

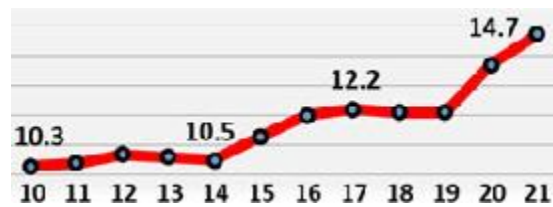
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FEARFUL, ANGRY, FUZZY-HEADED. AND ARMED.

Do “Stand Your Ground” laws needlessly increase gun violence?



For Police Issues by Julius (Jay) Wachtel. America’s love affair with the gun is certainly having some predictable consequences. Although we usually avoid kicking things off with numbers, excuse us for mentioning that according to the [CDC’s Wonder platform](#), yearly firearm death rates per



100,000 pop. from all causes rose steadily during 2013-2021 (the most recent year of data), going from from 10.3 to 14.7, a twelve-year gain of *nearly 43 percent*.

Shocking as these numbers might seem, they haven’t drawn much notice. Instead, what’s really caught the public eye is an aspect of the mayhem that’s usually overlooked. We’re talking about more-or-less “ordinary” citizens who are propelled by “[seemingly trivial circumstances](#)” to use firearms as lethal instruments of expression. And as of late, there’s been a surfeit of examples:

- [Antioch, Illinois, April 12](#): Apparently annoyed by his neighbor’s leaf-blowing, a 79-year old resident with a reputation for quarreling grabbed his handgun and fatally shot the 59-year old man in the head. A murder charge was filed.
- [Liberty, Missouri, April 13](#): It was ten at night when a sixteen-year old Black youth on an errand to fetch his brothers rang the wrong doorbell. That got an 84-year old White man out of bed. Revolver in hand, he supposedly saw the youth pulling on the storm door (that’s contested). So he fired, twice. One bullet struck the teen in the head. Miraculously, he survived. According to the prosecutor, the

case has a “racial component.” First-degree assault charges have been filed.

- **[Davie, Florida, April 15](#)**: A couple making a late-evening Instacart delivery drove up the wrong driveway and was shooed away by the homeowner’s son. But after turning around, the vehicle ran over some rocks on the road. That supposedly frightened the homeowner. He opened fire, striking the vehicle’s bumper and flattening a tire. No charges were filed, and police returned the shooter’s handgun. But the local D.A. ordered an inquiry.
- **[Hebron, New York, April 15](#)**: On the same day, a like set of circumstances had a far poorer ending. Realizing that they were in the wrong driveway, a group of friends in two cars and a motorcycle turned around and were on their way out. That’s when the 65-year old landowner, who was reportedly upset by like incidents in the past, opened fire. One of his bullets struck and killed Kaylin Gillis, a 20-year old budding marine biologist. A murder charge was filed.
- **[Gastonia, North Carolina, April 18](#)**: Soon after moving into a quiet neighborhood, a 24-year old man developed a “rep” for yelling at the kids next door. And when they ran into his yard to fetch an errant basketball he came out shooting. Bullets grazed a child and her mother and seriously wounded the dad. Unlike our other examples, the shooter had a recent criminal history and was pending trial for a recent assault-with-a-hammer.

And just as we were trying to put the wraps on this essay came a real stunner:

- **[Cleveland, Texas, April 28](#)**: Five persons ages 8 to 40 were shot dead in rural Texas by their next-door neighbor after asking that he stop firing his AR-15 style rifle in the yard. Deputies had previously confronted Francisco Oropeza, 38, about that, but let him keep the gun. Oropeza fled towards a forest some miles away. And at this writing, he’s still on the lam.

As gun killings increase (again, glance at our introductory graph) episodes where guns are “expressively” misused have captured public and media attention. Inevitably, the blame game is on. When, as in Missouri, the tragedies involve White shooters and Black victims, racial animus inevitably becomes the prime suspect. And it may well be a factor. But how to explain the many episodes where shooters and victims are of the same (usually, White) race? Could it be that White folks have gotten, well, crazier?

COVID’s become a popular explanation (excuse?) for misbehavior. [A 2020 APA survey](#) concluded that thanks to the pandemic’s deleterious effects on social interaction

and such, “we are facing a national mental health crisis that could yield serious health and social consequences for years to come”.

