

# The Structural Determinants of Justifiable Homicide

Assessing the Theoretical and Political Considerations

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*Although there is an abundance of research examining the influence of structural conditions on total homicides, less is known about the differential influence of structural conditions on homicides disaggregated by type. Justifiable homicide by civilians represents one type of homicide that has received little attention in the literature, particularly at the macro level. Given the debate about the role of guns in cases of self-defense, it is clear that this category of homicide is important to study for theoretical and practical reasons. The authors provide an empirical assessment of these issues using data from 188 U.S. cities with populations of more than 100,000. The findings indicate that cities with higher rates of violence, with more divorced men, and located in states with less restrictive gun laws on concealable firearms have higher rates of justifiable homicide. In addition, as cities increase the level of police per capita, justifiable homicide rates are significantly lowered. The implications of these findings for theory and policy are discussed.*

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What factors lead to justifiable killings in American cities? Approximately 1.7% of all homicides in the United States are determined to be justifiable, yet few studies have examined what factors influence their use. Perhaps no type of homicide draws as much public attention as situations in which a citizen is required to use lethal force in defense of his or her life. Such incidents, though relatively rare in American society, are a source of public apprehension and concern. Yet, sociologists have paid little attention to this type of

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homicide. The lack of attention to this category of homicide may have to do with its rarity and a general interest in study of violence to explain social pathology (Durkheim, 1951). It may also be due, in part, to the focus on overall or total homicide events in much of the previous homicide research (for a detailed discussion, see Flewelling & Williams, 1999). In light of the recent arguments for the importance of examining distinct types or classifications of homicide (Decker, 1993; Maltz, 1994, 1998), and the recent surge in studies that find different types of homicide respond to different structural and cultural factors (K. F. Parker & McCall, 1999; Williams & Flewelling, 1988), we offer an investigation into the structural determinants of justifiable homicide.

The present research examines the impact of structural predictors on homicide cases in which American society justifies the use of deadly force by civilians, excluding those incidents of homicide that are deemed as excusable or nonprosecutable. Although we agree that excusable or nonprosecutable are sometimes similar to justifiable homicides and deserve to be investigated, our research emphasis is only on cases that are clearly justifiable. Drawing on structural level theories of homicide, and literature that highlights important political considerations in the study of homicide, such as gun availability and gun laws, this study provides a test of the rates of justifiable homicides across large American cities.

### JUSTIFIABLE HOMICIDE: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The fact that Americans feel a need to defend themselves from physical attack is without question. Numerous public opinion surveys indicate that the majority of American citizens believe in the right to use lethal force in the case of self-defense (see D. Cohen & Nesbitt, 1994; Kleck, 1997). How these opinions are reflected in actual incidence of deadly self-defense outcomes, however, has not been addressed in public opinion surveys. In fact, previous studies examining justifiable homicides by civilians have been limited.

With few exceptions (e.g., MacDonald & Tennenbaum, 1999), social scientists have ignored the subject of justifiable homicides. Rather, the majority of research on justifiable homicides has

focused on explanations of homicides committed by the police (Fyfe, 1980; Geller & Scott, 1992; Jacobs & Britt, 1979; Jacobs & O'Brien, 1998). The earliest empirical work on justifiable homicides was conducted by Brearley (1932). Using vital statistics data, Brearley suggested that justifiable homicides accounted for roughly 26% to 30% of homicides in Washington, D.C.; Chicago; and Detroit. Brearley, however, did not differentiate between justifiable and excusable homicides, nor did he differentiate between homicides committed by the police and those committed by civilians. This broad use of the term, in addition to significant historical changes in American violence (Lane, 1999) and police perpetrated homicide (Sherman & Langworthy, 1979), could help explain the differences between Brearley's estimates and contemporary data on justifiable homicide.

