

**Gary Kleck**

**POINT**



**BLANK**

**Guns and Violence  
in America**

**POINT  
BLANK**



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

**Gary Kleck**

**POINT  
BLANK**

**Guns and Violence  
in America**

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 1991 by Transaction Publishers  
Paperback edition published 2005 by AldineTransaction

Published 2017 by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

Copyright © 1991 by Taylor & Francis.

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

Notice:

Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks, and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

Library of Congress Catalog Number: 91-16780

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication

Kleck, Gary, 1951-

Point blank : guns and violence in America / Gary Kleck.

p. cm. — (Social institutions and social change)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-202-30419-1 (cloth); 0-202-30762-X (paper)

1. Violence—United States. 2. Firearms—Social aspects—United States. 3. Gun control—United States. I. Title. II. Series.

HN90.V5K56 1991  
303.6'0973—dc20

91-16780

ISBN-13: 978-0-202-30762-6 (pbk)

*To my wife Diane and my children Matthew and Tessa  
To my parents, William and Joyce Kleck  
and to my mentor, David Bordua*

#### AUTHOR'S VOLUNTARY DISCLOSURE NOTICE

The author is a member of the American Civil Liberties Union, Amnesty International USA, and Common Cause, among other politically liberal organizations. He is a lifelong registered Democrat, as well as a contributor to liberal Democratic political candidates. He is not now, nor has he ever been, a member of, or contributor to, the National Rifle Association, Handgun Control Inc., or any other advocacy group on either side of the gun control issue, nor has he received funding for research from any such organization.

---

## Contents

---

Acknowledgments	<i>xi</i>
Preface	<i>xiii</i>
 <b>PART I. ISSUES OF GUN CONTROL AND GUN OWNERSHIP</b>	
1. Ideology, Politics, and Propaganda	3
Ideological Ironies and Crosscurrents	3
The Appearance of Reason—Fallacies in Gun Control Reasoning	7
Fallacies in Anticontrol Argumentation	7
Fallacies in Procontrol Argumentation	13
Common Problems of Persuasion	15
2. Ownership and Uses of Guns	17
Size of the Civilian Gun Stock	17
Who Owns Guns?	21
Why People Own Guns	25
Uses of Guns	41
How Are Guns Acquired?	45
Conclusions	47
3. Searching for “Bad” Guns: The Focus on Special Gun Types	65
Introduction	65
Machine Guns	67
Assault Rifles and Assault Weapons	70
Plastic Guns	82
“Cop-Killer” Bullets	82

“Saturday Night Specials”—Small, Cheap Handguns	83
Handguns	91
Conclusions	94
<b>PART II. EFFECTS OF GUNS ON VIOLENCE</b>	
4. Guns and Self-Defense	101
The Nature of Defensive Gun Use	103
The Frequency of Defensive Gun Use: Survey Data	104
Problems with the Surveys	108
Shooting in Self-Defense	111
Carrying Guns for Protection	117
Psychological Effects of Keeping Guns for Protection	119
Effectiveness and Risks of Armed Resistance to Criminals	120
Rape and Resistance	126
The Police Chief’s Fallacy	126
An Exercise in Ingenious Speciousness	127
Crimes Involving Defensive Gun Use	128
Deterrence	130
Guns and the Displacement of Burglars from Occupied Homes	138
Conclusions	141
Implications for Crime Control Policy	143
5. Guns and Violent Crime	153
Guns and Power	154
Issues of Assault Outcomes	155
Attack	156
Injury	162
Death	163
Guns in Robbery and Rape	170
Individual-Level Analysis	173
Problems in Analyzing Violent Incidents	175
Methods of the Present Analysis	176
Aggregate-Level Analysis of Gun Ownership and Violence Rates	185
International Comparisons	188
A City-Level Study of Gun Levels and Violent Crime Rates	191
An English Test of the Link Between Guns and Crime Rates	201
Conclusions	202

6. Guns and Suicide	223
Why Do Suicides Use Guns?	223
The Control Hypothesis	227
The Modeling Hypothesis	230
Who is Most Likely to Use Guns in Suicide?	231
Region and Suicide Method Preference	233
Ownership and Acquisition of Suicide Guns	235
Types of Guns Used in Suicides	236
What Suicides Might be Prevented by	
Reduced Gun Availability?	238
Prior Studies of Method Availability and Suicide Rates	246
The Impact of Gun Ownership Levels on Suicide Rates	248
The Impact of Gun Control Laws on Suicide	251
City-Level Analysis of the Impact of Guns on	
Suicide Rates	255
7. Firearms Accidents	269
The Frequency of Gun Accidents	270
Trends in Gun Accidents	274
Children and Gun Accidents	276
Gun Types Involved	280
The Victims and Shooters in Gun Accidents	282
Alcohol Involvement	286
Circumstances and Activities Associated with	
Gun Accidents	287
Defective Firearms	291
The Nature of Accidents and Those Who Cause Them	293
Personality Traits of the Accident-Involved	294
Reducing Gun Accidents	296
City-Level Analysis of Fatal Gun Accident Rates	303
Summary and Conclusions	304

### **PART III. REGULATING GUNS**

8. Types of Gun Regulation	323
Gun-Related Activity Regulated	323
Gun Types Controlled	327
Who Is Controlled?	328
Level of Restrictiveness	331
Level of Government	332
Some Detailed Comments on Specific Control Measures	333

Mandatory Penalties for Unlawful Carrying	342
Prohibition and Other Broadly Targeted Measures	344
Enforcement of Current Gun Laws	347
Administration of Licensing Laws—Two Contrasting Cases	353
<b>9. Public Opinion and the Bases of Support for Gun Control</b>	<b>359</b>
Some Caveats About Interpreting Public Opinion Polls	359
Trends in Public Opinion on Gun Control, 1959–1990	366
What Kinds of Gun Control Do Americans Favor?	368
The Nonutilitarian Nature of Much Gun Control Support	370
Who Supports Gun Control?	372
<b>10. The Impact of Gun Control on Violence Rates</b>	<b>385</b>
Methods of Prior Research	386
Results of Prior Research	390
Cross-National Comparisons	393
A City-Level Study of Gun Control Impact	394
The Toughest Gun Law in America: A Case Study	408
Gun Decontrol: A Case Study	411
Untried Gun Control Strategies	414
<b>PART IV. POLICY LESSONS</b>	
<b>11. Conclusions</b>	<b>429</b>
The Shape of Effective Gun Controls	431
A Workable Gun Control Strategy	432
Notes	447
Appendix 1. Production-Based Estimates of the Gun Stock (Chapter 2)	451
Appendix 2. Survey-Based Estimates of the Gun Stock (Chapter 2)	455
Appendix 3. Substitution of Long Guns for Handguns	461
Appendix 4. Alternate Estimates of the Number of Defensive Uses of Guns (Chapter 4)	467
Appendix 5. Legal Classification and Counting of Defensive Homicides (Chapter 4)	469
Appendix 6. Technical Problems in Using National Crime Survey Incident Files Data (Chapter 5)	473
References	477
Index	506

---

## Acknowledgments

---

Many people have helped me with the work in producing *Point Blank*, a massive task that would have taken even longer without their generous help. I am happy to have the chance to properly thank them for their contributions. My colleague Professor Britt Patterson collaborated with me on the analyses of the city-level data, reported in Chapters 5 and 10, and my former student, Professor Karen McElrath collaborated on the analysis of the individual-level assault data, reported in Chapter 5. Over the years, my many graduate assistants have helped gather mounds of data. These include Byron Johnson, Tracy Griffith, Susan Sayles, Wes Johnson, and Miriam DeLone. It was always a pleasure to work with all of them.

I am grateful for the extremely close readings and searching critiques of previous drafts of the book provided by Don Kates and my colleague Professor Leroy Gould. Also, thanks to James Wright not only for reading the manuscript but also for suggesting the book's title. Dr. Paul Blackman of the National Rifle Association also read the manuscript and shared his encyclopedic knowledge of the gun control field with me. Although I could not always make changes in accordance with his many strong criticisms, the book is nevertheless stronger for his comments. Others who were given an opportunity to read and comment on the manuscript included Barbara Lautmann, of the Center to Prevent Handgun Violence, and Professors Philip Cook and Colin Loftin.

Many of the datasets analyzed for this project were supplied by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. They are listed in the References. Neither the collectors of the data nor the Consortium bear any responsibility for the analyses or interpretations presented here. The Federal Bureau of Investigation provided unpublished city arrest data for 1979–1981 which were used in the city-level analyses, and the National Technical Information Service supplied the 1979–1981 Mortality Detail Files datasets. The National Rifle Association provided

counts of NRA membership in each of the 170 largest U.S. cities. Thanks are due in particular to that organization's Mary Rose, for painstakingly compiling the figures. Finally, William Kleck, of the Audit Bureau of Circulation, supplied unpublished county-level gun magazine subscription figures (Thanks, Dad!).

I am grateful to various sources for giving permission for me to use previously published material. The University of California Press has given permission to use copyrighted material in Chapter 4 that was adapted from *Social Problems*, Vol. 35, No. 1, February, 1988, pp. 1–19. The University of North Carolina Press has given permission to use copyrighted material in Chapter 5 that was adapted from *Social Forces*, Vol. 69, No. 3, March, 1991, pp. 1–21.

The Florida State University Foundation provided travel funds so that some of the findings of this research could be presented at the annual meetings of the American Society of Criminology and the American Sociological Association. The Bureau of Justice Statistics and the American Statistical Association sponsored the First and Second National Workshops on the National Crime Surveys and thereby underwrote much of my education on the NCS. Thanks to Colin Loftin and the rest of the Workshop staff, as well as the rest of the participants, for a tremendously enriching experience.

The staff of the FSU Computing Center provided computing advice and data entry services, while Paul Hanna of the College of Social Sciences helped in acquiring many computer datasets. The staff of Strozier Library, and especially Ann Foche and the rest of the Documents Department staff, were an invaluable asset.

Finally, I wish to thank my mentor, Professor David Bordua, for inspiring me to undertake the project, and my wife Diane, for inspiring me to complete it.

---

## Preface

---

By 1990 there were probably more than 200 million guns in private hands in the United States, and around half of American households contained a gun. Over 30,000 people a year are killed with guns in suicides, homicides, and accidents (Chapter 2), and Americans use guns for defensive purposes as many as a million times a year (Chapter 4). There is little doubt that gun violence and gun control are issues of vital national importance and worth debating. There is considerable reason to doubt, however, whether most gun debates are worth listening to.

