PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF ‘STAND YOUR GROUND’ LAWS

Forty six states have adopted some form of the castle doctrine, which allows individuals to use deadly force to defend themselves in dangerous situations in their homes. Twenty-two states extend this right to use deadly force in self-defense to public places. These laws, called Stand Your Ground (SYG) laws, have reduced the legal risk of using deadly force in any situation that might be construed as presenting a threat of physical harm. The discipline of psychology has much to contribute to the consideration of SYG laws. The following sections, with select annotated references, outline the psychological implications of SYG laws on individuals, communities, and society at large.

SYG Laws and Racial Bias

African Americans are commonly stereotyped as “criminal,” “aggressive,” or “thug.” It is important to note that most people stereotype, and most are not aware of it. Recent research has focused on how stereotypes can be activated automatically and unconsciously, meaning mental associations and attitudes can be sparked simply by encountering or even thinking about someone who belongs to the stereotyped group. Thus, seeing an African American face can automatically elicit negative thoughts and feelings without intent or awareness.

Further, the perceptual link between African Americans and crime is bidirectional. That is, seeing African Americans often leads to thoughts of crime, and envisioning “crime” leads many people to think of African Americans. As a result, African Americans are disproportionately represented in considerations of crime, threat, and danger.

We see the results of this stereotyping in the use of shooting simulators, in which African Americans are disproportionately targeted. This is referred to as “shooter bias.” On average, participants in these simulated shooting tasks, including police officers, are faster to shoot an armed African American target than an armed European American target, slower to decide not to shoot an unarmed African American target, and more likely to mistakenly shoot an unarmed African American target. Trained police officers are less likely than untrained civilians to exhibit the tendency to wrongfully shoot unarmed African Americans in these simulations, but most people, trained or not, exhibit some shooter bias. As SYG laws legitimize real-world use of deadly force, particularly by people who are not trained law enforcement professionals, stereotyping leads to increased risk of violence against African Americans.

Moreover, juries interpret Stand Your Ground laws differently for people of varying ethnicities. Data indicate that juries in states with SYG laws are more likely than those in non-SYG states to rule White-on-Black homicide as justifiable, with no discernable difference in Black-on-White homicides. Between 2005-2010, 16.9% of White-on-Black homicides were ruled justifiable in SYG states, as compared to 9.5% in non-SYG states; in the same time period, 1.4% of Black-on-White homicides were ruled justifiable in SYG states, as compared to 1.1% in non-SYG states (see Roman, 2013, below for more details).

Research Highlights:


This seminal study used a computer-based simulation to examine the effect of ethnicity on shoot/don’t shoot decisions. Participants were told to “shoot” armed targets and to “not shoot” unarmed targets. They tended to make the correct decision to shoot armed targets more quickly when the targets were African American, and tended to “not shoot” unarmed targets more quickly when they were European American. This effect was magnified among those who subscribed to the cultural stereotype of African Americans as dangerous.
SYG and Social Influences

In addition to personal biases, social factors can influence potentially dangerous scenarios and increase the peril posed by SYG laws. A group that is perceived as threatening is more likely to be stereotyped. **Stand Your Ground laws, with their tacit endorsement of violence, may increase the acceptability and expectation of violent interpersonal conflict, particularly against stereotyped groups.** Moreover, some recent research suggests that individuals’ “implicit normative evaluations” (i.e., what they unconsciously believe other people feel, which may be different from what they feel themselves) can predict “shooter bias,” as described above.

**Research Highlights:**


*This research demonstrates that those who perceive more negative societal norms toward African Americans display more racial bias on the “shooter task.”*


*This influential chapter shows that when one’s group is threatened by another group’s perceived actions, beliefs, or characteristics, that "outgroup" will be disliked and negatively stereotyped.*

**SYG, Threat, and Mortality Salience**

SYG laws allow individuals greater latitude to use deadly force with impunity if they feel that they are threatened or in dangerous situations. Research has indicated that **feelings of threat can lead to shooting an unarmed target.** This may
be heightened by the presence of a firearm: A significant body of research has highlighted “the weapons effect,” showing that the mere presence of a weapon increases the likelihood of aggressive behavior. Moreover, holding a gun oneself increases the likelihood of assuming another person is wielding a weapon, heightening the possibility of a violent response.

