

On March 13, 1997, seven young seventh- and eighth-grade Israeli girls were shot to death by a Jordanian soldier while visiting Jordan's so-called Island of Peace. Reportedly, the Israelis had "complied with Jordanian requests to leave their weapons behind when they entered the border enclave. Otherwise, they might have been able to stop the shooting, several parents said."²¹

Obviously, arming citizens has not stopped terrorism in Israel; however, terrorists have responded to the relatively greater cost of shooting in public places by resorting to more bombings. This is exactly what the substitution effect discussed above would predict. Is Israel better off with bombings instead of mass public shootings? That is not completely clear, although one might point out that if the terrorists previously chose shooting attacks rather than bombings but now can only be effective by using bombs, their actions are limited in a way that should make terrorist attacks less effective (even if only slightly).²²

Substitutability means that the most obvious explanations may not always be correct. For example, when the February 23, 1997, shooting at the Empire State Building left one person dead and six injured, it was not New York's gun laws but Florida's—where the gun was sold—that came under attack. New York City Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani immediately called for national gun-licensing laws.²³ While it is possible that even stricter gun-sale regulations in Florida might have prevented this and other shootings, we might ask, Why did the gunman travel to New York rather than remain in Florida to do the shooting? And could someone intent on committing the crime and willing to travel to Florida still have gotten a gun illegally some other way? It is important to study whether states that adopt concealed-handgun laws similar to those in Israel experience the same virtual elimination of mass public shootings. Such states may also run the risk that would-be attackers will substitute bombings for shootings, though there is the same potential downside to successfully banning guns. The question still boils down to an empirical one: Which policy will save the largest number of lives?

The Numbers Debate and Crime

Unfortunately, the debate over crime involves many commonly accepted "facts" that simply are not true. For example, take the claim that individuals are frequently killed by people they know.²⁴ As shown in table 1.1, according to the FBI's *Uniform Crime Reports*, 58 percent of the country's murders

Table 1.1 Murderers and victims: relationship and characteristics

	Percent of cases involving the relationship	Percent of victims	Percent of offenders
Relationship			
Family	18%	—	—
Acquaintance (non-friend and friend)	40		
Stranger	13		
Unknown	30		
Total	101		
Race			
Black		38%	33%
White		54	42
Hispanic		2	2
Other		5	4
Unknown		1	19
Total		100	100
Sex			
Female		29	9
Male		71	72
Unknown		0	19
Total		100	100

Source: U.S. Dept. of Justice, FBI staff, *Uniform Crime Reports*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Govt. Printing Office, 1992)

Note: Nonfriend acquaintances include drug pushers and buyers, gang members, prostitutes and their clients, bar customers, gamblers, cab drivers killed by their customers, neighbors, other nonfriend acquaintances, and friends. The total equals more than 100 percent because of rounding. The average age of victims was 33; that of offenders was 30.

were committed either by family members (18 percent) or by those who “knew” the victims (40 percent). Although the victims’ relationship to their attackers could not be determined in 30 percent of the cases, 13 percent of all murders were committed by complete strangers.²⁵

Surely the impression created by these numbers has been that most victims are murdered by close acquaintances. Yet this is far from the truth. In interpreting the numbers, one must understand how these classifications are made. In this case, “murderers who know their victims” is a very broad category. A huge but not clearly determined portion of this category includes rival gang members who know each other.²⁶ In larger urban areas, where most murders occur, the majority of murders are due to gang-related turf wars over drugs.

The Chicago Police Department, which keeps unusually detailed numbers on these crimes, finds that just 5 percent of all murders in the city from 1990 to 1995 were committed by nonfamily friends, neighbors, or roommates.²⁷ This is clearly important in understanding crime. The list of nonfriend acquaintance murderers is filled with cases in which the relationships would not be regarded by most people as particularly close: for

example, relationships between drug pushers and buyers, gang members, prostitutes and their clients, bar customers, gamblers, and cabdrivers killed by their customers.

While I do not wish to downplay domestic violence, most people do not envision gang members or drug buyers and pushers killing each other when they hear that 58 percent of murder victims were either relatives or acquaintances of their murderers.²⁸ If family members are included, no more than 17 percent of all murders in Chicago for 1990–95 involved family members, friends, neighbors, or roommates.²⁹ While the total number of murders in Chicago grew from 395 in 1965 to 814 in 1995, the number involving family members, friends, neighbors, or roommates remained virtually unchanged. What has grown is the number of murders by nonfriend acquaintances, strangers, identified gangs, and persons unknown.³⁰

Few murderers could be classified as previously law-abiding citizens. In the largest seventy-five counties in the United States in 1988, over 89 percent of adult murderers had criminal records as adults.³¹ Evidence for Boston, the one city where reliable data have been collected, shows that, from 1990 to 1994, 76 percent of juvenile murder victims and 77 percent of juveniles who murdered other juveniles had prior criminal arraignments.³²

Claims of the large number of murders committed against acquaintances also create a misleading fear of those we know. To put it bluntly, criminals are not typical citizens. As is well known, young males from their mid-teens to mid-thirties commit a disproportionate share of crime,³³ but even this categorization can be substantially narrowed. We know that criminals tend to have low IQs as well as atypical personalities.

For example, delinquents generally tend to be more “assertive, unafraid, aggressive, unconventional, extroverted, and poorly socialized,” while non-delinquents are “self-controlled, concerned about their relations with others, willing to be guided by social standards, and rich in internal feelings like insecurity, helplessness, love (or lack of love), and anxiety.”³⁴ Other evidence indicates that criminals tend to be more impulsive and put relatively little weight on future events.³⁵ Finally, we cannot ignore the unfortunate fact that crime (particularly violent crime, and especially murder) is disproportionately committed against blacks by blacks.³⁶

The news media also play an important role in shaping what we perceive as the greatest threats to our safety. Because we live in such a national news market, we learn very quickly about tragedies in other parts of the country.³⁷ As a result, some events appear to be much more common than they actually are. For instance, children are much less likely to be accidentally