The main issues and arguments in the debate over controlling firearms in the United States have not changed substantially from those summarized in 1926 in a debate outline titled "Outlawing the Pistol" (Berman 1926). What is remarkable is that so few of the component issues of the debate have been resolved in the intervening decades. The quality of the disputation has generally been abysmal. As one critic noted, "Any careful observer of the battle must be distressed at the ignorance, ill-will, and dishonesty apparent on both sides" (Caras 1970, p. 122). Others have described the level of argumentation as "debased," and asserted that "the gun control debate has been conducted at a level of propaganda more appropriate to social warfare than to democratic discourse" (Bruce-Briggs 1976, pp. 37–8). The discussion can fairly be described as a dialogue of the deaf (Kennett and Anderson 1975, p. 232). In a proper debate, each side understands, responds to, and tries to undercut the assertions of the other side; in the Great American Gun War each side simplifies, caricatures, and sometimes willfully distorts the arguments of the other, setting up and knocking down their respective straw men with ease. Partisans then wonder how their opponents could possibly hold to such obviously absurd views. Rather than directly engaging the best arguments actually made by the adherents of the opposing position, the debaters argue past one another. Thus, it is not surprising that the debates generally leave everyone exactly where they began, with their biases intact.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to acquiring an understanding of the facts surrounding the gun control debate is the firm conviction of many on both sides that most of the critical facts are self-evident. Is it not obvious that widespread private gun ownership deters crime? Alternatively, it is not indisputable that the availability of guns increases the homicide rate and plays a large role in America's high violence rates? How could the possession and use of deadly weapons *not* raise the murder rate? The debaters begin with premises that are so thoroughly taken-for-granted that they never consider evaluating them. Self-examination is redundant and doubt is out of the question.

The scholar's faith is that knowledge matters, and that there exists an open-minded audience ready to consider seriously the full range of pertinent ideas and evidence bearing on an issue. It is to this audience that this book is directed. The time when it was necessary to arouse public concern about guns and violence is long past. Quite the contrary—constructive discussion possibly leading to reasonable public policies has become nearly impossible in this context of fever-pitch emotionalism. This book is written deliberately to work against this atmosphere of hysteria and extremism. There will be no dramatic and heart-rending accounts either of people killed by attackers armed with guns or of people killed because they did *not* have a gun for self-defense. In short, there will be no attempts to manipulate readers by stimulating their viscera and bypassing their minds. Readers who seek that sort of material need only turn on their television or open a newspaper or magazine for an ample supply.

While the gun control debate will not be advanced with emotional appeals, neither can it be settled by logical argumentation without factual material. Both sides in the debate use arguments that are *both* emotionally powerful and logically valid to buttress their positions and to undercut the claims of their adversaries. As with most complex and heavily disputed topics, people of intelligence and good will have reasonable differences about guns and gun control, which will not be resolved through logical argumentation alone. If one's goal is to seek the types and levels of gun regulation that will produce the greatest good for the greatest number, then one prerequisite is more and better empirical information.

The gun debate has been unusually statistically oriented, perhaps because intelligent adherents on both sides recognize that most of the key questions are not a matter of *whether* certain costs and benefits are produced by gun control or gun ownership, but rather a matter of *how much* cost or benefit there is, and for how many people. How many lives

are lost from criminal use, or saved by defensive use, of guns; how many robberies or assaults are facilitated by criminal possession of guns or deterred by victim possession; how much reduction in crime is produced by gun controls, at what cost in law enforcement dollars and loss of civil liberties and privacy? This book is devoted to providing information about these questions, and thus to make public, democratic debate on the issue of gun control a productive exercise rather than a hollow political ritual.

*Organization of the Book.* The book covers a broad span of issues bearing on the impact of guns on violence and how best to regulate (or not regulate) firearms in order to reduce violence and crime. In Part I, Chapter 1 considers the political and ideological obstacles to understanding the problem of gun violence and doing something about it, and identifies common flaws in the arguments to which readers are likely to have been exposed. Chapter 2 assesses the extent and nature of gun ownership and use, for legitimate and illegitimate purposes, examining who owns guns and how and why they acquire, own, and use them. Part II covers the effects of gun ownership and use on all major forms of violence and crime linked with firearms. Chapter 3 examines the involvement of specific subtypes of guns and ammunition in violent crime. Chapter 4 explores the effects on violence of guns in the hands of victims and prospective victims. Chapter 5 addresses the effect of gun availability and use on assaultive crime, rape, and robbery. Chapter 6 assesses the relevance of weaponry and gun control to suicide. Chapter 7 gives extended attention to the often neglected topic of gun accidents. Part III examines attempts to regulate guns, what controls have been tried and how well enforced gun laws are (Chapter 8), how much public support there is for various forms of gun control (Chapter 9), the effects of the major existing forms of control on crime and violence, and various untried policy options (Chapter 10). Finally, Part IV outlines what lessons for making public policy may be drawn from the evidence (Chapter 11).

The book reports both original research and assessments of existing evidence drawn from a wide variety of academic disciplines, from criminology and sociology to law and medicine. It is addressed primarily to a general scholarly audience of criminologists, but much of it has been written so it will be understandable to a general nonscholar audience. The discussion is sufficiently nontechnical for nonspecialist scholars to understand most of the material, but some technical material cannot be covered briefly and in a way that is understandable to the general reader.



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

PART

**I**

---

ISSUES OF GUN CONTROL AND GUN OWNERSHIP

---



Taylor & Francis

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

## CHAPTER

# 1

---

## Ideology, Politics, and Propaganda

---

### **Ideological Ironies and Crosscurrents**

One of the ironies of the gun control struggle is how traditional political positions often become reversed when the issue is guns. Although twentieth-century liberals have usually supported expanding the state's power to regulate business, they have generally opposed expanding its authority to regulate the behavior of individuals. They have commonly opposed restrictions on free speech, public demonstrations, political associations, sexual behavior, abortion, drug use, and pornography. More specific to criminal justice matters, they have usually opposed the expansion of the power and authority of police and prosecutors to search homes, interrogate suspects, gain confessions, and seize contraband. And although conservatives have opposed expanding the state's power to regulate business, they generally have supported expanding the state's authority and power to regulate private behavior of which they disapprove, and to enforce laws that concern behaviors mainly engaged in by lower class persons, including so-called "street crime." Liberals usually give a broad reading to the Bill of Rights regarding individuals rights of criminal suspects, privacy, and limits on governmental power in general, whereas conservatives give it a narrow one, especially regarding the rights of criminal suspects and dissenters. Liberals generally oppose increasing the scope and severity of penalties for typically lower-class forms of criminal behavior, whereas law-and-order conservatives support the death penalty, mandatory sentencing, and more severe punishment of crime. More generally, liberals oppose expanding the scope of the criminal law to include more "victimless crimes," i.e., prohibited categories of behavior that involve no unwilling victim, such as illegal drug use or gambling (Stinchcombe et al. 1980).

When the issue is gun control, liberals and conservatives switch places. Many liberals support gun laws that confer broad power on

government to regulate individual behavior, especially in private places, whereas conservatives oppose them. Some liberals dismiss the Second Amendment to the Constitution as an outmoded historical curiosity that never really guaranteed an individual right to keep and bear arms, whereas conservatives defend a view of this amendment that is every bit as broad as the American Civil Liberties Union's (ACLU) view of the First Amendment regarding free speech or the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Amendments as they pertain to suspects' rights.

Some liberals seek to pass gun control laws that create and expand a category of victimless crime (gun possession), whereas some conservatives oppose the effort, citing all the arguments liberals use to oppose laws restricting drug use, gambling, pornography, and sexual conduct: the laws create black markets, criminalize and stigmatize otherwise non-criminal people, encourage discriminatory law enforcement, are impossible to effectively enforce, invite police corruption and abuse of authority, and divert law enforcement resources from areas in which they are more effectively deployed (Kessler 1980). Although murder and robbery with a gun are not victimless crimes, laws banning the mere possession, acquisition, sale, or carrying of firearms clearly encompass "victimless" behaviors. An especially noteworthy example of this particular reversal can be found in the work of Edwin Schur, the principal popularizer of the "victimless crime" concept (Schur 1965). Schur is also a strong supporter of gun control, who shows no apparent awareness of any possible contradiction—"Effective general gun control . . . is one of the few public policy measures directly aimed at controlling crime that could really have a beneficial impact" (Schur 1974, p. 237). Other proponents of the victimless crime perspective have been more intellectually consistent in applying it to gun law violations as well as to the behaviors traditionally discussed under that heading, drugs, gambling, prostitution, and so on (Kaplan 1979; Kessler 1980; Kates 1984a).

It is a mildly amusing pastime to read virulently anticontrol propaganda written by obviously ultraconservative authors, who rail against improper warrantless searches of gun owners' homes and gun dealers' business premises, sounding for all the world like spokesmen for the ACLU (e.g., the March/April and September/October 1987 issues of *The Gun Owners*, newsletter of Gun Owners of America). On the other hand, the writings of otherwise liberal proponents of gun control are frequently most remarkable for what they leave out—any discussion of the search-and-seizure issues that make effective enforcement of many gun laws so problematic or of evidence of discriminatory enforcement (Kates 1986). Even when these concerns are confronted, however superficially,

they are commonly dismissed as minor (e.g., Drinan 1976). At one point the city attorney of Berkeley, California, which had what was arguably the most liberal city government in the United States, was even researching the legality of establishing the nation's first neighborhood "weapons checkpoints," allowing random police searches of cars for weapons (Levine 1987).

The current ideological lineup on gun control has shallow historical roots. Before 1963, gun control was not a salient issue for most Americans. Only two Gallup polls from the 1930s up to 1959 asked even a single question on the issue (Crocker 1982). Support for gun control was not a major tenet of liberalism before that time. Indeed, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, gun control laws were most often targeted at blacks in the South and the foreign-born in the North, and were supported by persons who would clearly not be recognized today as liberals. The stated motives behind support were often overtly racist and xenophobic, revolving around a desire to control "dangerous populations," including not only racial and ethnic minorities, but also radicals, anarchists, union organizers, and other "troublemakers." Southern gun laws during the antebellum and immediate postwar years were explicitly limited to blacks. And although those during and after Reconstruction were written in race-neutral language, they too were aimed at, and largely enforced against, blacks (Kennett and Anderson 1975, pp. 50–1, 81, 153–5, 167; Kates 1979a, pp. 12–22; Kessler 1984, pp. 476–8). In the North, legislative activity on guns were most intense during the period of rapid immigration from about 1890 to World War I, and proponents often justified their proposals with references to the dangers of violent foreigners, anarchists, and other radicals, rather than just the "criminal classes" (Kennett and Anderson 1975, pp. 163, 167, 174, 177–8, 183, 213; Kates 1979a, pp. 15–22).