Since Brearley's (1932) early work, only a few studies have specifically dealt with justifiable homicides. Copeland (1984) studied justifiable homicides in Dade County, Florida, from 1957 to 1982. Copeland found that the majority of the victims were young Black males, and most justifiable homicide incidents (56%) occurred in a home or commercial establishment. Other research, which compares justifiable homicides by civilians with those committed by the police within a single jurisdiction, found that Black males are disproportionately the victims of both types of homicide and that the majority of these incidents involved the use of a gun (Challener, Adelson, & Rushforth, 1987; Griswold & Massey, 1985). Recent work by Alvarez (1992) and Tennebaum (1993) provides additional evidence that Black males are overwhelmingly represented as victims of justifiable homicides. More recently, MacDonald and Tennebaum (1999) found that victims of justifiable homicides by civilians are more likely to be killed by a firearm than victims of criminal homicide. Although these studies advance our understanding of justifiable homicide at the micro level, attempts to assess the relevance of structural factors as predictors of justifiable homicide rates have been limited. In this macro-level study of justifiable homicides, we address four key considerations.

One key consideration in the study of justifiable homicide is its definition. We argue that the lack of clarity when defining homicides as justifiable may have contributed to the inconsistencies in and lack of empirical attention to this type of homicide in pre-

vious studies. For example, the term *justifiable* is often confused with the term *excusable*. The main distinction between these two forms of homicide is that in the former, the homicide is completely justified and fully authorized by law, whereas in the latter, the homicide is committed for excusable reasons or without criminal negligence (Robin, 1967). Although legal statutes vary from state to state on the specific circumstances in which civilians are legally authorized to use deadly force, all states grant persons the right to use deadly force against an attacker, if their life is in danger or they are exposed to serious physical injury (Tennebaum, 1993). In this study, we focus solely on justifiable homicides by civilians in which there was an immediate aggressor and the use of deadly force was determined to be reasonable by law enforcement officials.

A second critical issue is that the majority of previous studies on justifiable homicide were conducted in single jurisdictions (Challener et al., 1987; Copeland, 1984; Griswold & Massey, 1985). As a result, it is difficult to generate systematic or generalizable findings from these works. To address this issue we offer the first study of justifiable homicide across multiple urban cities that include community-level structural factors.

Third, as previous studies inform us that justifiable homicides are more likely to involve the use of a gun, gun availability becomes an important consideration. That is, although research on justifiable homicides indicates greater gun use than found for other types of homicide (see Alvarez, 1992; MacDonald & Tennebaum, 1999), previous findings on the relationship between gun availability and violent crime have been mixed (Kellerman et al., 1993; Lott, 1998; McDowall, Loftin, & Wiersema, 1995; Sherman, 2000). The topic of gun control is also of political significance as the debate over gun control only increases in the United States. For example, proponents of less restrictive gun laws call for the need for citizens to have the ability to defend themselves. In light of this debate, the issue of gun control and self-defense is relevant to our examination of justifiable homicide. To date, little is known about how structural factors and gun laws concomitantly influence justifiable homicides.

A final issue is incorporating theoretically derived structural and cultural predictors into the research on justifiable homicide. Researchers have yet to address how urban disadvantage, poverty,

breakdown in informal social control, among other theoretical indicators, influence this type of homicide. Given that justifiable homicides represent a response to violence in a given area, such as in the case of self-defense, and that justifiable homicide is a category of homicide that differs from other types of homicide events, a macro-level analysis of these events not only provides greater insight into these incidents specifically but also contributes to the broader study of violence in urban areas.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In an attempt to fill the void in the research on justifiable homicides, we explore the influence of various theoretically relevant structural socioeconomic and political factors. Traditionally, criminological theories have been utilized to explain homicides that are deemed criminal. Yet, we argue that these macro-level forces and structural conditions might also explain the variation in justifiable homicides across urban cities. For example, social disorganization theory suggests that the ecological structure of a given area contributes to the breakdown in social control, which in turn results in crime and violence. Because the disadvantages in these areas are widespread, we think that it is theoretically plausible to assume justifiable homicides will be similarly influenced. Key to this study is our efforts to test the applicability of various criminological arguments on the social production of justifiable homicide. Specifically, theories of interest are those commonly offered in macro-level studies of homicide, such as the subculture of violence, community control, strain, and routine activities/lifestyles approaches.