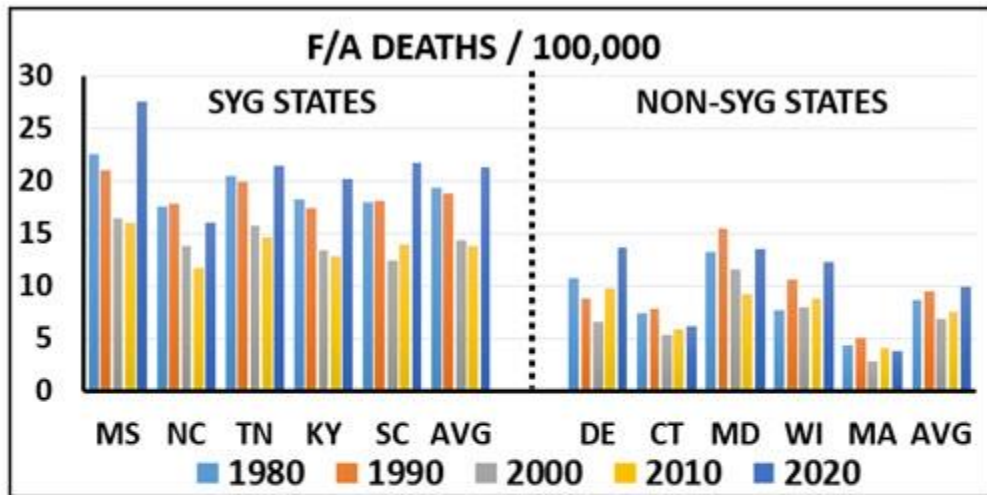
A key shift in the law has also caught blame. Citizens were once required to, whenever possible, “[safely step away](#)” from threatening situations. That began to change in 1994, when Utah passed the nation’s first stand-your-ground (SYG) law. By the end of the last decade, SYG laws graced the codes of thirty states. Could it be, [as the AP recently conjectured](#), that the loosening led to needless violence?

Academic studies suggest the answer is most likely “yes”:

- In 2012 eighteen states had SYG laws. Georgia State University scholars Chandler McClellan and Erdal Tekinan [examined their effects](#). They concluded that “extending the right to self-defense with no duty to retreat to any place a person has a legal right to be” led to a statistically significant increase in death by homicide among White male residents of SYG states. Numbers-wise, it amounted to “an additional 4.59 homicides per 100,000 residents per month per state.” No effects were found on Black persons, or on suicides.
- Last year *JAMA Open* [published a study](#) comparing twenty-three states that enacted SYG laws between 1999 and 2017 with eighteen states without SYG. Three scholars from the UK and a University of Pennsylvania biostatistician concluded, among (many) other things, that SYG laws were “associated” with an increase in firearms homicide of 8 percent nationally, and 10.8 percent in SYG states. But there were marked differences within. Five SYG states – Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Missouri – demonstrated pronounced increases, while seven SYG states – Arizona, Indiana, Michigan, Nevada, Oklahoma, Texas, and West Virginia – seemed unaffected.
- A recent [RAND review](#) of twelve studies concluded that “there is supportive evidence that stand-your-ground laws may increase firearm homicides”. But it tempered its findings by noting that seven concluded SYG’s effects were “uncertain.” That uncertainty was evident in the *JAMA Open* piece, which cautioned that factors including “economic shifts”, local cultures, existing laws and gun availability could affect the interpretation of outcomes.

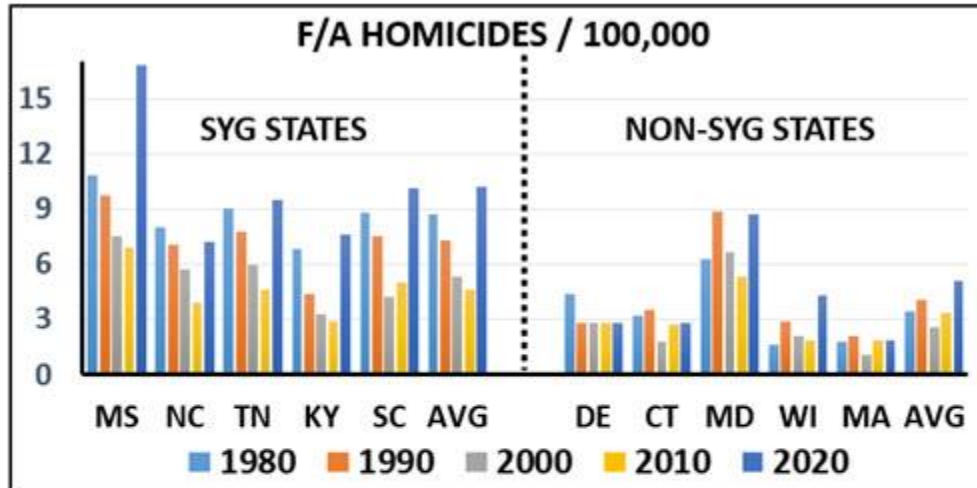
Most of these studies generated output that ordinary earthlings might find perplexing. We wanted something simpler. Excluding D.C. and foreign possessions, [there are presently thirty SYG states and twenty non-SYG](#). We used a statistics package to randomly select five from each group. CDC death rate data