Between World War I and the assassination of President John Kennedy in 1963, there was still little clear conservative–liberal lineup on gun control, and limited legislative activity (Kennett and Anderson 1975, pp. 187–215). John Kennedy was himself a gun owner and life member of the National Rifle Association. Ownership and even carrying of firearms were common among prominent liberals of earlier eras, such as Theodore Roosevelt, Eleanor Roosevelt, and columnist Drew Pearson (Kennett and Anderson 1975, p. 235; Kates 1986). However, since 1963, liberalism and support for gun control have become closely linked in the public mind. Surveys have documented a rough association between gun control support and a wide variety of other opinions conventionally associated with liberalism. Interestingly, it turns out that this link is

solely due to higher gun ownership among conservatives—gun-owning liberals are no more likely to support gun control than gun-owning conservatives (Chapter 9).

Further, not all liberals take a procontrol stance. A book published in 1979 was titled *Restricting Handguns: The Liberal Skeptics Speak Out* (Kates 1979a). Its editor was a former law clerk to radical lawyer William Kunstler and had helped draft civil rights legislation for the U.S. House of Representatives. Its preface was written by U.S. Senator and leading Vietnam War opponent Frank Church, and its contributors included the cofounder of American Amnesty International, the Vice President of the Southern California ACLU, various civil rights activists, and a former legal aid lawyer who worked for Cezar Chavez' United Farm Workers and who took part in the earliest Freedom Rides of the civil rights movement. All expressed concerns, rooted in liberal principles, about the wisdom of gun control in its more restrictive forms. The book's chapters documented the antiblack and anti-immigrant origins of many gun control laws, reinstated the Second Amendment as an important part of the Bill of Rights, and argued the importance of gun ownership for deterring government oppression. The contributors asserted that guns provided the only effective means of defense for minorities and dissidents deprived of legal protection by hostile authorities, and argued from a feminist position that guns are vital "equalizers" for women with a need to protect themselves from violent, physically stronger men.

It is interesting in this connection that support for gun control is often one of the few "liberal" positions taken by otherwise dyed-in-the-wool conservatives, including William F. Buckley, Jr., who once flirted with a procontrol position, former Du Pont executive and self-described conservative Pete Shields, chairman of Handgun Control, Inc., and dozens of law-and-order big city police chiefs (Shields 1981; Alviani and Drake 1975, p. 52). Taking a procontrol stand allows such individuals to thereby display their open-mindedness and ability to rise above rigid ideological categories, by endorsing a position that has a liberal reputation, but is not really all that alien to the rest of their generally conservative beliefs.

Radical scholars such as Raymond Kessler (1984) have asserted that gun laws are fundamentally conservative or even reactionary, having in times and places served a variety of conservative political functions beyond simple crime control, including (1) increasing citizen dependence on the state for protection, (2) facilitating repressive action by governments, (3) reducing popular pressures for more fundamental reforms that might reduce crime, and (4) enabling selective enforcement against dissident political groups and racial and ethnic minorities. In sum, it is

by no means clear that the intellectually natural position for liberals is support for restrictive gun controls or that the natural position of conservatives is opposition.

### **The Appearance of Reason—Fallacies in Gun Control Reasoning**

By disposing of some of the more specious arguments for and against gun control, the air can be cleared so as to focus with fewer distractions on the more valid arguments. Therefore, some of the more common fallacies are discussed immediately. Of course, throughout the book, many dubious claims made by adherents of both sides will be compared with the evidence. Right now it suffices to cover only some of the more general and widely disseminated fallacies.

### **Fallacies in Anticontrol Argumentation**

#### *The Overmotivated Criminal*

Gun control opponents argue that criminals cannot be disarmed or prevented from committing crimes through gun control because they will always be willing and able to either get a gun or to commit the crime without a gun. There is certainly some merit to this argument, as even proponents will concede. It is, however, an exaggeration, one that is based on a conception of criminal motivation that sees every criminal as powerfully motivated and driven to commit crime regardless of the obstacles. Like noncriminals, however, criminals do many things that are casually or only weakly motivated. Indeed, much crime is impulsive or opportunistic, with criminals committing some crimes only if it requires little effort and entails little risk (Feeney 1986). Certainly, gun control is unlikely to have much effect on crime committed by criminals with the strongest and most persistent motivation to commit crimes, such as drug dealers, emotionally disturbed mass murderers, professional hit men, terrorists, or political assassins. However, it is not at all impossible for crime preventive effects to be achieved among the more weakly or temporarily motivated criminals who may make up the majority of the active offender population. Note also that if conservative opponents of gun control really believed this argument, they would not support proposals to prevent crime through deterrence produced by more severe penalties. Offenders as strongly motivated as they allege most criminals to be would not be deterred by any penalty, no matter how severe.

*Anything Short of Total Success is Utter Failure*

Opponents of gun laws, like opponents of any law, like to point to the failures of the laws—how many crimes are committed even in places with strict gun laws, how many criminals have guns despite the laws, and so on. This argument, however, is a non sequitur; it does not follow that gun laws are ineffective. All laws are violated and thus less than completely effective, and most important criminal laws are violated frequently, as a glance at criminal statistics indicates. Even some laws widely supported by the population have been violated by a majority of the population, as self-report surveys of the population have long shown (e.g., Wallerstein and Wyle 1947). Yet no one concludes that the thousands of homicides committed each year mean that laws prohibiting murder are ineffective and should be repealed. It is unreasonable to oppose a law merely because some people will violate it.

A more sensible standard to apply is to ask whether the benefits of the law exceed its costs, i.e., whether the world will, on balance, be a better place after the law is in effect. It is impossible to directly count the number of successes, i.e., the number of crimes deterred or otherwise prevented by the existence of laws prohibiting the acts, since one can never count the number of events that do not occur. And no matter how many failures there are, it is always possible that there are still more successes. The only way one can assess the relative balance of successes and failures is to compare jurisdictions having a law with those lacking the law, or to compare jurisdictions before and after they adopt a law, to see if there is, on balance, less crime with the law than without it. Just counting failures settles nothing.

*Criminals Will Ignore the Law*

A corollary to the previous fallacy is the assertion that many criminals will ignore gun laws and get guns anyway. This is indisputably true, but not especially decisive regarding the desirability of gun control, since it does not address the number of successes of gun control. There is no clearly established minimum level of compliance that must be achieved before a law is to be judged a success. And if there were such a standard, it certainly could not reasonably be 100%, and would not necessarily be even 50% or any other similarly high level. It is even conceivable that if just 1 or 2% of potentially violent persons could be denied a gun, the resulting benefits might exceed the costs of whatever measure produced this modest level of compliance.

As it happens, there appears to be some compliance with gun laws

even among the “hard-core” felons incarcerated in the nation’s prisons. A survey of over 1800 felons in 11 state prisons found that 25% of felon gun owners reported having registered a firearm and 15% reported having applied for a permit to purchase or carry a gun, percentages that would have been higher had felons in states without such legal requirements been excluded from the computations (Wright and Rossi 1986, p. 84). Although the self-reported compliance levels were low, as one would expect in a sample of felons, they were also not zero. Among potentially violent persons not in prison, who are probably less persistently and seriously involved in law-breaking, compliance levels would presumably be even higher.

### *One Thing Leads to Another*

Gun control supporters often wonder how the National Rifle Association (NRA) and other gun owner organizations can possibly oppose some of the more modest and apparently inoffensive regulations. Opponents reply that today’s controls, no matter how limited and sensible, will just make it that much easier to take the next, more drastic step tomorrow, and then the next step, and the next, until finally total prohibition of private possession of firearms is achieved. They argue that gun control is a “slippery slope” on which it is hard to stop halfway, and that many proponents do not want to stop with just the more limited restrictions.

This fear is not completely unreasonable, as bills calling for a national ban on private possession of handguns have been introduced in Congress (Alviani and Drake 1975, pp. 55, 57) and much of the general public does favor prohibitions. In national opinion polls, about 40% of Americans say they support bans on the private possession of handguns, and one in six even support a ban on possession of *any* guns. Since about 75% of all Americans favor registering gun purchases and about 70% favor requiring police permits to buy a gun (Chapter 9), this means that *most* supporters of these moderate controls also favor a total ban on private handgun possession. If this is so among ordinary nonactivist supporters of gun control, it almost certainly is true of activists and leaders of gun control advocacy groups.

There have always been enough prominent prohibitionists willing to air their views in a highly visible way to lend credence to fears about a movement toward total prohibition. For example, criminologist Marvin Wolfgang, in a letter to the editor of *Time* magazine, advocated a total national ban on possession of all firearms (July 5, 1968, p. 6), a sentiment echoed by noted sociologist Morris Janowitz (*Time*, 6-21-68).

Most leaders of gun control advocacy groups eventually became cautious about publicly describing their prohibitionist intentions, but earlier in the debate some were quite open about them. In 1969, one of the leading gun control advocacy groups was the National Council for a Responsible Firearms Policy (NCRFP). Its Secretary, and a member of its Board of Directors, was J. Elliott Corbett. Responding to a letter writer who evidently had complained that the NCRFP's support for a moderate handgun control bill did not go far enough, Corbett wrote: "I personally believe handguns should be outlawed . . . Our organization will probably officially take this stand in time but we are not anxious to rouse the opposition before we get the other legislation passed. It would be difficult to outlaw all rifles and shotguns because of the hunting sport. But there should be stiff regulations. . . . We thought the handgun bill was a step in the right direction. But, as you can see, our movement will be towards increasingly stiff controls" (reproduced in the *Congressional Record*, 3-4-69). Other advocates have expressed similar support for a one-step-at-a-time or incrementalist strategy. In a 1990 television documentary, a reporter asked the mayor of Stockton, California why she supported restrictions on so-called "assault rifles" while leaving much more powerful hunting rifles unregulated. She replied "I think you have to do it one step at a time . . . banning semi-assault [sic] military weapons . . . is the first step" (ABC-TV documentary, "Guns," broadcast 1-24-90).

Leaders of procontrol advocacy groups such as Handgun Control and the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence (previously the National Coalition to Ban Handguns) used to assure audiences that they were interested only in regulating handguns, so hunters and sport shooters who used rifles and shotguns had nothing to fear from them (e.g., Fields 1979; Shields 1981, p. 124). Yet, once "assault rifles" became a highly publicized issue, leaders of these groups immediately pushed for strict controls on semi-automatic rifles (Chapter 3). This kind of policy shift undercuts their credibility regarding their ultimate intentions, and feeds the worst paranoia of anticontrol extremists. In Don Kates' words, this sort of "extremism poisons the well," making it all the harder to get people to seriously consider more reasonable alternatives (1984b, p. 533).