Early explanations of aggregate homicide rates debated the importance of culture for the explanation of lethal violence (Gastil, 1971; Hackney, 1969; Loftin & Hill, 1973). Scholars suggest that higher rates of homicide occur in the southern region of the United States because of a "subculture of violence" that exists there, which condones the use of lethal violence to defend one's home or "honor" (Brearley, 1932; Hackney, 1969; Nisbett & Cohen, 1996). According to this perspective, for example, there exists an "unwritten law" in the South that "a man slay another who disrupts his home by seduction or adultery" (Brearley, 1932, p. 51).

This approach also regards violence as acceptable when avenging an "insult," defending one's "honor," or as a means of self-defense (D. Cohen & Nesbitt, 1994). Survey research provides some support for this claim and finds that people living in the southern United States are more likely to own a gun for self-protection and to believe that a person has the right to kill another person in a case of self-defense (D. Cohen & Nesbitt, 1994). Furthermore, MacDonald & Tennebaum (1999) provided macro-level evidence that justifiable homicide rates are higher in the southern region as compared with other regions in the United States. Yet, claims of the existence of a southern culture of honor and evidence of its influence on violence remain a matter of debate (see Kowalski & Petee, 1991; K. F. Parker & Pruitt, 2000). In fact, recent homicide data suggest that homicide rates in the West closely resemble those in the South (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1999). Given the hypothesized importance of regional culture, we assess how regional differences in the cultural endorsement of violence and gun ownership affect the social production of justifiable homicides.

Opposing cultural explanations of homicide, others suggest that the regional differences in homicide are related to structural dimensions of these areas (Sampson, 1987). Based on the works of Wirth (1938) and Shaw and McKay (1942), the social disorganization perspective argues that the ecological conditions in urban cities contribute to violence (homicide) indirectly through ineffective social control. Research by Sampson (1987), for example, suggests that family breakdown and joblessness weaken a community's level of informal social control networks, which in turn leads to higher rates of urban violence. When drawing from a social disorganization perspective, previous studies examining the impact of percentage Black residents, percentage divorced, and percentage of families living below poverty consistently found a relationship between these structural factors and homicide rates (Bailey, 1984; Kovandzic, Vieraitis, & Yeisley, 1998; Messner & Golden, 1992; Sampson, 1987; Williams & Flewelling, 1988). On the other hand, research on the impact of density on homicide has been mixed (Land, McCall, & Cohen, 1990). Overall, these studies provide support for a social disorganization approach to homicide. In terms of our current study, we argue that justifiable homicides also respond to the breakdown in informal

social control that results when urban areas face family disruption, poverty, and urban density. That is, as urban areas face greater levels of social disorganization and disadvantage, the informal processes of social control that inhibit violence are weakened, which allows for an increase in both criminal and justifiable homicide rates.

In addition to ecological arguments, opportunity theories also have been influential in much of the homicide literature, particularly routine activities and lifestyles theories (L. Cohen & Felson, 1979; Hindelang, Gottfredson, & Garofalo, 1978). From the routine activities perspective, it is hypothesized that increased numbers of unsupervised young adults (e.g., divorced or unattached males) lead to increased rates of violence. In addition, lifestyles theories suggest that the daily patterns of individuals influence their probability of criminal offending and victimization. According to these two perspectives, young adults are at risk of being both victims and perpetrators of violence because of their difference in daily routines and activities. Research on the relationship between aggregate age structure (18 to 24 years of age) and homicide is less than conclusive (see Land et al., 1990). The fact that victims of justifiable homicide are overwhelmingly young adults, however, would suggest that cities with higher percentages of young adults would have greater rates of motivated criminal offenders and justifiable homicide victims.