Additionally, studies have shown that those who have increased “mortality salience” (thoughts of death) are more likely to act aggressively against others who threaten their worldview. For example, liberals in these conditions display more aggression against conservatives, and vice versa. In the context of SYG laws, if an individual feels threatened and sees someone he feels “doesn’t belong” to the community – which is particularly likely with gated and/or ethnically segregated enclaves – this is likely to promote an aggressive response.

**Research Highlights:**


> The researchers conducted a review of 56 published studies, confirming that the sight of weapons increases aggression in both angry and non-angry individuals.


> In this study, police officers participated in a memory test, viewed a police-threatening video, and then participated in a simulated shooting task. Officers with a lower working memory (which can result from being in a stressful, potentially violent situation), and who felt threatened by the video, were more likely to shoot unarmed targets.


> The authors investigate a theory of Terror Management. Most relevantly, they find that increasing thoughts of one’s death motivates aggression against others who threaten one’s way of seeing the world, for example by belittling political or cultural beliefs.


> In a series of experiments, participants were asked to determine whether another person was holding a gun or a neutral object. Participants holding a gun themselves were significantly more likely to report “gun present” than those holding a neutral object.

**SYG and the Consequences of Violence**

Stand Your Ground laws reduce the likelihood of punishment for using deadly force. Mitigating the consequences for lethal force can increase the likelihood that lethal force will be used. This is consistent with psychological theories about goals. Broadly speaking, if a method of accomplishing a goal is made more prominent and accessible, an individual will pursue that method over alternative, less salient possibilities. SYG laws legitimate the use of lethal force in a broader set of circumstances, and thereby increase the primacy of using lethal force (e.g., a gun) to achieve one’s
goals. In the aggregate, enhanced self-defense laws (i.e., SYG and concealed carry) do not decrease crime rates. In fact, the opposite relationship is observed; in states where such laws have been passed, homicide rates have increased by 8 percent, translating to approximately an additional 600 deaths per year across the states that have SYG laws.

Research Highlights:


Researchers use 2000 - 2010 data to investigate crime rates in states that transitioned to expanded SYG laws. Their analysis indicates that the laws do not deter burglary, robbery, or aggravated assault. Conversely, they correspond to an 8 percent increase in the number of murders and non-negligent manslaughters. The authors statistically control for other explanations for this increase, and conclude that SYG laws are a causal factor.


The authors describe their influential theory of goals and means, explaining how people prioritize certain goals over others, and how they choose the means by which they pursue such goals.

Conclusion

The research outlined above indicates why Stand Your Ground laws are more likely to increase than decrease violent crime, and exacerbate racial discrimination and conflict. Although SYG laws can, on the surface, appear just, factors such as racial bias, normative influences, reduced consequences of violence, and heightened threat perceptions most likely cause them to do more harm than good.

This psychological evidence indicates two primary mechanisms by which SYG laws affect people’s decision-making. First, SYG laws reduce the number of psychological barriers preventing someone from using lethal force, and establish violence as an accessible and acceptable option. Second, as research has consistently shown, individuals who feel that they or their community are threatened are more likely to respond in an aggressive manner, particularly if they possess a weapon.

Finally, it is important to note the significance of the broader social context. Both of these mechanisms affect and are affected by (frequently unconscious) racial bias and normative evaluations. That is, African Americans, who often evoke stereotypes such as “criminal” or “dangerous,” are more likely to be the victim of SYG-related violence, and less likely to benefit from SYG laws.

*SPSSI Dalmas Taylor Minority Policy Fellow Ryan Lei contributed to this analysis, carried out in part to support the congressional testimony of Dr. Phillip Atiba Goff.*

The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues (SPSSI) is an international group of approximately 3000 psychologists, allied scientists, students, and others who share a common interest in research on the psychological aspects of important social issues. The Society seeks to bring theory and practice into focus on human problems of the group, the community, and nations, as well as the increasingly important problems that have no national boundaries. For more information, please contact Policy Director Dr. Gabriel Twose at (202) 675-6956 or gtwose@spssi.org.