It would be unfair to generalize from such cases to all supporters of moderate controls. Undoubtedly, many of those who insist they are not interested in further controls are sincere. Unfortunately, it is impossible for gun owners to know for sure which gun control supporters are sincere, how numerous they are, whether they will continue in the future to adhere to their commitment to limited controls, and whether

they will dominate the gun control movement in the future. There are uncomfortable historical parallels between the gun control movement and the Temperance movement. The latter movement was originally directed toward regulating alcohol and encouraging, as its name suggested, moderation in drinking and a reduction in alcoholism. Yet it eventually evolved into the national Prohibition movement, which completely banned the production and sale of alcohol, and thereby criminalized millions of Americans (Gusfield 1963, esp. pp. 74, 96–110).

The political advantages of an incrementalist strategy are obvious. If one imagines a hypothetical scale of gun control restrictiveness going from, say, one (least restrictive) to ten, it is easier to move incrementally from level one to level two, then from two to three, and so on, up to level ten, than it is to jump straight from level one to level ten. Each single step looks less radical than a leap of several steps.

However, this is true about all solutions to any social problem. The fact that such escalation *could* happen says nothing about whether it *will* happen. The belief that “one thing inevitably leads to another” would preclude action of almost any kind, since a minor dose of any given solution to any problem could always lead to an overdose. It might be argued that use of the death penalty for murder or long mandatory prison sentences for serious violent crimes might lead to applying them to petty theft, then to minor traffic violations, and eventually to spitting on the sidewalk or speaking an unkind word to one’s neighbor. Yet one never hears conservative gun control opponents applying this line of reasoning to their preferred solutions to crime. If such thinking is unreasonable in those examples, it is equally unreasonable to apply it to gun control, in the absence of any evidence showing the gun issue to be significantly different in this respect.

The fact remains that although most Americans support moderate gun controls such as requiring a permit to buy a gun, decades of law-making and propaganda have not persuaded a majority of them to support a general ban even on private possession of handguns, never mind all guns. The efforts of gun prohibitionists notwithstanding, the historical record does not support the view that public support for gun control has increased inexorably over the years; indeed it has remained fairly stable regarding most moderate controls, and even declined slightly with regard to handgun bans (Chapter 9). Nor does the record support the view that gun law has inevitably gotten more restrictive. Indeed, the gun lobby’s victories in passing state preemption laws (Chapter 8), the 1986 amendments weakening the federal 1968 Gun Control Act, and recent liberalization of state gun carrying laws (Blackman 1985, p. 13

suggest an opposite trend in restrictiveness. A few minor procontrol victories notwithstanding (Chapter 3), so far, at least, one thing has not lead to another. Regardless of their prohibitionist intentions, the more extreme gun control advocates have not, with few exceptions, been successful in moving very far toward banning guns. Opponents frequently cite New York City as an example of a place where originally moderate laws evolved, through gradual amendment and exploitation of administrative discretion, into virtual prohibition. As will be discussed in Chapter 8, there is merit to this claim as it pertains to New York City, but opponents can cite very few other examples, leading to the conclusion that such an evolution has been the exception rather than the rule with gun controls.

*To Reduce Crime, We Should Get Tough with Criminals,  
Not Gun Owners*

It may surprise some readers to learn that gun owner groups do support some kinds of gun control—severe, mandatory penalties for persons who commit crimes with firearms. However, this sort of “get tough with criminals” approach is usually regarded as an alternative to the measures most people have in mind when the term “gun control” is used, rather than being gun control itself. That is, opponents recommend “criminal control” as an alternative to gun control. However, proponents point out that to regard these as forced-choice alternatives is an error, since there is nothing to prevent governments from doing both (Shields 1981, pp. 123–4). Indeed, this is precisely what most governments do. The same legislators who support gun control proposals are often quick to point out also how “tough on criminals” they are, and the same is even true of some leaders of procontrol groups (e.g., Shields 1981, p. 156).

Nevertheless, both proponents and opponents who consider this an effective approach to crime reduction, as distinguished from a cynical but effective propaganda strategy, are on empirically weak ground. A long series of “get tough” strategies have been tried, carefully evaluated, and found to be either ineffective in producing significant crime reductions or hopelessly expensive. These failed strategies include longer prison terms mandatory prison terms, use of capital punishment, “selective incapacitation” of career criminals, increasing police manpower, and reducing procedural restraints on police and prosecutors (see Chapter 8, and the excellent book-length assessment by Walker 1989). While there are many promising alternatives to gun control for reducing violence, the “get-tough” approach is not one of them.

## Fallacies in Procontrol Argumentation

### *The Undermotivated Offender*

Just as opponents of gun control envision the typical criminal to be so strongly motivated that no gun law could possibly restrain him, proponents envision the opposite: weakly motivated offenders who could be prevented from committing crimes merely by placing procedural obstacles or delays in their way, making the acquisition of a gun marginally more expensive or difficult. The truth, of course, lies somewhere between these extremes. At least a few murderers are weakly or only temporarily motivated to kill their victims, and some are ambivalent or unclear in their intentions. Proponents exaggerate this image, however, by suggesting that killers rarely intend to kill, that the fatal outcome of their assaults was largely the product of weapon availability and chance. They argue that this implies that some criminals can be prevented from getting guns, and that many killers will *not* do whatever it takes to kill and will not kill using other means if they are denied guns (e.g., Zimring 1968). As will be discussed in Chapter 5, there is little direct empirical support for this idea and the evidence presented to support it usually has little clear bearing on the issue. Most homicides are unpremeditated, most develop out of arguments, and many involve combatants who knew one another, but none of these facts imply anything about how strongly killers wanted to kill or how angry they were at the time of the attack. Consequently, they imply nothing about whether most assaulters still would have killed had they not had a gun, or about whether they could have been prevented from getting a gun by gun control laws (see Chapter 5; Wright et al. 1983, pp. 189–206).

It is necessary, however, for this imagery to be maintained if proponents are to argue that gun control can reduce crime. They must believe in the existence of a substantial number of persons who are willing and able to break serious laws such as those prohibiting murder, assault, and robbery, yet who are not willing or able to break gun control laws. If someone lacks the first attribute, preventing them from getting guns would be pointless for crime control; if they lacked the second, it would be impossible.

### *Guns That Are Good for Just One Thing—Murder* (Targeting the “Bad” Types of Guns)

In the face of a U.S. civilian stock of over 200 million guns (half of U.S. households have at least one firearm—Chapter 2), many gun law propo-

nents have narrowed their political efforts, targeting specific types of guns, which they argue are “good for only one thing—to kill” (Shields 1981, pp. 38, 46). These proponents in effect differentiate “good” (or at least not-so-bad) types of guns, like the old family deer rifle, from “bad” types of guns. At various times, the especially dangerous, “bad” subcategory has been (1) handguns, (2) the cheap, small handguns known as “Saturday Night Specials,” (3) so-called “assault rifles,” (4) machine guns, and (5) plastic guns. Proponents argue that these weapons are only useful for committing crimes, and sometimes even imply that they are never used for any other purposes (Fields 1979; Shields 1981). Because the guns have no legitimate purposes, it is argued, there can be no valid objection to outlawing them.

The logical problem with this position is that whatever technical attributes guns have that make them suitable for committing crimes necessarily also make them useful for a variety of lawful applications. This issue is discussed at length in Chapter 3.

#### *Gun Control Is Worthwhile Even if Just One Life Can Be Saved*

This argument is convenient for gun control proponents since it relieves them of the need to establish just why they consider a gun-linked problem to be serious or to demonstrate that their proposals will save a large number of lives. Advocates will at times cite data documenting the large number of lives supposedly lost due to guns, yet at other times (usually after doubt has been cast on their figures) hint that the number of lives lost due to guns is not really an important matter because every human life is infinitely valuable. Almost any plausible gun control measure is bound to save at least one life, somewhere, sometime in the future. Therefore, it is implied, only a cold-hearted monster could deny the wisdom of a policy that could save that life.

There are two problems with this argument. First, it ignores the costs of gun control, in particular the possibility that gun control could cost lives by denying effective defensive weaponry to at least a few people who need and could successfully use guns in self-defense—almost any control that saved lives could also cost at least one life (Chapter 4). Second, most major social problems have multiple possible solutions, each costing something, and each having some potential for reducing the problem. However, since resources are limited, choices inevitably must be made as to which strategies the resources should be invested in. More resources devoted to some strategies means less available for others. Consequently, the adherents of one particular strategy are obliged to at least roughly assess the potential benefits that strategy would pro-

duce rather than merely arguing that it does not matter whether a proposed policy would save one life or a 1000 lives. It is unlikely that many people would seriously argue that a problem resulting in 1000 deaths is no more important than one resulting in one death, so numbers do matter. In any case, it is doubtful if advocates really believe to the contrary—most invoke the “one life” argument only when one of their numerical claims regarding the harms of guns is challenged as being inflated.

Procontrol propagandists sometimes avoid making meaningful assessment of the seriousness of a particular gun-related problem if the effort would not yield a supportive result. They frequently note that more than three fifths of homicides are committed with guns, but when targeting assault rifles or machine guns are silent on how many crimes are committed with these weapons, and do not cite any meaningful standard by which one could judge criminal use of these guns to constitute a serious problem. Proponents do note that gun suicides outnumber suicides by any other means, a meaningful comparison, but do not indicate what standard should be used to judge gun accidents to be an important source of mortality among children (e.g., Schetky 1985). Or sometimes they use a standard of comparison that is uninformative or misleading, as when proponents state that fatal gun accidents are the fourth leading cause of *accidental* death among children aged 14 and under (Center to Prevent Handgun Violence 1989). Although approximately accurate (they are the fifth leading cause rather than the fourth), the ranking is not very enlightening, since it conceals the fact that only the first of the leading accidental causes, motor vehicle accidents, is responsible for a large number of child deaths. Out of more than 20,000 deaths, from all causes, of children age 1 to 14 in 1987, over 4000 were due to motor vehicle accidents, compared to about 250 due to gun accidents (National Safety Council 1989). If gun accidents are responsible for only 1% of child deaths, then the only standard by which this can be regarded as a major source of child mortality is the one which states that every human life is infinitely valuable and that all causes of death therefore are “major.” But by this standard, comparisons among causes of death are pointless.