Last, structural explanations of violence also point to the importance of strain theory (Merton, 1938) and economic inequality (Blau & Blau, 1982) when explaining the variation in homicide rates (Messner & Rosenfeld, 1994). This perspective suggests that violence is a result of the tensions associated with the inequality of the marketplace. Accordingly, blocked opportunities and general economic inequality produce anger, hopelessness, and a sense of relative deprivation. Numerous studies have tested the relationship between homicide in general and poverty and income inequality (Blau & Blau, 1982; Fowles & Merva, 1996; Kovandzic et al., 1998; Land et al., 1990; R. N. Parker, 1989). Whether these blocked opportunities and forms of deprivation translate into rates of justifiable homicide is yet unknown.

Although subcultural, social disorganization, strain, and routine activities theories all have been found influential to the study of homicide in general, less is known about how these theoretical

perspectives explain the production of justifiable homicides. Do the same structural and cultural factors that predict criminal homicide also predict justifiable homicides? In addition to theoretical concerns, we acknowledge the importance of the ongoing political debate on gun control to our investigation of justifiable homicide. That is, on both methodological and political grounds, one must take into account the variations in gun laws across cities and ensuing political debate.

The importance of guns and their availability in the production of violence remains a topic of considerable debate in social science research (Blumstein, Rivara, & Rosenfeld, 2000; Blumstein & Rosenfeld, 1998; Cook, 1983; Kleck, 1997; Lott, 1998; Sherman, 2000; Stolzenberg & D'Alessio, 2000). Research by Sloan et al. (1990), for example, suggests that increased access to handguns in the United States results in higher rates of homicide. Time-series research also provides support for the relationship between greater access to firearms and homicide (McDowall et al., 1995). More recent research by Blumstein et al. (2000) suggests that the rise in violent crime in the 1980s and early 1990s is largely attributed to the greater access to firearms among juveniles and young adults.

In contrast, other researchers suggest that greater access to guns does not necessarily engender higher homicide rates, as long as the guns are purchased by "law abiding" citizens (Kleck, 1997; Lott, 1998). Kleck's (1997) research indicates that a greater number of persons use guns for purposes of self-defense than criminality. Similarly, Lott (1998) suggested that more guns lead to less crime. Specifically, Lott suggested that states with concealed-handgun laws have lower rates of violent crime and mass murder (see also Lott & Landes, 2000). Although these studies point to the importance of examining the effect of gun laws on homicide rates, none of the previous works disaggregate homicide by types or classifications. Given that concealed-carry laws rest largely on grounds of self-defense and deterrence arguments, these laws have strong implications for the incidents of justifiable homicide. We believe that an empirical examination of these arguments is essential to the study of justifiable homicide. For instance, if concealed-carry handgun laws actually increase the number of readily accessible firearms, such laws may increase the probability of justifiable homicide specifically. Below we offer the data and methodology



we utilize to assess these important theoretical and political considerations in this study of justifiable homicide.

## DATA AND METHOD

The units of analysis for this study are 188 cities in the United States with a population greater than 100,000 in 1990.<sup>1</sup> The city-level data on justifiable homicides by civilians come from supplementary homicide reports filed by the police to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) for the years 1990 to 1994.<sup>2</sup> The official data on these events are far more accurate in accounting for extreme cases of pure self-defense than are public opinion surveys (Kleck, 1997). The FBI classifications of homicides are based solely on law enforcement investigation. Therefore, the FBI classification of justifiable homicides by civilians does not include homicides that are determined to be excusable by a prosecutor, grand jury, or a criminal court. Some researchers suggest that the FBI definition therefore is too narrow. Kleck (1991), for example, suggested that the FBI classification does not include "civilian legal defense homicides" and that some self-defense homicides can be classified either as an excusable or justifiable homicide. Although we agree with Kleck's argument that the FBI data do not include excusable homicides, we think that this omission is necessary because the FBI's definition of justifiable homicide was intended to exclude cases in which there was even the slightest question of criminal culpability. A hypothetical example of this type of case is described in the *Uniform Crime Reporting Handbook* (FBI, 1984, p. 7): "Joe and Jim, while playing cards, get into an argument. Joe comes at Jim with a broken bottle and Jim pulls a gun and kills Joe. Jim is arrested and claims self-defense."

