

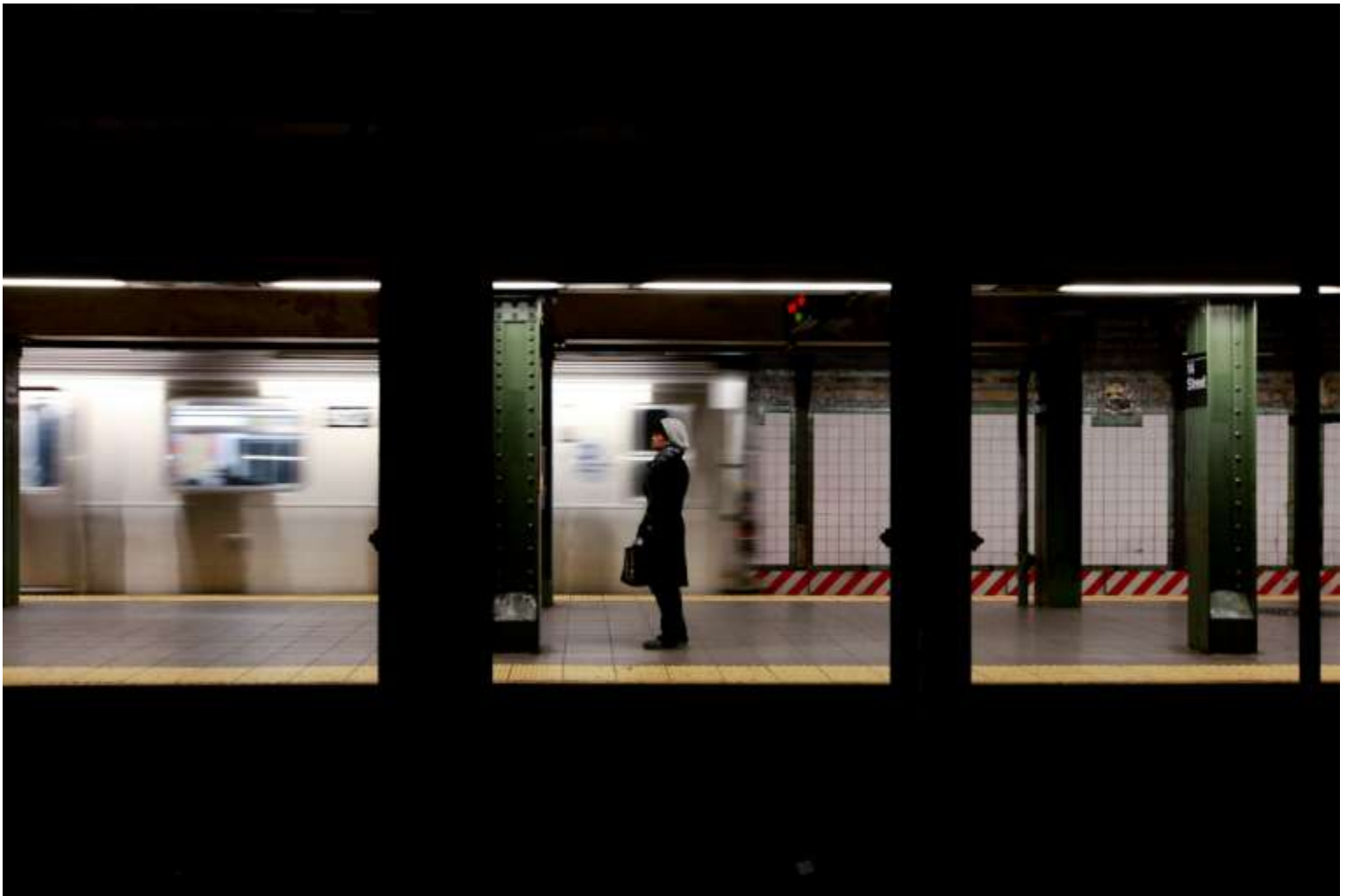
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THE BLOG

The Truth about Violence

3 Principles of Self-Defense

[Self-Defense](#) | [Violence](#) | November 5, 2011



(Photo by [Pensiero](#))

As a teenager, I once had an opportunity to fly in a police helicopter over a major American city. Naively, I thought the experience might be uneventful. Perhaps there would be no crime between 8:00 and 10:00 p.m. on a Saturday night. However, from the moment we were airborne, there was a fresh emergency every fifteen seconds: *Shots fired... rape in progress... victim stabbed...* It was a deluge. Of course, the impression this left on me was, in part, the result of a sampling

bias: I was hearing nothing but incident reports from a city of 4 million people, most of whom would never encounter violence directly. (No one calls the police to say “Everything is still okay!”) Yet it was uncanny to discover the chaos that lurked at the margins of my daily routine. A few minutes from where I might otherwise have been eating dinner, rapes, robberies, and murders were in progress..

Just as it is prudent to wear your seat belt while driving, it makes sense to know how best to respond to violence. In fact, it is overwhelmingly likely that some of you will become the targets of violence in the future. The purpose of this essay is to help you prepare for it. While I do not consider myself an expert on personal security, I know enough to have strong opinions. In my youth, I practiced martial arts for many years and eventually taught self-defense classes in college. ^[] My education included work with firearms and a variety of other weapons. I eventually stopped training and moved on to other things, but my interest in self-defense has resurfaced. It’s hard to say why. No doubt receiving occasional death threats and other strange communications has been a factor. But I think that having a family has played a much larger role. I now feel acutely responsible for the safety of those closest to me.