### Common Problems of Persuasion

Members of advocacy groups on both sides of the great American gun debate share some rhetorical difficulties in common. Each side is committed to overstating the problem it addresses. For the procontrol forces,

that problem is the contribution of guns to violence and crime, while for the anticontrol forces that problem is the procontrol forces. Each side faces a delicate dilemma in their propaganda efforts, one familiar to fund raisers everywhere—they must convey the enormity of the problem, yet also instill confidence in their own effectiveness by pointing to their victories and the progress they have achieved. Thus the NRA must simultaneously convince its current and potential members and contributors that it is facing a powerful gun control movement that is a serious threat to gun owners' rights if not checked, but also convince them that the NRA has beaten the enemy in the past and can do so again in the future, if they are just given the support they need. Likewise Handgun Control, Incorporated (HCI) and the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence (CSGV) overstate the connection between guns and violence, and speak darkly of the NRA's vast political power, seemingly unlimited funds (largely derived, it is inaccurately hinted, from economically self-interested gun manufacturers), and their victories over majority public opinion, while also boasting of their own organization's growing membership and recent legislative victories (e.g. Handgun Control Incorporated 1989; National Coalition to Ban Handguns 1988). To believe both sides, one would have to believe that both parties to the conflict are simultaneously weak and strong, triumphantly victorious and headed toward ignominious defeat. Each set of advocacy groups serves as the demon with which the other side can rally the troops, raising morale and money. The public is not enlightened by this war of words because neither set of advocates has any stake in merely presenting the plain unvarnished truth, even to the extent that flawed and biased human minds can understand it. Quite the contrary—to tell the truth and nothing but the truth would place one side at a distinct disadvantage if the other side did not also lay down their propaganda weapons. As a consequence, the intended audience for these propaganda efforts is inundated with an avalanche of misinformation, half-truths, irrelevancies, trivialities, and outright falsehoods. And this bad information drives out the good, either displacing it because there is only so much attention that can be paid to any given issue, or rendering accurate information useless because it cannot be recognized as such, being so thoroughly intermixed with the disinformation that only the most diligent and unusually well informed readers and viewers can and will separate the two.

## CHAPTER

# 2

---

## Ownership and Uses of Guns

---

The heart of this book is concerned with the relationships among guns, violence, and gun control. However, to understand these issues it is necessary to first appreciate how common gun ownership is, who owns guns, why they own them, how they get them, and what they use them for. How easily and cheaply guns can be regulated depends to a great extent on how numerous they are. How easily people can be dissuaded from getting, having, keeping, carrying, or using guns depends heavily on why they own them. And how one interprets the relationships between gun availability and crime will depend on how well one understands the impact of crime on gun ownership, in addition to the impact of guns on crime.

### Size of the Civilian Gun Stock

Although a few nations may have shares of their households with guns rivaling those of the United States, this country almost certainly has more firearms in civilian hands than any other nation in the world.<sup>1</sup> Exactly how many guns there are, however, will never be known with certainty.

There are two major ways to measure the size of the civilian gun stock, i.e., the number of guns in the possession of private persons, other than the on-duty arms of the police or military. First, one can cumulate the number of guns manufactured for the civilian market in the past, subtract guns exported out of the country, and add guns imported into the country. Second, one can survey a representative sample of the population and ask whether they own guns, and how many they own. Table 2.1 shows the figures resulting from the first procedure. The data indicate that this cumulated total (hereafter the “production-based estimate” for short), for all gun types, probably passed the 200 million

mark sometime around 1988. The handgun total is over 65 million. If one makes the simple assumption that uncounted additions to the gun stock have equalled uncounted losses, the figures imply that for every 100 Americans there are more than 80 guns of all types, including 27 handguns. There are, however, numerous flaws in these data, discussed at length in Appendix 1.

Several major points can be noted about the figures in Table 2.1. First, the existing private stock of guns in the United States is enormous. Even if it was conservatively (and unrealistically) assumed that no gun survived past its fortieth birthday, all older guns being lost, confiscated, worn out, or corroded, and it was assumed that there were *no* uncounted additions to the stock, there were still nearly 150 million guns, over 50 million of them handguns, in the civilian stock as of 1990. Second, most of the gun stock has been produced since the mid-1960s, and thus most guns are still relatively new and not likely to wear out or corrode soon. This is especially true of handguns, but is also true of all gun types. Third, of the nearly 200 million guns in the cumulated stock as of 1990, about one-third were handguns; the rest were long guns. Long guns are clearly much more common than handguns. Fourth, among recent additions to the firearms stock, handguns have claimed an increasingly large share. As recently as 1962 only 29% of annual additions were handguns, compared to 45% in 1987. During the 1960s and 1970s the demand for handguns increased faster than the demand for long guns. Fifth, the increasing annual additions of guns was not solely due to population increases, since the per capita rates in the last two columns also show large increases. The rates of increase in per capita ownership turned sharply upward right around 1963, also a watershed year for crime rate increases. From 1963 to 1987, the rate for handguns increased by 145%, and the rate for all guns increased by 83%. Thus the biggest increases occurred among the type of guns most frequently owned and used for self-defense and for committing crimes.

The other major way of measuring the size of the gun stock, as well as the prevalence of gun ownership in the population, is through surveys of representative samples of the nation's population. Table 2.2 displays the results of 45 national surveys conducted between 1959 and 1990. (There were no national surveys asking a gun ownership question before 1959). All of the surveys asked whether there was a gun of some kind in the respondent's (R) household, and most asked more specifically whether there was a handgun in the household. With one exception, only since 1980 have any national surveys asked whether the R owned any of the household guns. The surveys indicate that since at least 1959 about one out of two U.S. households have owned a gun.

The survey-based estimates have all the widely discussed deficiencies of survey data [e.g. see Deming (1944) 1978 for a classic enumeration]. Rs can forget, not be aware of, or lie about guns in their households. They can even misunderstand what the question means, failing to understand that air guns should not be reported, or that guns kept in a vehicle, garage, or barn, or at a business should be reported along with those in their house or apartment. Some Rs may not know about the gun ownership of other household members, some Rs may forget about guns long gathering dust in an attic or basement, and some may no longer think of an antique family heirloom as a firearm. Perhaps the most important problem with the survey data is the possibility that some Rs intentionally conceal their gun ownership. These problems with the survey estimates, and others, are discussed in detail in Appendix 2.

There is a major gap between most estimates of the gun stock based on surveys and those based on production and import/export figures. The most conspicuous seeming discrepancy is that survey results indicate no trend in general gun ownership prevalence, while the production-import estimates indicate enormous growth in the size of the total gun stock from about 1965 to 1990. Even the handgun prevalence figures from the surveys indicate no significant change from 1978 to 1990. Appendix 2 covers some of the possible reasons, stressing flaws in the survey data and especially respondent reporting failure. There is, however, another possible explanation for the gap. It is possible that survey respondents have been generally accurate in their reports of gun ownership, but that gun ownership has increased greatly among segments of the population largely excluded from survey samples, including transients, young minority males, illegal immigrants, and criminals. It may be these groups, which, though a relatively small share of the entire population, absorbed a disproportionate share of the guns, especially handguns, produced in the 1960s and 1970s. Evidence concerning gun possession trends in some of these groups will be presented later in the chapter.

By international standards the fraction of U.S. households with guns is extremely high. The nearest known competitor is Switzerland, where about a third of households have guns, mainly due to military service requirements (Killias 1990). Nevertheless, household prevalence in the United States is probably actually *lower* today than it was in earlier periods, when the country was predominantly rural. There are indirect indicators of gun ownership available for much longer periods of time than production or survey data. Table 6.5 in Chapter 6 shows the percentages of suicides and homicides committed with guns, and compares these with the production-based gun ownership estimates. These indi-

cators are necessarily “noisy,” reflecting both gun availability and inclinations of violent people to choose guns for their aggressive or suicidal purposes. Although the two measures often show similar trends, they also moved in opposite directions during 1945–1951, 1976–1983, and, to a lesser degree, 1958–1963. If the gun share of homicides were used as an indicator of long-term trends in a general gun ownership, it would indicate that gun ownership had declined since the 1920s. In 1920–1926, 71% of U.S. homicides were committed with guns (Brearley 1932, p. 68). Since at that time six states in the South and West, where a high share of homicides were committed with guns, were not yet a part of the national vital statistics system, the figure almost certainly would have been higher had those states been included. By 1989, the national figure was down to 62% (U.S. FBI 1990).

Table 2.3 provides estimates of the size of the U.S. gun stock, based on national surveys that asked Rs how many guns they owned. They all support the view that there was a huge number of guns in private hands. All but one of the estimates, however, are substantially lower than production-based estimates for the same years (Table 2.1). Flaws in these estimates and reasons for the discrepancy are discussed in Appendix 2.

Table 2.4 displays information on the combinations and numbers of guns owned by gun-owning households and individuals. Part A shows that most households with guns have long guns (85%), and that most (56%) own *only* longguns, whereas only one-seventh of owning households have *only* handguns. However, it will be this handgun-only type of household that will be of special interest later because it may be the type most likely to have guns for crime-related reasons (Bordua et al. 1979). Conversely, two-thirds of households with handguns also have long guns. This fact is significant because it suggests that when handguns are used in crimes or for defense (at least when in the home), the use was often the result of a choice between different types of guns, rather than the fact that only handguns were available. This would support the view that there is something about handguns that gun users regard as especially suitable for defensive and criminal purposes. An even more important implication is that if handguns were restricted, most current handgun owners would not even have to acquire new guns in order to have substitute firearms to use. The implications of this substitution possibility will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

Part B of Table 2.4 attempts to provide more realistic estimates of the number of guns owned per owner than were reported in Table 2.3. It has been assumed that the true fraction of households and individuals own-

ing guns is 10% higher than survey figures indicate, to adjust for the underreporting previously discussed (see Appendix 2 for a justification). These survey figures were combined with the production cumulation figures in Table 2.1 to roughly estimate the numbers of guns owned per owner. Based on this procedure, among households owning guns, an average of over four guns are owned, considerably higher than most survey data suggest. The distribution, however, is undoubtedly skewed to the right, with a few households owning very large numbers of guns, and most households owning a few, based on the Table 2.3 survey results. Among households with a handgun, the average number of handguns owned is about 2.8. Among individuals age 18 or over who own guns, the average number owned is about 3.4, and among individuals with handguns, the average is about 2.0. Both these data and survey data support the conclusion that although gun ownership is widespread in the United States, a large share of the guns may also be in relatively few hands (see also Cook 1983, pp. 78–9).