The supplementary homicide reports do include "subcircumstances" categories for cases of justifiable homicide. The subcircumstances categories include cases in which a felon attacked a civilian and a felon was killed in commission of a crime. It seems reasonable to suggest that the first definition refers to self-defense, whereas the second refers to killing while committing a crime, both of which represent cases in which there is uniformity in state laws permitting the use of lethal force for the "protection of person." We think it is a mistake to confuse justifiable

homicides with excusable homicides because justifiable homicides carry no blame for the perpetrator, but excusable homicides carry some level of blame for the killer, even though not enough to convict him or her. Although all official data suffer from issues of measurement error, we think that the use of the supplementary homicide is germane for an investigation into justifiable homicide because it represents the only available national level data for which there is some uniformity in classifications. City-level characteristics on economic and demographic factors were drawn from the U.S. Bureau of Census population statistics (Bureau of the Census, 1990).

### **Dependent Variable**

Because justifiable civilian homicides are rare events, we compute the total number or count of justifiable homicides in a city during a 5-year period (1990-1994).<sup>3</sup> We use the total count of justifiable civilian homicides over the period to reduce instability in these rare events from year-to-year fluctuations. This method reduces the possibility of missing data and increases the comparability of the data across cities. Because the use of ordinary least squares regression on count data can lead to inefficient, inconsistent, and biased estimates, we employ the use of a negative binomial Poisson-based regression model (Long, 1997). We employ the use negative binomial regression instead of Poisson regression because the Poisson model assumes that conditional variance is equal to the conditional mean (Long, 1997), an assumption that rarely applies in rare aggregate crime data (Osgood, 2000). When this assumption is violated and there is overdispersion in the dependant variable, estimates using the standard Poisson regression model will be biased downward, which will lead to larger  $z$  values and misleading indications of statistical significance (Long, 1997; Osgood, 2000). Recent work by Osgood (2000) confirms that the negative binomial regression is preferable to the standard Poisson regression model when analyzing rare event aggregate crime data. In this study, we are interested in the likelihood that someone will be justifiably killed in a given city. Therefore, we include the log of the city population as an independent variable and constrain its coefficient to equal 1. This method

converts the counts of justifiable homicides into the equivalent of a rate for each city (Maddala, 1983; Osgood, 2000).<sup>4</sup>

### **Explanatory Variables**

This study draws on the extant literature on homicide in general to develop its explanatory variables. Because we are interested in assessing the impact of both ecological and opportunity-based indicators, measures of structural disadvantage are included that are derived from social disorganization, strain, and routine activities explanations of urban violence. We also add a measure of the state gun laws in these cities during this period to examine their relative influence on the incidence of justifiable homicides, recognizing that research has suggested that greater levels of gun carrying may either enhance (Sherman, 2000) or reduce the murder rate (Lott, 1998). We measure gun laws according to an ordinal scale of whether a city is located in a state with a "right-to-carry" denied (0), "right-to-carry" limited by local authority discretion (1), or "shall issue"—the least restrictive of concealed-carry laws (2). For operational purposes, we hypothesize that cities located in states with shall-issue laws will have greater rates of justifiable homicide. To control for the possible influence of subculture, we include a dummy variable for cities located in southern states. In this research, therefore, we move beyond pure economic and social demographic models of urban homicide and examine the importance of political factors.

Because prior research has noted the relationship between criminal homicides and justifiable homicides, we include a measure of the average murder rate for each city for the 5-year period. Legally justifiable homicides are removed from this rate. Percentage Black, population size, and population density are included because of their hypothesized importance in the social ecology of violence. Density is measured by the number of residents per square mile and is converted into its square root to correct for a mild skew.

