

Media coverage of stand your ground laws deters crime in some cities, but not in others

So-called ‘stand your ground laws’ – which give people the right to use deadly force to defend themselves – have now been in place for a decade. In new research which uses a Texas shooting incident as a case study, [Ling Ren](#), [Yan Zhang](#), and [Jihong “Solomon” Zhao](#) examine whether or not the publicity over shooting incidents where the law is invoked helps to deter crime – specifically residential and business burglaries. They find that such media coverage of high-profile incidents does have a deterrent effect in some nearby cities, but not in others.



Since the enactment of the first such law in Florida in 2005, [45 states](#) across the US have put laws into effect generally referred to as “[castle doctrine](#)” or “stand your ground” statutes. Deeply rooted in the common law tradition, a castle doctrine law empowers homeowners with the legal right to use force (even deadly force) to [defend themselves](#) and their families against an intruder. In March 2007, surrounded by state lawmakers, Texas Governor Rick Perry signed that state’s castle doctrine bill into law, effective the following September.



Coincidentally, in November 2007, a highly publicized shooting incident in a Houston suburban community made the castle doctrine law and the potential adverse consequences of residential burglary known to most residents in the Houston area. Joe Horn, a retired engineer, called the 911 operator, reporting that he spotted two burglars breaking into his neighbor’s home and did not want them to get away. Armed with a shotgun, Joe Horn went out of his house to confront the two burglars and subsequently killed both of them by shooting them in the back. The shooting incident sparked a media frenzy via lengthy reports by Fox News, ABC, NBC, U.S.A. Today, the Associated Press, the Daily Telegraph London, the National Post Canada, and the New Zealand Herald. For example, a search of the U.S. newspaper database revealed that there were 30 articles covering the story in *Houston Chronicle* in the month and half after the shooting incident, as well as reports on the four local TV stations and many other local newspapers in the Houston metropolitan area. In comparison, there were only 12 articles in the *Dallas Morning News* despite the fact that Dallas is only 240 miles away from Houston.



According to deterrence theory, two crucial components, certainty of detection and severity of [punishment](#), largely determine the [deterrent effect](#) of a law. In the case of the Texas castle law, the intended purposes of the law are to protect residents by granting them the right to employ deadly force to defend themselves in their “castles” when burglaries happen, and to deter the potential burglars from committing burglaries. It is important to mention that the certainty of apprehension is very low because burglary incidents involving the shooting of a burglar are [extremely rare](#). The severity of adverse outcomes, however, can be extremely serious (even deadly) for a burglar if they decide to break into a house. In this light, we argue that the Horn shooting incident can be considered as a stimulus which publicizes the potential adverse consequences of committing burglaries, as it may invoke the possibility of future punishment or bring the attention of would-be burglars to the message that they may be shot or even killed. In this regard, the general deterrence of the law may be achieved and enhanced by increasing the subjective risk of punishment among the offender groups. Thus, the number of burglaries would go down after such a law goes into effect. In the literature, the deterrence theory has often applied to the research on gun ownership and crimes, particularly burglary.



Credit: [\[puamelia\]](#) (Flickr, [CC-BY-SA-2.0](#))

We examined daily residential burglary data in Houston and between January 2007 and August 2008. The advantage of using daily burglary events is that this form of evidence is very sensitive to the two events of interest — namely, the enactment of the castle doctrine law and the subsequent Horn shooting incident. Analyzing daily data also permits greater reliability and validity in examining pre- and post-intervention effects on the change in burglary events because of the sufficient number of observations. In addition, since the application of castle doctrine law is extended to one’s business in Texas, nighttime business burglary is included in the analysis to offer additional insight into the effect of the law.

Another consideration of using nighttime business burglary is that it serves as a “control” series for the possible displacement effects, especially after the Horn shooting incident. For rational and calculative burglars, the risk of being shot and killed while burglarizing a business at night would be much lower than a residence. Thus, they may switch their targets to businesses at night due to that calculation. Both residential and business burglary data were obtained from the Houston Police Department and the Dallas Police Department. The data cover a baseline period of 243 days (eight months) before the enactment of the Texas Castle doctrine law and a follow-up period of 366 days (one year) thereafter. We used interrupted time-series analysis to assess the intervention effects of the law and the Horn shooting event on the targeted crimes in two cities.

Our most important finding is that after the Horn shooting incident, the Texas castle doctrine law began to have a significant and deterrent effect on both residential and business burglaries over the study period. In other words, the castle doctrine law itself did not produce a significant impact on burglary in Houston prior to the Horn shooting incident. This effect can be contributed to the extensive media coverage of the Horn shooting incident in Houston that helped focus considerable attention on the new law. However, the deterrent effects of the castle doctrine law and the Horn shooting were not detected in the comparison city, Dallas, Texas. It is important to note that internal validity of the results was strengthened by analyzing the pattern of daily street robbery data series during the same testing period in Houston.

This article is based on the paper, ‘The Deterrent Effect of the Castle Doctrine Law on Burglary in Texas: A Tale of Outcomes in Houston and Dallas’, in Crime & Delinquency.

Please read our comments policy before commenting.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <http://bit.ly/1SICqIq>

About the authors

Ling Ren – *Sam Houston State University*

Ling Ren is an Associate Professor in the Department of Criminal Justice & Criminology in the College of Criminal Justice at Sam Houston State University. Dr. Ren's primary research interests include policing, comparative criminal justice, and quantitative methodology. Her recent work has appeared in such journals as *Justice Quarterly*, *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, and *Crime & Delinquency*.



Yan Zhang – *Sam Houston State University*

Yan Zhang is an Associate Professor in the Department of Criminal Justice & Criminology in the College of Criminal Justice at Sam Houston State University. She specializes in quantitative research methods. Dr. Zhang has published in such journals as *Justice Quarterly*, *Crime & Delinquency*, *Journal of Criminal Justice*, and *Violence Against Women*.



Jihong "Solomon" Zhao – *Sam Houston State University*

Jihong Zhao is a Professor in the Department of Criminal Justice & Criminology in the College of Criminal Justice at Sam Houston State University. Dr. Zhao has authored, co-authored, or edited three books on community policing and contemporary policing issues. He has published more than 70 peer-reviewed journal articles.



- CC BY-NC 3.0 2015 LSE USAPP