Regardless of the major source on which one relies, it is clear that the number of guns currently in private hands in the United States is very large, whether the number is 100 or 200 million. One straightforward policy implication is that policies that seek to reduce gun violence by reducing the overall supply of guns, as distinct from reducing the number possessed by high-risk subsets of the population, face an enormous obstacle in this huge existing stock. Even if further additions to the stock could somehow be totally and immediately stopped, the size of the stock and durability of guns imply that, in the absence of mass confiscations or unlikely voluntary surrenders of guns, it might be decades before any perceptible impact became apparent.

### Who Owns Guns?

In a nation where at least half of the households have a gun, it would be difficult to regard gun ownership as an unusual or deviant status. Nevertheless, gun owners do differ from nonowners in some respects, as the figures in Table 2.5 demonstrate. These figures were computed from the combined 1980, 1982, and 1984 General Social Surveys conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (for details of the surveys, see Davis 1984). These surveys were superior to previous national surveys in that they asked whether each *respondent* (R) owned a gun, rather than asking only whether someone in the household did. This made it possible to relate attributes of the R to whether the R owned

guns, a procedure whose value was first demonstrated by Bordua and his associates in the late 1970s (Bordua et al. 1979).

For descriptive purposes, the following material discusses bivariate relationships between gun ownership and other variables. The reader is strongly cautioned against drawing causal inferences before the results of multivariate analyses are discussed later. Males are far more likely to personally own guns than females, although many women live in households with guns that belong to a male in the household. Whites are much more likely to own guns or handguns than blacks, although the difference is much smaller for handguns. Most of this racial difference is due to the facts that most blacks live in big cities and that gun ownership is low in big cities. Black households in rural areas are just as likely to have a gun as white households in those areas, and racial differences in other kinds of places are small (Stinchcombe et al. 1980, p. 107). Guns are more common among whites in those ethnic groups that immigrated earlier to the United States than in more recently arrived white ethnic groups. Gun ownership is higher among middle-aged people than in other age groups, presumably reflecting higher income levels and the sheer accumulation of property over time. Married people are significantly more likely to own guns than unmarried persons. Protestants are more likely than others to have guns, and Jews are far less likely to have guns. Middle and upper income people are significantly more likely to own than lower income people, but consistent with the stereotype of gun ownership as a working class attribute, persons with manual jobs are more likely to own guns (contrast with Wright and Marston 1975). There is little association between gun ownership and education.

Along with the gender difference, perhaps the strongest differences in gun ownership are by size of place—rural people are far more likely than urban residents to own guns, including handguns. By region, gun ownership is highest in the Rocky Mountain states (not the South, as some might believe), followed by the Southern states, the Midwest, then the Pacific states. Finally, it is the Middle Atlantic states, and, even more so, New England, which stand out as the oddities, showing far lower levels of gun ownership than the rest of the nation.

Political conservatives are more likely to own guns than liberals. Not surprisingly, hunters are far more likely to own guns than nonhunters. About 40% of persons admitting to a nontraffic arrest record report personally owning a gun, and 21% reported a handgun, compared to only 28 and 15%, respectively, among persons not reporting an arrest record. However, differences are slight in terms of household owner-

ship. There is no significant relationship between respondent gun ownership and approval of violence (as measured by the sum of approving responses to five approve–disapprove items describing hypothetical acts of violence), although there is a statistically significant relationship between respondent handgun ownership and approval of violence. Finally, contrary to what might be common expectation, persons afraid to walk in their neighborhoods or afraid in their homes at night are significantly *less* likely to own guns or handguns, and those burglarized or robbed in the year prior to the interview were slightly less likely to own guns.

Perhaps what is most striking about this entire set of relationships is the absence of consistent indications of a link between gun ownership and criminal or violent behavior by owners. Whereas self-reported arrestees were somewhat more likely to report gun ownership, the difference was a rather modest one for R ownership of handguns, the type of gun most frequently involved in violence, and the difference in household ownership of a handgun was nonsignificant. There was a relationship between handgun ownership and approval of violence, but gun ownership was not consistently higher in segments of the population in which rates of actual violent behavior are higher. It is true that both gun ownership and violence are more frequent among males and Southerners. On the other hand, gun ownership is also higher among whites than among blacks, higher among middle-aged people than among young people, higher among married than unmarried people, higher among richer people than poor, and higher in rural areas and small towns than urban areas, patterns that are all the reverse of the way in which violent criminal behavior is distributed. In short, gun ownership is not consistently higher in places and groups where violence is higher. This should serve as the first broad hint that the relationship between guns and violence is not so close, simple, or consistent as might be thought.

For the most part, there has been very little change in recent decades in the patterns of gun ownership, or changes in who owns guns. The major patterns of gun ownership in the early 1980s (Table 2.5) were also evident in survey data from 1959 (Wright et al. 1983, pp. 87, 89) and throughout the period from 1973 through 1987 (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics 1988, pp. 167, 169). Further, when Wright and his associates combined data from a 1959 survey and a 1976 survey, they found that the predictors of gun ownership did not interact with the year of the survey, indicating that the effects of the variables had not changed over time (1983, p. 92). The press gave considerable attention to claims that

gun ownership increased sharply among women in the 1980s, but beyond a survey sponsored by a gun manufacturer, there is little credible evidence for the assertion. The percentage of women reporting they personally owned a gun in the General Social Surveys (GSS), was 11 in 1980, 14 in 1982, 11 in 1984, 12 in 1985, and 14 in 1987 (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics 1988, p. 169). Given that these estimates all had a margin of error due to random sampling error of about two percentage points, they do not support a claim of increasing gun ownership among U.S. women from 1980 to 1987.

There was, however, one important shift in the social distribution of gun ownership in recent decades. During the period of the nation's fastest increases in violent crime rates, from 1964 to 1974, gun ownership apparently increased more among criminals than it did among noncriminals. There are several scattered pieces of evidence supporting this claim. The most direct evidence of such a trend would be survey data comparing persons with and without a criminal arrest or conviction. Although the GSS asked both gun ownership and arrest questions, these surveys began only in 1973, too late to indicate trends over the entire period of interest. Earlier gun ownership surveys did not ask any criminal record questions.

The next most direct evidence would be survey information on other groups with high rates of violence. Black homicide victimization rates are many times higher than white rates, and one pair of surveys indicated that household handgun ownership increased from 1972 to 1978 much more for blacks than for whites (Kleck 1984a, p. 129). However, another pair of surveys showed less of an increase for nonwhites than for whites from 1959 to 1976 (Wright et al. 1983, p. 89). Neither comparison quite pertains to the time period of interest. Further, the contradictory results may be at least partly due to the small numbers of black households in the surveys (typically only about 150), which leads to very unstable estimates. Other evidence is less direct, though more reliable. The proportion of homicides, aggravated assaults, and robberies involving guns increased rapidly from 1964 to 1974, suggesting increasing gun availability among persons who commit violent crimes. Further, the fraction of homicides involving guns increased much faster among blacks than among whites over this period, again suggesting that gun availability may have been increasing faster among blacks than among whites. On the other hand, it is possible that what changed over this period was criminals' *preferences* in weapons to use in assaults, rather than relative gun levels among blacks and whites.

Although the GSS data do not concern the period of interest, they do

point to a possible continuation of this trend into the 1973–1984 period. Gun and handgun ownership among persons without arrest records remained fairly stable over this period, whereas ownership fluctuated erratically among self-admitted arrestees over this span (Table 2.6). Since the number of arrestees included in each survey was about as small as the number of blacks, these estimates are subject to the same instability as annual estimates by race. Therefore, the percentages for the four surveys from the 1970s have been averaged together and compared with the averages for the three surveys from the 1980s. The resulting figures indicate that the trends hypothesized for the 1964–1974 period may have continued through the 1980s—household ownership of guns in general, but especially of handguns, increased more for arrestees than for nonarrestees, from the 1970s to the 1980s.

## Why People Own Guns

### *Stated Reasons*

There are two ways one can answer the question “Why do people own guns?” The simplest way is to report the reasons people give when they are asked the question. These reasons tend to be utilitarian, reflecting the uses to which gun owners put, or anticipate putting, their guns. When the questions refer to all guns, without differentiating them by type, the most frequently given *main* reasons for owning guns are, in descending order: hunting, self-protection, sport or target practice, and gun collecting. In a 1978 national survey, 74% of all gun owners reported that hunting was *one* of the reasons they owned guns, 65% mentioned protection, 40% sport or target shooting, and 21% gun collecting (DMI 1979, p. 71). Very similar results had been obtained in a 1975 Harris poll (Crocker 1982, p. 256). Some people also can state honestly that they have no particular reason for owning a gun since they may have inherited one or received it as a gift.

When the question pertains just to handguns, the leading reason for ownership is protection. About half of handgun owners report that defense or protection is their main reason for having a handgun, leaving half who own them for other, mainly recreational, reasons. However, among persons in a 1977 Illinois survey who owned *only* handguns, 67% reported that protection was their primary reason for owning the guns, with 73% citing protection as a primary or secondary reason (Kleck 1984a, p. 105). No other single reason for owning handguns rivals pro-

tection. In a 1978 national survey, 45% of handgun owners stated that protection at home or work was their most important reason for owning, with another 8% owning for a law enforcement or security job, arguably also defensive reasons for owning. The next most common reasons were target shooting, cited by 17%; gun collecting, cited by 14%; and hunting, cited by 9% (DMI 1979, p. 40).

Owners of long guns are most likely to own them primarily for hunting or target shooting, although in the 1977 Illinois survey, even among persons in households with only long guns, 11.4% owned them at least partly for protection (Bordua et al. 1979, p. 231). It should be stressed, however, that in all these surveys "protection" could have been understood by Rs to refer to protection from dangerous animals as well as defense against humans. The most important conclusion to be derived from these data is that most owners of guns in general, and long guns in particular, own them primarily for reasons unrelated to crime; rather, they own them for a variety of recreational reasons, especially hunting. On the other hand, about half of handgun owners, and some long gun owners as well, own guns mainly for protection, and it may be this subset of owners that is most relevant to understanding the relationship between levels of gun ownership and violence. The share of all gun owners having guns for protection may also be increasing. In a 1986 national survey, 30% of all households keep a gun at home "for security reasons" (DIALOG 1990). Since 42% of households reported a gun in 1986 (Table 2.2), this means that about 71% ( $30/42 = 0.71$ ) of gun-owning households kept a gun at least partly for protection in 1986, compared to 65% in 1978 (DMI 1979).

