residents, 1960-1970*

In this test a similar procedure to that described above was followed. The census tracts were rank ordered by the proportion of white residents, then divided into fifths. However, in this case we used the 1960 data for the determination of the quintile distribution. By using 1960 data, we could determine the nature of the changes in the composition of the population which occurred during 1960-1970, and see how these affected the gun application rate. First, it should be noted that there was an increase during the decade of black residents in almost every area of the city. Furthermore, areas which experienced the greatest increase in black residents were the areas which originally had the largest concentration of blacks. For example, only two of Seattle's 121 census tracts lost black residents in proportions sufficient to change their quintile rank order during the decade.

With respect to gun applicant behavior, there is a perfect rank order correlation between the increase in the proportion of black residents between 1960-1970 and the size of the gun applicant rate for all categories of applicants: white, black, and other nonwhites. The gun applicant rate of whites living in predominantly white residential areas is 6.4 per thousand. As the proportion of black residents increases by quintile, so too does the white gun applicant rate increase: from 6.4 to 7.0 to 8.9 to 9.0 to 10.3 per thousand. A similar pattern is shown for black and other nonwhite gun applicants, although, reliable estimates can be secured for only 40 percent of the census tracts, where there is mixed racial residency.

### *Tempo of Increase of Black Residents, 1960-1970*

We have already noted that racial changes for the most part occurred incrementally throughout Seattle during the decade. However, there are certain areas of the city which gained black population at a more rapid tempo than the average. The gun applicant behavior in areas undergoing rapid racial change were compared with that of areas experiencing slight change. To do this, the census tracts were grouped into seven

types of residential areas taking into account the proportion of black residents in 1960 and 1970, and the extent of racial change during the decade. For example, Residential Area 1 included 24 tracts which had no black residents in 1960 and two-tenths of one percent in 1970; that is, it is essentially a stable all-white residential area throughout the decade. At the opposite extreme is Residential Area 7 which contained 12 census tracts with an average of 33.8 percent black residents in 1960 and an average of 48.2 percent black residents in 1970—a relatively stable, well-identified black residential area during the decade; that is, Seattle's racial ghetto. Two other relatively stable predominantly white areas were Residential Area 2 containing 56 census tracts and Residential Area 4 with 12 census tracts. In contrast, three Residential Areas (3, 5, and 6) may be characterized as having a changing pattern of racial occupancy. In each of these areas the increase in the proportion of black residents is greater than the increase for the city as a whole.

With respect to gun applicant behavior, the finding is that whites seek permission to carry a concealed weapon more frequently if they live in a racially changing area than if they live in a racially stable area. The gun applicant rate is lowest, 5.8 per thousand, in the stable white residential area which contains the smallest proportion of black residents per census tract, and which has a history of predominant white occupancy. The rates are highest in the residential areas undergoing racial change, 10.1, 11.0, and 11.3 per thousand. It should be noted, however, that white gun applicant rates are lower in areas that have a stable history of black occupancy than for areas marked by rapid racial change.

The gun applicant behavior of blacks is strikingly different from that of whites. First, it is higher for blacks than whites in all areas, regardless of racial composition or whether the areas are changing or relatively stable. Second, the gun application rate of whites is relatively low in stable interracial areas, whereas for blacks it is relatively high. For example, the black gun application rate is 24.8 per thousand in Area 7, Seattle's major stable interracial area, as compared with the white gun application rate of 6.5 per thousand.

It is evident that the racial composition of the residential neighborhood in which the applicant lives would seem to be an important factor conditioning the likelihood of the applicant to file for permission to carry a concealed weapon.

What is the nature of the threat that induces this behavior? To answer this question, we return once again to the reasons stated by the gun applicant.

Applicants were asked to indicate the location where a gun might be needed. Among the locations were "at home," "on the streets," "at place of business," "on highways," and "in the woods." Residents living in racially changing areas more frequently cited "at home" or "on the streets" than those living in relatively stable areas. Moreover, as the proportion of black residents increases, there is an increase in the number of persons of all races who say they need weapons to protect themselves at home, work, or in the streets.

