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Criminologist: Americans Own Too Many Guns

By Lisa Cunningham

Guns are the number one crime problem in this society," says Cecil Greek, USF St. Petersburg assistant professor of criminology.



Cecil Greek

Greek describes his opinion on guns as "radical": Only the police and military should have them, but hunters could keep their rifles in an armory and get them the night before they go hunting.

However, he realizes that many responsible gun owners won't like his ideas. Greek is aware of the arguments they and the National Rifle Association use: that if more gun control laws are passed, only criminals will get guns; that guns don't kill people — people do.

"They say guns are tools, but it's a tool that has a very different use than a rake or a hoe," he says. "I don't think everyone needs them.

"People do not often use guns to protect themselves in the home." There are far more incidents of children and family members getting shot than those of people defending themselves from criminals, he maintains.

"There are a lot of responsible gun owners, who say they've never shot anybody...that's a strong point on their side," he acknowledges.

The NRA uses the Second Amendment to the United States Constitution as the basis of its arguments. That amendment reads: "A well-regulated

militia being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed."

"The NRA does not see any restrictions on gun ownership and tends to interpret the Second Amendment as an absolute right," says Michael Gibbons,

chairman of USF's department of international affairs.

When the amendment was written, the founding fathers took gun ownership for granted. Guns were needed to hunt for meat, to run a farm and to fight off Frenchmen and Native Americans.

"Militia membership was not an option," Gibbons says. "You didn't even have to register, because the government knew where you lived."

Some states have enacted tough penalties for having an unregistered gun, Gibbons says. Massachusetts has a one-year mandatory jail sentence.

Despite the passage of the Brady bill, which puts a waiting period on handgun purchases nationwide, Greek doesn't foresee any major gun control measures without "a big public outcry."

"I think there will be attempts to pass more legislation, but most of it will be like Brady — cosmetic."

Greek says the murder rates are much lower in Canada and Britain, where guns are illegal. He is adamant about reducing the U.S. murder rate.

"We'd be much safer without millions of guns." *USF*

USF War Stories

Campus officers experience a variety of assignments — from interceding with suicidal students to escorting dignitaries. A sample of incidents follows.

•On Feb. 17, 1994, a crowd of concert attendees was exiting the Special Events Center when an estranged boyfriend shot and killed his ex-girlfriend as she walked through a parking lot. The UP quickly secured the scene and began an investigation. An hour later, the suspect shot himself when stopped by Hillsborough County deputies.

•Perhaps the most horrific internal incident at USF was in August 1985, when colleagues noticed a secretary was missing in Cooper Hall after her lunchbreak. Officers combed the building and found her dead in a classroom. Within 48 hours, the UP tracked down the engineering student who battered and killed her.

•A routine traffic stop can uncover a stolen car. During one such campus incident in June 1989, six non-student passengers — one with a six-month old baby — were linked to several robberies and two shootings in the Tampa area.

•The UP received national publicity for breaking up a false ID ring in 1988. Just after the drinking age had been raised, students had created a back-drop of a Florida driver's license to be used with photos.

•In 1992, officer Frank Wasserberg heard a car horn blowing near the Psychiatry Center. He followed the sound and saved a woman who was in the car being held at knifepoint by her husband.

•One bizarre case involved catching alligator poachers at 3:00 one foggy morning in Hillsborough River State Park. Poachers were also caught at the USF golf course. *USF* -D.C.

the image of firearm accuracy in stressful situations," warns Staehle. "A bullet is indiscriminate as to what it hits or where it stops. It is a matter of physics — nothing else."

And it doesn't take a physics major to figure out that all will not block a racing bullet. A population of innocent students, faculty and staff may wait out of sight and unprotected. Combined with other collegiate variables like alcohol and flaring tempers, the consequences of one person being harmed could prove deadly.

In one September 1993 weekend, guns were drawn twice at USF.

The first incident was at the University Center, where a 80-caliber automatic handgun was fired by a freshman into a crowd of about 150 students leaving a Phi Beta Sigma party.

"It was a miracle no one was shot," says Staehle. One student was hit over the head with a bottle, knocked unconscious and kicked repeatedly during a series of fights that broke out after the shooting.

Beta Hall dormitory was the site of the second gun threat. A 21-year-old student pointed a semi-automatic gun at two other students watching TV.

A few years ago, a domestic situation erupted in the Sun Dome parking lot. A woman's ex-husband shot her in the stomach, opened fire on her boyfriend and finally killed himself. USF's police impound about 30 guns a year.

"We've definitely seen an increase in gun carriers at routine stops over the last five years," Staehle says, describing fights, disturbance reports and traffic accidents as routine.

William Blount, chairman of USF's criminology department, discourages students from carrying weapons.

"I can understand in general why people are arming themselves — it has to do with an individual's belief that law enforcement can't protect them. So, in the American way, we do it ourselves," says Blount. "But there is no reason to believe that this should be translated to campus life." *USF*

By Mark Jaronski, USF Oracle