### *Modeling Gun Ownership*

Another way to explain why people own guns is to develop and test a statistical model predicting gun ownership. Prior research of this type will be reviewed. Interest will first focus on the possible effects of criminal victimization and fear of crime on gun ownership, since these links will be important later in interpreting aggregate-level relationships between gun ownership levels and rates of crime and violence. These can be regarded as situational determinants of gun ownership, because it is assumed that when crime levels change or people relocate into areas with a different crime level, the motivation to get a gun for defensive reasons changes as the situation changes. Situational determinants can be contrasted with cultural determinants, which are likely to be more lasting mental attributes that people retain over time and carry with them as they move from place to place, to some degree independent of

situation. Thus, persons raised to believe in rural values or a Southern regional culture conducive to gun ownership are likely to retain these cultural attributes for a time, even after they leave the social settings when they were socialized and where these cultures flourish, carrying their culture with them even when they move into social situations less conducive to keeping firearms.

### *Fear, Victimization, and Gun Ownership*

Some scholars have expressed doubt that fear of crime and prior criminal victimizations motivate gun ownership (Wright et al. 1983). Nevertheless, it is argued here that the weight of the best available evidence is at least weakly supportive of the idea that crime affects handgun ownership, although interpretation of the evidence is clouded by the fact that it may simultaneously reflect both the effects of fear or victimization on gun owning and the effects of gun ownership on fear and victimization.

Evidence on these issues has been very mixed. Williams and McGrath (1976), Lizotte and Bordua (1980; Lizotte et al. 1981), McClain (1983), Hill et al. (1985), Young (1986), and Smith and Uchida (1988) all found support for the idea that fear, prior victimization, or perception of high or increasing crime rates motivates gun acquisition, at least for some people, while Wright and Marston (1975), DeFronzo (1979), Stinchcombe et al. (1980), and Young (1985) generally failed to detect significant positive associations. Generally the supportive studies were methodologically more satisfactory, but all were seriously flawed. Most used datasets not originally designed to study gun ownership, such as the General Social surveys (GSS), which did not ask questions about many important possible determinants of gun ownership. Some of the surveys asked only about household gun ownership, making it difficult to relate respondent (R) attributes such as fear of crime to the R's own gun ownership. The earlier studies used simple cross-tabular analytic methods with few simultaneous controls for possibly confounding variables (Wright and Marston 1975; Williams and McGrath 1976; Stinchcombe et al. 1980).

Some examined ownership of guns in general rather than just handguns, even though it was mainly handgun ownership that was assumed to be motivated by concerns about crime. The significance of the problem was first demonstrated by Williams and McGrath (1976), who found that pistol ownership was positively and significantly related to both fear of crime and prior victimization, whereas general gun ownership was related to neither.

Some researchers attempted to isolate "protection" owners in GSS datasets by defining them as nonhunting gun owners who lived in a household with a handgun (Hill et al. 1985) or as people who personally owned guns (of any kind) but did not hunt (Young 1986). Although the former is somewhat better than the latter, both result in frequent classification error. For more than a quarter of gun owners, and half of handgun owners, the primary reason they own guns is *neither* protection nor hunting; these nonhunting owners would be misclassified as protection owners by Hill et al. and Young. Further, many hunters also consider protection to be one reason they own guns; these protection owners would be misclassified as not protection owners (DMI 1979, pp. 71, 118).

These studies also relied on crude measurement of fear of crime, usually using the GSS question asking whether the R was afraid to walk near his or her home at night. Since most guns owned for defensive reasons are kept in the home, one might expect gun acquisition to be more closely related to fear in the home. The 1982 GSS included a question about fear at home; Young (1986) found it to be significantly and positively related to gun ownership for non-Southerners, though not for Southerners.

Clearly the best studies of gun ownership done to date are those of Lizotte and Bordua (1980; Lizotte et al. 1981).<sup>2</sup> Though the studies covered only Illinois, the researchers avoided all of the problems mentioned thus far. They used data generated by surveys designed specifically to research gun ownership, measured respondent as well as household gun ownership, could directly identify Rs who owned guns for protection, specified multivariate models of gun ownership, estimated their models with logistic regression methods, and used a three-item measure of fear of crime and a five-item measure of prior victimization. In addition, they explored the possible causal paths through which actual crime levels, perceived crime levels, prior victimization, and fear of crime might affect gun ownership. They found that county crime rates positively affected Rs' perceived level of crime, which in turn positively and significantly affected fear of crime. Both fear and prior victimization were significantly and positively associated with gun ownership for protection.

Some ancillary findings from the Illinois surveys are important to note. Bordua and his associates asked respondents why they owned guns and thus could distinguish those who owned only for protective reasons, mainly for protection, secondarily, or not at all for protection. They found that though women were far less likely to own guns than men, they were more likely to own solely for protection. Likewise, though blacks were generally less likely than whites to own guns, they

were more likely than whites to own solely for protection. In particular, 9.8% of all Illinois black female respondents owned a gun solely for protection, compared to only 2.4% for the white males, who otherwise were most likely to own guns. These findings are significant in light of the symbolic imagery used by gun control advocates to justify disarming defensive gun owners. Bordua has noted that these advocates paint a picture that stresses the "obstructionist refusal of 'rednecks' to join the twentieth century" but downplays "disarming frightened black women whose frontier is now." He further suggested that "The common stereotype held among gun control proponents of a Daniel Boone lingering on from yesterday should perhaps give way to that of a black nurse hoping to make it to tomorrow" (Bordua 1988, pp. 37, 42).

Although the Lizotte–Bordua studies are the most authoritative to date, both they and their predecessors share important flaws. First, there is the knotty problem of causal order. Whereas fear of crime and criminal victimization might affect gun ownership, gun ownership could also influence the level of fear and the likelihood of victimization. If people buy guns to provide themselves with some security against crime, then one would expect that gun ownership could reduce fear of crime (DeFronzo 1979; Hill et al. 1985). Clearly this is what gun owners believe they experience. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, results from a number of national surveys have all indicated that most protection gun owners feel safer because they have a gun in their home, whereas almost none feel less safe. If these self-assessments are accurate, the net effect of home gun possession on gun owners is to reduce fear of crime. In surveys done at a single point in time, it is impossible to disentangle the possible negative "reassuring" effects of gun ownership on fear, and deterrent effects on victimization, from the positive "motivating" effects of fear and victimization on gun ownership. The results of prior survey studies may reflect an undifferentiated combination of both effects. Since the effects are of opposite sign, almost any observed association is compatible with the hypothesis that fear and victimization motivate defensive gun acquisition. For example, even a net negative association could be interpreted as indicating a strong fear-reducing effect of gun ownership, in combination with a weaker positive motivating effect of fear on gun acquisition. Likewise, the absence of any relationship significantly different from zero could simply be interpreted as an indication of the two opposite-sign effects canceling each other out, the "reassuring" effects of gun ownership being roughly equal in size to the motivating effects of fear on gun acquisition (a point noted by Wright et al. 1983, p. 129).

Indeed, if one had to interpret existing survey results as bearing on

one causal link or the other, one would have to say that the surveys bear more on the effects of gun ownership on victimization and fear of crime than the effect of victimization and fear on gun ownership. The R's fear has always been measured as of the time of the survey, and victimization measured for the period (usually a year) just prior to the interview. In contrast, gun ownership is a continuing status resulting from a gun acquisition that occurred at some time in the past, usually the rather remote past—in one national survey the median span of gun ownership was 23 years (Quinley 1990). Thus gun acquisition is usually temporally prior to victimization and fear of crime as measured in these surveys. A present-time emotion cannot cause a behavior in the past. Further, current fear is unlikely to be a good proxy for fear prior to gun acquisition in the past, especially 23 years in the past. Perhaps the best way to interpret the results of the best survey studies is to conclude that the net relationship between fear and gun ownership is positive, suggesting that the positive motivating effect of victimization and fear on gun ownership may be greater, on average, than the fear-reducing effects of gun ownership. Whether there is actually any effect of fear on gun acquisition cannot be definitively established until research focuses on recent gun buyers and/or uses a panel design to assess this temporal/causal sequence.

Although the authors of at least two studies have raised these causal order issues (DeFronzo 1979; Hill et al. 1985), only DeFronzo attempted to deal with them, and he was unable to satisfactorily do so for technical reasons. He specified a nonrecursive model in which fear was allowed to affect household handgun ownership, but handgun ownership was also allowed to affect fear, estimating the model with two-stage least-squares methods on GSS data (males only). For estimates to be consistent and unbiased, this sort of model must be properly identified (see Johnston 1972 for a discussion of the identification issue). In this application, this meant that DeFronzo had to specify at least one variable that had a direct causal effect on fear, but not on handgun ownership, and at least one variable that had a direct causal effect on handgun ownership, but not on fear. Such variables are called "instruments" and the plausibility of results derived from estimation of nonrecursive models depends largely on the credibility of assumptions about the instruments. DeFronzo's key assumption was that the R's age would affect fear, but not handgun ownership (p. 356). This is not a plausible assumption, in light of the significant bivariate relationship between age and gun ownership observed in Table 2.5 and in light of the commonsensical expectation that the probability of owning most consumer durables is likely to increase

with age, as people accumulate possessions over time. Indeed, other researchers have routinely specified age as a determinant of handgun or protective gun ownership (e.g., Hill et al. 1985; Lizotte et al. 1981). Consequently, this model was probably underidentified and its estimates biased and inconsistent. In fairness, there is little DeFronzo could have done, since the GSS just do not provide any strong instruments for estimating this reciprocal relationship. For what it is worth, DeFronzo concluded that handgun ownership appears to reduce fear, whereas fear has no apparent effect on handgun ownership.

The second major problem characterizing most of these studies is a conceptual one. It is a mistake to think that the only way gun ownership can be a response to crime is through the emotional experience of fear. Instead, gun acquisition, even for protective reasons, may be a fairly unemotional act of prudence and planning for the future. Persons acquiring guns may get them not because they are afraid but simply because they recognize the possibility of becoming a crime victim in the future and wish to give themselves another option for dealing with such a situation should it arise. Under this rational decision-making model, some people in effect make rough predictions of the likelihood of their future victimization and the probability that it will occur in circumstances where their possession of a gun might help. If this model is correct, gun ownership is indeed a response to crime, but the effect does not have to be mediated by either fear of crime or even experience with criminal victimization. Prior victimization would be but one of many possible predictors of future victimization. (Indeed, some people may even fall prey to the irrational gambler's fallacy that once they have been victimized, they have "had their one" and thus have less need to prepare for another victimization.)