From the evidence it would appear that something is occurring in the homes and the streets of interracial areas that

encourages arming by both blacks and whites. The national crime statistics in the early 1970s showed that there were more serious and violent crimes each year. Moreover, in 1971, the period of this study, 62.2 percent of the murder arrests, 66.4 percent of the robbery arrests, 50.3 percent of the rape arrests, and 46.9 percent of the aggravated assault arrests were black. We cite these statistics to illustrate the important connection between race and crime.

However, despite the relatively high, sustained level of criminal and violent activity which characterized the nation and Seattle, only one-in-five gun applicants in Seattle claimed prior victimization as a reason for carrying a concealed weapon. In addition, our research shows little relationship between gun application rates and the incidence of crimes against persons and property in Seattle. Given these findings, we discount criminal activity by itself as the single most important source of perceived threat, and turn to the nature of the perceived racial threat. It should be noted that for many people a perceived racial threat implies an increased crime threat as well.

Although we do not know with certainty whether whites feel most threatened by the accelerated "encroachment" of blacks into "their" home territory, such an explanation is proposed in much of the available research on the subject. It is supported by our finding that white gun applicant rates are perfectly correlated with the increase of the proportion of black residents. Moreover, the white gun applicant rate is higher in areas experiencing the greatest increase in black occupancy.

However, the data also show that whites, currently living in the *stable* interracial areas of Seattle, which also contain the highest proportion of black and other nonwhite residents, have a relatively low gun applicant rate. It would appear that the proximity of black neighbors is less threatening to whites in some areas than it is in others. Seattle's Area 7 is one in which there is a public identity and established legitimacy for interracial residence. Perhaps, therefore, there is little or no black threat to whites living in the area, hence, no *racially based* reason for carrying a weapon.

Yet, the areas undergoing rapid racial change are not so clearly and publicly defined. The advent of another black family is considered as evidence of black invasion, an event that is suspected and feared. Given the history of neighborhood desegregation and the fact and fiction accompanying it, it is reasonable to assume that one phenomenon will be an increase in gun carrying by those who feel threatened by the process. Such a scenario helps to explain neighborhood variations in gun applicant behavior.

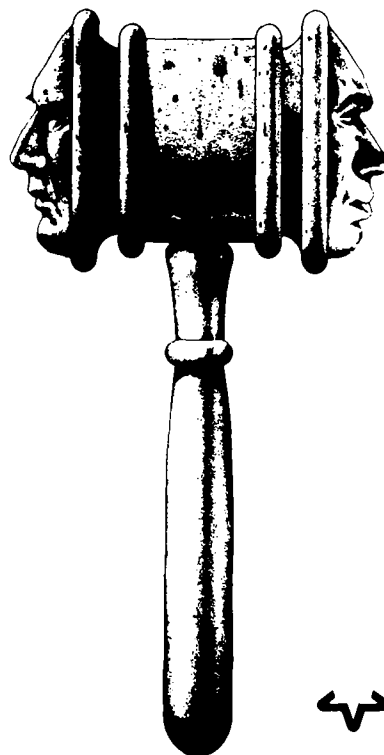
Area 5 illustrates this point. It is an area that has experienced rapid racial change, moving from predominantly white in 1960 to racially heterogeneous in 1970 (black, 10.9 percent and other nonwhite, 13.5 percent). The gun applicant rate is high for both whites and blacks, 10.1 and 13.1 per thousand respectively. Although there were 17 gun applicants living in this area in the year of our survey, not a single one reported that he/she had been victimized. Yet 56 percent of the applicants stated that they needed a gun for their

protection in home or neighborhood. Area 5 is unlike the city as a whole where one person in five is victimized and one in three wants a weapon for protection in home or in neighborhood.

This scenario, however, does not explain the reasons why blacks have a higher gun applicant rate than whites in all types of residential areas. In particular, why do blacks living in Seattle's ghetto area, Area 7, have a gun applicant rate four times that of whites living there, and over twice as high as elsewhere in the city? Surely it is not a fear of *white* racial threat, although this might be one explanation of the high gun applicant rate for blacks moving into predominantly—perhaps hostile—white areas.

Rather a scenario to explain this phenomenon would need to consider such variables as institutionalized racism and differential law enforcement.