(click [here](#) and [here](#)) was then used to generate a graph that tracks firearms death rates per 100,000 population in ten-year increments between 1980 and 2000 (SYG states on the left, non-SYG on the right):



SYG	1980	1990	2000	2010	%CHG	2020	%CHG	NON	1980	1990	2000	2010	%CHG	2020	%CHG
MS	22.5	21.1	16.5	16	-28.9	27.6	72.5	DE	10.7	8.8	6.6	9.8	-8.4	13.7	39.8
NC	17.6	17.8	13.8	11.8	-33.0	16	35.6	CT	7.5	7.8	5.3	5.9	-21.3	6.2	5.1
TN	20.5	19.9	15.8	14.7	-28.3	21.4	45.6	MD	13.3	15.5	11.6	9.3	-30.1	13.5	45.2
KY	18.2	17.4	13.4	12.8	-29.7	20.2	57.8	WI	7.7	10.6	8	8.8	14.3	12.3	39.8
SC	18	18.1	12.4	14	-22.2	21.7	55.0	MA	4.4	5.1	2.8	4.1	-6.8	3.9	-4.9
AVG	19.4	18.9	14.4	13.9	-28.4	21.4	54.3	AVG	8.7	9.6	6.9	7.6	-10.5	9.9	30.9

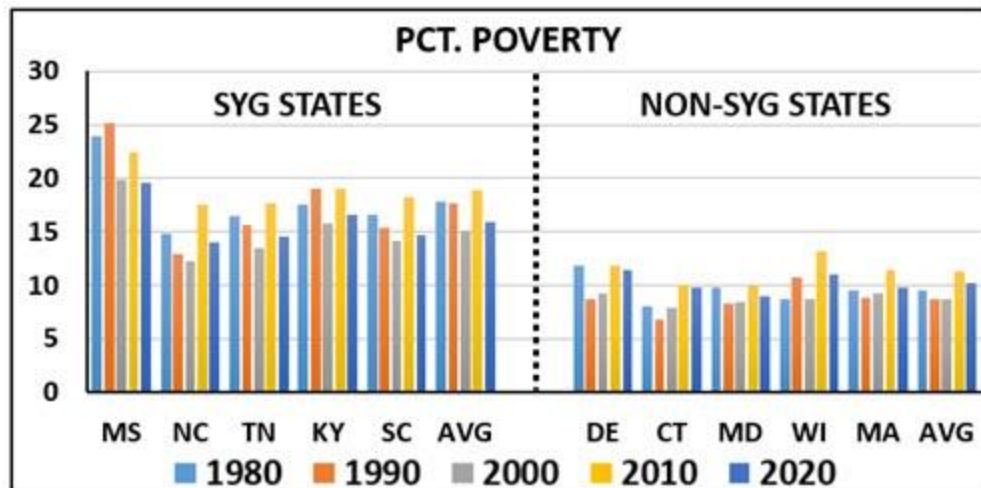
There are two %CHG columns: the one on the left lists percentage change in gun deaths between 1980 and 2010, and the second between 2010 and 2020, the period when most SYG laws came into effect. What's apparent is that as the periods transitioned, gun death rates in both SYG and non-SYG states, which had been falling across the board, abruptly shifted direction. Of course, given the national uptick in violence that accompanied the pandemic (see that introductory graph) that was to be expected. But the SYG states' increase seems especially pronounced. CDC data also reports gun homicides. Here are those rates:



SYG	1980	1990	2000	2010	%CHG	2020	%CHG	NON	1980	1990	2000	2010	%CHG	2020	%CHG
MS	10.8	9.7	7.5	6.9	-36.1	16.8	143.5	DE	4.4	2.8	1.1	5	13.6	7.7	54.0
NC	8	7.1	5.7	3.9	-51.3	7.2	84.6	CT	3.2	3.5	1.8	2.7	-15.6	2.8	3.7
TN	9	7.8	6	4.6	-48.9	9.5	106.5	MD	6.3	8.9	6.7	5.3	-15.9	8.7	64.2
KY	6.8	4.4	3.3	2.9	-57.4	7.6	162.1	WI	1.6	2.9	2.1	1.9	18.8	4.3	126.3
SC	8.8	7.5	4.2	5	-43.2	10.1	102.0	MA	1.8	2.1	1.1	1.9	5.6	1.9	0.0
AVG	8.7	7.3	5.3	4.7	-47.4	10.2	119.7	AVG	3.5	4.0	2.6	3.4	1.3	5.1	51.2

What we've seen so far is consistent with concerns that SYG laws, which were mostly enacted after 2010, may have provoked gunplay. Still, non-SYG Delaware, Maryland and Wisconsin also exhibited substantial upticks. Although their rate increases aren't as drastic, *something* was driving things. And it wasn't SYG laws!