Prior research also has noted the importance of family disruption, age structure, and income inequality in the social production of urban violence (Sampson, 1995). Therefore, we include the percentage of divorced males in each city as a measure of family

disruption. To measure the influence of potential motivated offenders in each city we include a measure of the percentage of residents between 18 and 24 years old and the percentage of the population not employed (L. Cohen & Felson, 1979). We use the percentage of population not employed instead of the unemployment rate to capture joblessness, which includes those persons in the population not actively seeking work. That is, this measure more accurately accounts for percentage of the population out of the labor force (Krivo, Peterson, Rizzo, & Reynolds, 1998; Wilson, 1987). The specific age range of 18 to 24 years was chosen because research suggests this is the time when people peak in their offending rates (Blumstein, Cohen, Roth, & Visser, 1986). To account for the potential influence of aggregate income inequality, we used the Gini coefficient, which is commonly utilized in studies of homicide (Land et al., 1990; K. F. Parker & McCall, 1999).

We measure the influence of official social control in each city with the rate of police officers per 100,000 residents. We chose the actual number of police officers because the hypothesized effect of the police on violence (both criminal and justifiable) should be affected the most by officers actually working the streets.

## RESULTS

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations for the variables included in this study. There was an average of approximately 12 justifiable homicides across these 188 cities from 1990 to 1994 (ranging between 0 and 264). In terms of our predictors, we find that African Americans compose approximately 19% of the population base in this sample of urban cities. Furthermore, we find that on average 26% of a city's population is between 18 to 24 years of age. Last, although these cities are densely populated, average levels of divorce (8.5%) and persons not employed (7%) are relatively low. We now turn to the results of the negative binomial regression model of justifiable homicides.<sup>5</sup>

The results from the negative binomial model are displayed in Table 2. The results indicate that the murder rates, population size, and family disruption are significant predictors of greater justifiable civilian homicide rates. As one would predict from the

**TABLE 1**  
**Means and Standard Deviations of All Variables**

<i>Variable</i>	M	SD
Justifiable civilian homicides	11.572	35.353
Murder rate	14.707	13.098
Population size (ln)	12.274	0.735
Percentage Black	19.094	17.637
Percentage aged 18-24	26.223	2.924
Percentage not employed	7.217	2.625
Population density (square root)	62.041	21.622
Income inequality	0.442	0.043
Percentage divorced males	8.533	1.871
South	0.335	0.473
Police per capita	207.735	85.229
Concealed-carry gun laws	1.314	0.674

NOTE: ln = natural logarithmic transformation. Data computed on 188 U.S. cities with a population of more than 100,000.

limited prior literature on justifiable homicides, cities with larger populations and higher criminal homicide rates have significantly greater rates of justifiable killings. These findings make sense if one considers the fact that persons living in high crime (homicide) cities will be more likely to defend themselves. In addition, cities with higher family disruption have significantly higher rates of justifiable homicide. These results provide some support for social disorganization theory, by suggesting that weakening social bonds and social control leads to higher rates of homicide, even legally justifiable ones. These results appear to also support the routine activities or lifestyle perspective (L. Cohen & Felson, 1979), in that they suggest that as the pool of would be offenders increases so does the probability that civilians will have to commit acts of lethal self-defense. On the other hand, our findings depart from research on criminal homicides and find that percentage Black, population density, income inequality, joblessness, and southern location have negligible effects. Overall, these findings suggest that the structural influences of justifiable homicide differ from those for criminal homicide.

In terms of political factors, our results also indicate a significant relationship between strength of the police and gun laws on justifiable homicide. In a departure from studies of criminal homicide, cities with greater numbers of police per capita have

**TABLE 2**  
**Negative Binomial Regression of Justifiable Homicides**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>z value</i>
Murder rate	.040*	3.522
Population size (ln)	.442*	3.872
Percentage Black	.011	1.336
Percentage aged 18 to 24	.009	0.303
Percentage not employed	.051	1.157
Population density (square root)	.010**	1.885
Income inequality	-1.896	-0.809
Percentage divorced males	.137*	2.871
South	-.222	-0.829
Police per capita	-.005*	-4.636
Concealed-carry gun laws	.393*	2.697
Intercept	-18.082*	-10.395
Log likelihood		-453.837*
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>		.090
Likelihood ratio test, alpha = 0		632.340*

NOTE: ln = natural logarithmic transformation.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .10$ .

significantly lower rates of justifiable homicide. These findings suggest that police departments have some influence of enhancing social control and limiting the incidents in which citizens must use lethal means of self-defense. In contrast, cities located in states with less restrictive concealed-carry gun laws have significantly higher rates of justifiable homicide. These findings suggest that relaxing the restrictions on concealed-carry statutes increases the incidence of legally justifiable homicide. That is, although less restrictive laws may inhibit criminal homicide (Lott, 1998), they appear to enhance legally justifiable ones.