It is well known that blacks experience systematic discrimination in education, employment, and community and institutional services. Ghetto conditions continue to produce an environment that fosters alienation, violence, and lawlessness. Blacks and others who live in and near the ghetto frequently are the targets of violence and lawlessness. Our study provides added evidence of this. About 53 percent of the black women and 35 percent of the men in our sample reported that they had been victimized or threatened with personal violence as compared with 18 percent of the white women and 13 percent of the white men. Furthermore, this area of residence makes a difference. Only 7 percent of the sample living in the predominantly white Area 1 reported that they had been victimized in contrast to 39 percent living in the ghetto, Area 7.



### The Duty to Act

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Protection against violence in the streets and homes is largely a law enforcement function. Recent studies have shown that urban policeman are having great difficulty in the successful performance of this function, particularly in ghetto and other interracial areas. The reasons for this are many: First, many crimes of violence occur there. Second, many policeman tend to view these crimes as "natural" and "inevitable" consequences of ghetto living and, thus, provide inadequate protection. Third, urban policeman tend to view the residents as uncooperative and hostile. Fourth, the research of W.E. Groves and P.H. Rossi indicates that this hostility is more related to the policeman's perceived threat level than to actual hostile acts by ghetto residents. Fifth, the police are well armed with the latest, most lethal weaponry. Sixth, there are not clear, uniform rules governing the police about the use of weapons. Sherrill says: "Cops are too quick on the trigger." Finally, there is no adequate review procedure to curtail excessive police violence in the use of weapons.

One possible consequence of these conditions is the creation of a "threat" which leads blacks and others living in interracial areas to feel the necessity of arming themselves for their own protection. A similar line of reasoning currently is being advocated by women's groups, often in the face of official unconcern about physical assault or sexual attack in the homes or streets. They have advocated active self-defense including the carrying of handguns.

#### Analytical Limitations

The findings of this study with reference to the public image of Seattle's residential areas is born out in recent data on neighborhood "redlining" and urban development. The data indicate that there is a remarkable coincidence between racially changing areas and those which experience difficulty in financing home purchases and improvement, thus confirming our evaluation of the influence of race on the public image of residential areas used in our research.

Some limitations of the study should be noted:

We realize that in order to come to these conclusions about urban threats and gun application behavior we have made several assumptions which go beyond the "hard" data of the research. First, we have inferred a perceived threat to the applicant resulting in his seeking permission to carry a concealed weapon. Our evidence of perceived threat was based on reasons stated in the official record. However, it is quite likely that the reasons given were situationally induced. In fact, they might very well be false or not the *real* reasons. Second, we drew inferences about the nature of the perceived threat as racial or criminogenic from statistical indicators of racial composition, racial change, and incidence of crimes in the applicant's home neighborhood. Frequently, the reasons stated by the applicant provided corroborating evidence of this, but not always. Therefore, it is entirely possible, at least in some cases, that the individual's perception of the threat was different than that represented by the demographic and crime statistics. Third, we have run the risk of committing an ecological fallacy in our analysis. The ecological fallacy

consists of making assertions about one unit of analysis (population of census tract) based on the examination of another (sample of gun applicants). We have tried to minimize this risk by avoiding spurious correlations and by using simple percentaging, rank order statistics, and other careful analytic procedures.

How representative are the findings of this study for cities elsewhere? It is difficult to answer this question. Certainly, Seattle has very permissive regulations for gun carrying, and this fact must be taken into consideration in making comparisons. In the State of Washington any adult citizen without a felony record may carry a concealed weapon. Currently, these weapons do not need to be registered by the owner, only by a commercial seller at the time of purchase; there is no control over private sales. The only regulation is the one described in this article. In short, the findings of this study may pertain, if at all, only to cities with permissive regulations, such as Seattle.

Is there a connection between securing the right to carry a concealed weapon and gun-purchasing activity? Perhaps the "application to carry" is a better social indicator of the threshold of a threat whereas the "application to purchase" is clear evidence of the saliency of a threat.

There are many other factors related to the presence or absence of threat that require investigation. For example, we would postulate an inverse relationship between citizen gun-carrying behavior and the gun carrier's perception of police effectiveness to control threatening events. Also, safety in the streets and protection against victimization have been shown to have a direct relationship to the design and arrangements of buildings, the adequacy of lighting, the quantity of pedestrian traffic, and the organization of citizen alert patrols, etc.

It is also clear that if more stringent control of gun possession and use is to be a societal goal, we need information to assess the situation in order to support appropriate and equitable administration of that control. □

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