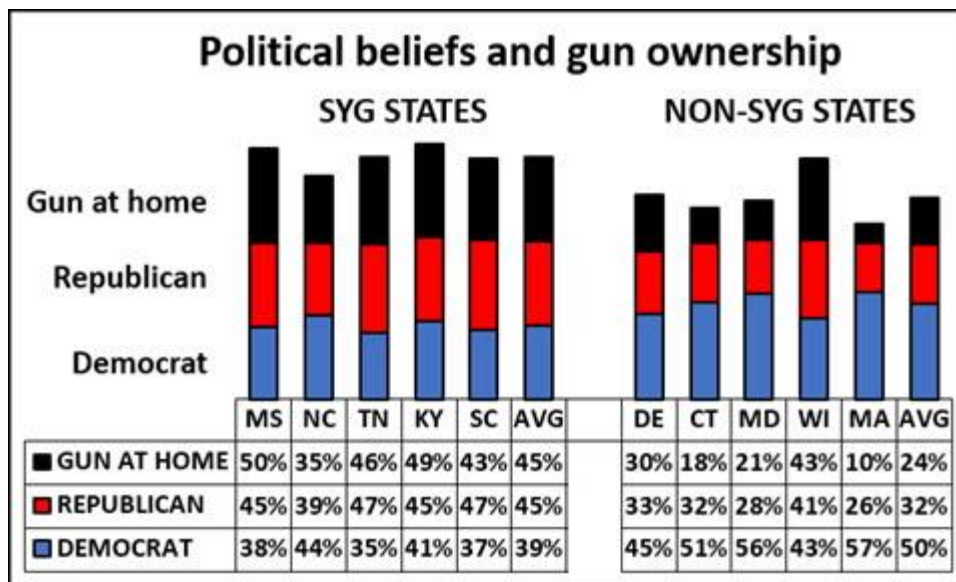
What else could it be? We've frequently harped about poverty's strong association with violence (check out that lead table in "[Woke up, America!](#)"). Here's a graph that compares SYG and non-SYG states poverty-wise:



SYG	1980	1990	2000	2010	%CHG	2020	%CHG	NON	1980	1990	2000	2010	%CHG	2020	%CHG
MS	23.9	25.2	19.9	22.4	-6.3	19.6	-12.5	DE	11.8	8.7	9.2	11.8	0.0	11.4	-3.4
NC	14.8	13	12.3	17.5	18.2	14	-20.0	CT	8	6.8	7.9	10.1	26.3	9.8	-3.0
TN	16.4	15.7	13.5	17.7	7.9	14.6	-17.5	MD	9.8	8.3	8.5	9.9	1.0	9	-9.1
KY	17.6	19	15.8	19	8.0	16.6	-12.6	WI	8.7	10.7	8.7	13.2	51.7	11	-16.7
SC	16.6	15.4	14.1	18.2	9.6	14.7	-19.2	MA	9.6	8.9	9.3	11.4	18.8	9.8	-14.0
AVG	17.9	17.7	15.1	19.0	7.5	15.9	-16.4	AVG	9.6	8.7	8.7	11.3	19.5	10.2	-9.2

Clearly, there's a big difference. SYG states have been economically beset for a very long time. In comparison, their non-SYG brethren have basked in affluence. And while that gap lessened over time, it remains observably pronounced.

Political beliefs and gun availability could also be important. This graph uses data from RAND's estimate of [household gun ownership during 1980-2016](#) by state and the results of Gallup's [2017 poll of party affiliation](#):



Bottom line: residents of SYG States are considerably more likely to be ideologically conservative and to have (at least one) gun at home.

So what's the upshot? Self-help is consistent with conservative political doctrine, which is prominent in SYG states. Residents of SYG states are also more affected by gun violence. And more likely to be dissatisfied with their economic conditions. So it would make perfect sense for them to oppose Government meddling and, as personal safety goes, demand a permissive approach to self-defense. Of course, human nature is fickle. People are fallible, and increased gun availability can greatly worsen the effects of bad

decisions. So that same set of circumstances that led thirty states to enact SYG laws may have brought on a lot more than what their boosters intended.

But we haven't even touched on the consequences of encouraging citizens to use guns on the civil servants who must respond to *all* shootings, SYG or otherwise. Given the risks of working those unpredictable streets, has it made *them* more likely to needlessly use lethal force? Check out what happened to that [well-intentioned armed citizen in Hemet, Calif.](#) when a cop mistook him for being a bad guy. Police officers, too, are fallible humans. But that's something for another essay.