Two prior studies related gun ownership to actual (as distinct from perceived) crime rates in surrounding areas. Lizotte et al. (1981, p. 501) found a weak indirect connection between reported crime rates in the R's county of residence and owning a gun for protection—crime rates affected perception of county crime rates compared to other counties, which in turn affected fear of crime, which influenced the likelihood of protective gun ownership. Smith and Uchida (1988, pp. 100–1) found that reported crime rates indirectly affected the likelihood of buying a weapon for protection by increasing the perception of a rising crime rate and of the perceived likelihood of burglary or robbery victimization in the future.

The rational decision-making explanation ties together all of the existing survey research results just reviewed, the fact that large numbers of

gun owners, especially handgun owners, say they own guns for protection, and also the results of aggregate studies that indicate that increases in crime rates can drive up gun ownership rates (discussed in a later section). However, it should be stressed that this perspective does not preclude the possibility of some individuals acquiring guns in response to fear. There can be multiple paths to protective gun ownership.

### *Confidence in the Criminal Justice System*

There is another way in which protective gun ownership may be a response to crime. People may acquire guns not merely because they perceive high or rising crime risks, but also because they believe the police and the rest of the criminal justice system cannot adequately protect them from these risks, leading them to the conclusion that they must rely at least partly on their own resources, including gun ownership, for security. In a 1970 national survey, Rs were asked "Do you think that people like yourself have to be prepared to defend their homes against crime and violence, or can the police take care of that?" (Feagin 1970, p. 805). Among Rs who believed they had to defend their homes and could not leave it to the police, 60% of whites and 33% of blacks reported a gun in their household, whereas among those who felt they could rely on the police, only 35% of whites and 27% of blacks reported a gun.

Lizotte and his colleagues (1981) constructed a two-item index of confidence in the police, consisting of the item used in the Feagin study and another one in which Rs rated how important they thought police patrols would be in reducing crime. They found that a perception of the police as ineffective indirectly affected ownership of a gun for protection by increasing fear of crime, which in turn increased the likelihood of protective gun ownership (p. 501). Later research by Young (1985), using more limited data from the Detroit area, also indicated that gun ownership was higher among persons with less confidence in the ability of the police to provide adequate protection. Smith and Uchida (1988) found that defensive weapon ownership was higher among persons less satisfied with the "quality of police services in their neighborhood" (p. 97). Unfortunately, this latter measure reflected all aspects of police activity, not just the crime control activity that occupies only a minority of police time (Reiss 1971). Nevertheless, using a wide variety of measures of both confidence in the police *and of gun or weapon ownership*, these researchers all found that protective gun/weapon ownership was

positively associated with a perception that the police were not sufficiently effective or could not adequately protect the citizenry (see also McDowall and Loftin 1983 for an extended discussion). On the other hand, Whitehead and Langworthy's (1989, p. 274) analysis of a 1982 national survey indicated no net effect of confidence in the police on household gun ownership. This anomalous finding may be due to the failures to measure the R's personal gun ownership or to distinguish defensive or handgun ownership from less crime-related types of gun ownership.

*Aggregate-Level Studies of the Effect of Crime Rates on Gun Ownership Rates*

Another way to assess the effects of crime on gun ownership is to use information on aggregates such as states or cities to measure the association between levels of gun ownership and levels of crime, civil disorder, and other sources of insecurity. In two national time series studies, Kleck (1979, 1984a) found that rates of total gun ownership, handgun ownership and even long gun ownership were positively and significantly affected by homicide rates. Because of the high correlation between homicide and robbery rates, the effects of these two crime rates on gun ownership could not be separated, but either variable included in the handgun equation by itself showed a positive and significant effect. These studies are superior to others because they utilized models that allowed for reciprocal causation between gun ownership and crime rates, i.e., crime rates could affect gun ownership levels, and gun ownership rates could affect crime rates. Further, production-based data were used to measure gun ownership levels, thereby counting both legal and illegal gun ownership. Using Kleck's data and a somewhat different estimation technique, Magaddino and Medoff (1984) also concluded that the homicide rate positively affected handgun ownership levels.

Bordua and Lizotte (1979) examined the relationship between rates of licensed gun ownership and crime rates in Illinois counties. They concluded that crime rates had no effect on rates of legal ownership among men but did have significant positive effects on women's ownership. However, the authors acknowledged that they could not separate ownership of handguns from long guns, noting the latter are far more common than the former. It may be for these reasons, and because much protective gun ownership is illegal, that the authors found no effect of

crime rates on legal ownership among men. Further, they did not model the reciprocal relationship between gun ownership and crime rates.

Clotfelter (1981) studied six states, relating crime rates and the frequency of riots during various periods during the 1960s and 1970s to various measures of legal handgun acquisition. The latter apparently measured applications to purchase handguns or perhaps the number of permits granted; it is unclear which was measured, or whether the same thing was measured in all of the states. In these six states, there was no significant relationship between the murder rate or the rate of other violent crimes and the rate of legal handgun acquisitions when a time trend variable was included in his regression equations, but acquisitions were positively and significantly related to nonmurder violent crime rates when the trend variable was omitted. Handgun acquisitions were also related to frequency of riots in the United States as a whole, though not to riot frequency within the states. Clotfelter did not model the possible reciprocal relationship between gun ownership and crime rates, in effect assuming that the former had no effect on the latter. Further, his results pertained only to legal acquisitions; their generalizability to handgun acquisition in general is unclear. Because the need for defensive guns is greatest in groups and areas in which law-breaking is highest, it would not be surprising if a large fraction of defensive gun acquisitions were unlawful and therefore not measured by gun purchase permits and the like.

Finally, in a sophisticated time-series analysis of the issuance of permits to purchase handguns in Detroit, McDowall and Loftin (1983) modeled the reciprocal relationship between gun ownership and crime. They found that the violent crime rate had a significant positive effect on handgun permits issued, and also that permit issuance was higher when police strength was low. As with the previous two studies, the generalizability of these findings to unlawful gun acquisitions is unknown.

If findings of the more sophisticated studies are weighted more heavily, the entire set of results from aggregate-level studies indicates that crime rates positively affect gun ownership rates. This conclusion thus accords with the admittedly ambiguous findings of the best individual-level survey studies, supporting the claim that gun ownership, especially handgun ownership, is often, though not exclusively, a response to the threat of a crime.

Additional support for this thesis comes from an examination of the trends in handgun sales during the 1960s and 1970s (Table 2.1). This was a period of both sharply increasing production and importation of handguns and rapid crime rate increases and civil disorders.

*Gun Ownership as Pathology*

Some researchers have proposed models of gun ownership, especially protective ownership, that stress pathological or abnormal causes. They have proposed that gun ownership is a result of racial prejudice, or punitiveness or aggressiveness toward criminals (Young 1985). Others have suggested that gun ownership may be the result of psychological abnormalities such as paranoia, violence-proneness, inability to control aggressive impulses, an unusual need for power, or felt sexual inadequacies (e.g., Bakal 1966; Sherrill 1973; Diener and Kerber 1979).

Stinchcombe and his associates argued that gun ownership is caused by "punitiveness" toward criminals (as well as gun ownership increasing punitiveness) (1980, p. 105). Using GSS data on household gun ownership, they found that persons favoring capital punishment and harsher criminal courts were more likely to own guns. However, this was true only for whites, and the differences in household gun ownership between those favoring and those opposing these views were typically only about five or six percentage points. Because they controlled only for race and sex, it would seem that this small association could be spurious, attributable to rural residency, age, and other variables that are positively associated with both gun ownership and "punitiveness" toward criminals, or to education, being Jewish, and other variables that are negatively associated with both gun ownership and punitiveness. Further, it is possible that the items used to measure punitiveness were instead merely indicators of a general political conservatism.

Young (1985) asserted that among white males in Detroit interviewed in 1979, racial prejudice toward blacks caused "aggressive attitudes towards criminals," which in turn caused nonhunting household gun ownership. He found no direct effect of racial prejudice on gun ownership. However, he did find that (1) racial prejudice was significantly related to favoring capital punishment and getting tough on crime, and (2) favoring capital punishment and getting tough on crime (believing stricter law enforcement will reduce crime, and that courts are too lenient) were marginally related to gun ownership (two-tailed significance levels of .10 and .06, respectively).

There were many problems with this analysis. First, the equations predicting "tough on crime" and "capital punishment" appeared to be substantially misspecified, with the former containing six predictors, only one of them significant at even the .10 level, and the second containing six predictors, only three of them significant. Second, treating

racial attitudes as causally antecedent to crime control attitudes is questionable. Third, it is possible that the items in Young's "prejudice" index and the crime control opinion items were all just measures of different aspects of a general conservatism, rather than causes of one another. Young conceded that a scale of conservatism was indeed positively and significantly correlated with the crime control attitude measures, but claimed that, in an analysis not reported in the paper, "the relationships among the variables presented here were unaffected by the presence of conservatism" (p. 478). This begged the question, since the problem was not just that conservatism should have been controlled as a separate variable, but rather that both prejudice and the crime control attitudes were aspects of a single underlying "conservatism" variable, a suspicion that his findings supported rather than refuted. In any case, even taking the results at face value, if the effect of prejudice is purely an indirect one through crime control attitudes, and these attitudes in turn were only marginally significant predictors of gun ownership, it would seem that support for the racial prejudice hypothesis in this study was weak.

Although Young was aware of the research and cited it in other connections, he omitted any mention of the null findings of Lizotte and his colleagues regarding the effect of racial prejudice. Using a much larger statewide sample, the latter researchers found that "racist attitudes did not predict owning a gun for protection" (Lizotte et al. 1981, p. 503). They did find that perception of blacks in the R's neighborhood increased the probability of crime victimization and increased the perception of an above-average crime rate in the R's county, and that these in turn increased fear of crime, which in turn increased the likelihood of owning a gun for protection. In short, the perceived presence of blacks in the neighborhood may have served as an indicator of high crime levels, elevating the perception of crime risk and thereby indirectly increasing protective gun ownership. This interpretation is supported by the findings of Smith and Uchida (1988, pp. 100-1), which indicated that the size of the nonwhite share of an R's neighborhood population had a positive effect on the purchase of protective weapons, but that all of this effect was mediated by household victimization experiences and the R's perceived risk of future victimization.

Lizotte and his colleagues did not report testing for the specific indirect links that Young proposed. In other work using these data, Bordua and associates (1979) reported that people who owned guns solely for defensive reasons were very likely to own only handguns and were disproportionately black and female. This could help explain why, at least among studies of samples including both blacks and whites, little racial prejudice was found among defensive or handgun owners.