To further examine the influence of gun laws on criminal homicide with these data, an additional analysis was conducted. The results, available from the authors, indicate that gun laws had a negative but statistically insignificant effect on criminal homicide. These results, however, should not be interpreted as refutation of the work suggesting the deterrent effects of less restrictive handgun legislation on criminal violence (Lott, 1998) because such research was conducted longitudinally using a different unit of analysis.

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The results from this research suggest some important considerations in the study of justifiable homicide. First, the social production of justifiable homicide does not appear to be the same as criminal homicide. This study found some important differences between the structural correlates of justifiable homicides and those commonly found in studies of criminal homicides. Although it appears that urban cities with a higher percentage of their male population divorced have higher rates of justifiable homicide, and these findings highlight the importance of family strife in the prevention of violence (Sampson, 1987), other theoretical measures were not found to be influential in our model. Contrary to empirical evidence in studies of criminal homicide, cities with greater aggregate income inequality, joblessness, and minority presence do not appear to engender increased rates of justifiable killings. These results depart from strain or deprivation explanations and thus suggest that these theoretical explanations of homicide might be limited to criminal actions. Second, these findings provide further support for the importance of disaggregating homicide by types and classifications (see Jacobs & Wood, 1999; K. F. Parker & Pruitt, 2000). Another important aspect of our study is that our findings suggest that justifiable homicides are more likely to respond to political influences than the economic and demographic characteristics of a given area. More important, our results reveal that police departments do play a role in limiting the incidence in which persons act in lethal defense. Like others, we find that police size may be more influential in reducing the incidence of legally justifiable killings than violent crime in general (for exceptions, see Jacobs & Wood, 1999; Sampson & Cohen, 1988). As a result, this study provides some positive evidence for the importance of the police in enforcing social control and reducing the tendency of citizens to take the law into their own hands. Yet, this study also offers a new twist in the current debate over gun control. Although gun control laws may reduce the incidence in which civilians justifiably kill, does society really want to prevent such incidents from occurring? After all, in such incidents the victim was perpetrating a crime, and the

offender committed an act of self-defense. The debate will surely continue as we are left with this important policy dilemma.

On a final note, our research suggests that a greater reliance on proactive forms of police protection is warranted in efforts to reduce justifiable homicide (see Sherman, 2000). The alternative is that residents of neighborhoods not actively patrolled by the police and/or reactive to citizen complaint may have to increasingly rely on their own means of self-protection. It is hoped that public policies that enhance effective police practices can improve public safety and reduce the occurrence of these incidents.

## NOTES

1. Although there were 196 cities in the United States with populations of more than 100,000, 8 of these cities had missing data in both the Supplementary Homicide Reports and city-level administrative factors that did not permit inclusion in the analysis. Our analysis, therefore, includes 188 cities. These 8 cities, however, are randomly distributed geographically and therefore do not impede the generalizability of our results.

2. The data utilized in this research were made available in part by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (Fox, 1996). The data are from the Supplementary Homicide Reports originally collected by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Neither the Consortium nor the collector bears any responsibility for the results or interpretations presented herein.

3. We do not calculate justifiable homicides past 1994 because changes in the violent crime rate and the economy, we think, do not merit such a long lag from the available 1990 city-level data.

4. We used the statistical program STATA version 6.0.

5. Collinearity diagnostics did not indicate a problem with multicollinearity in these measures. All variance inflation factors (VIF) fell below the conventional value of 4.0.

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