In my experience, most people do not want to think about the reality of human violence. I have friends who sleep with their front doors unlocked and who would never consider receiving instruction in self-defense. For them, gun ownership seems like an ugly and uncivilized flirtation with paranoia. Happily, most of these people will never encounter violence in any form. And good luck will make their unconcern seem perfectly justified.

But here are [the numbers](#): In 2010, there were 403.6 violent crimes per 100,000 persons in the United States. (The good news: This is an overall decrease of 13.4 percent from the level in 2001.) Thus, the average American has a 1 in 250 chance of being robbed, assaulted, raped, or murdered *each year*. Actually, the chance is probably greater than this, because we know that certain crimes, such as assault and rape, are underreported.

Of course, your risks vary depending on who you are and where you live. In Compton, one of the more dangerous parts of Los Angeles, your chances of experiencing violent crime in 2010 were 1 in 71; if you lived in Beverly Hills they were 1 in 458. Still, even in good neighborhoods, the likelihood of being attacked is hardly remote. In the comparative safety of Beverly Hills, assuming the crime rate stays constant, the probability that you will be robbed, assaulted, raped or murdered at some point over the next 30 years is 1 in 16. (The average risk in the U.S. is 1 in 9; in Compton it’s better than 1 in 3.) Again, these statistics surely paint too rosy a picture, because many crimes go unreported.

It may seem onerous to prepare yourself and your family to respond to violence, but not doing so is also a form of preparation. Failing to prepare is, generally speaking, preparing very well to do the wrong thing. Although most of us are good at recognizing danger, our instincts often lead us to behave in ways that increase our chances of being injured or killed once a threat emerges.

Why can't civilized people like ourselves simply rely on the police? Well, look around you: Do you see a cop? Unless you happen to be a police officer yourself, or are married to one, you are very unlikely to be attacked in the presence of law enforcement. The role of the police is to respond in the aftermath of a crime and, with a little luck, to catch the person who committed it. If you are ever targeted by a violent predator, whether you and your family are injured or killed will depend on what you do in the first moments of the encounter. When it comes to survival, therefore, you are on your own. Once you escape and are in a safe place, by all means call the police. But dialing 911 when an intruder has broken into your home is not a reliable strategy for self-defense.^[1]2

However, instruction in self-defense need not consume your life. The most important preparations are mental. While I certainly recommend that you receive some physical training, merely understanding the dynamics of violence can make you much safer than you might otherwise be.

Principle #1: Avoid dangerous people and dangerous places.

The primary goal of self-defense is to avoid becoming the victim of violence. The best way to do this is to not be where violence is likely to occur. Of course, that's not always possible—but without question, it is your first and best line of defense. If you visit dangerous neighborhoods at night, or hike alone and unarmed on trails near a big city, or frequent places where drunken young men gather, you are running some obvious risks.

I once knew an experienced martial artist who decided to walk across Central Park late at night. He was aware of the danger, but he thought "I have a black belt in karate. Why shouldn't I be able to walk wherever I want?" As it happened, this rhetorical question was answered almost immediately: My friend hadn't ventured more than a hundred yards into the darkness of the park before he was confronted by three men, one of whom plunged a hypodermic needle into his thigh without a word. Our hero bolted and escaped, otherwise unharmed, but he spent the next three months wondering whether he had been infected with HIV, hepatitis, or some other blood-borne disease. (He was fine.) The lesson: Whatever your training, you needn't be foolish.

Similarly, all men should learn to recognize and shun status-seeking displays of aggression. This is one problem that women generally don't have to worry about. It is, for instance, very rare for a woman to find herself party to an exchange like this:

"What are you looking at, asshole?"

"Who are you calling an asshole?"

"You, *bitch*. What are you going to do about it?"

Nevertheless, young men are easily lured into social dominance games from which neither party can find a face-saving exit. The violence that erupts at such moments is as unnecessary as it is predictable. If you want to preserve your health and stay out of prison, you must learn to avoid or defuse conflict of this kind.

When a conflict turns physical, there is always a risk that someone will be severely injured or killed. Imagine spending a year or more in prison because you couldn't resist punching some bully who dearly deserved it, but who then hit his head on a fire hydrant and died from a brain injury. As a matter of law, the moment you engage in avoidable violence of this

kind—rising to a challenge and escalating the conflict—you lose any legal claim to self-defense. Rather, you were *fighting*—which is illegal—and in this case you accidentally killed your opponent. You are now likely to get more practice fighting in prison. (Meanwhile, the costs of your criminal defense, and perhaps a subsequent civil lawsuit, could easily bankrupt you.) Take this maxim to heart: *Self-defense is not about winning fights with aggressive men who probably have less to lose than you do.* ^[] 3

Another principle is lurking here that should be made explicit: *Never threaten your opponent.* The purpose of his verbal challenge was to get you to respond in such a way as to make him feel justified in attacking you. You shouldn't collaborate in this process or advertise your readiness to defend yourself. Even if violence seems unavoidable, and you decide to strike preemptively, you should do so from a seemingly unaggressive posture, retaining the element of surprise. (This requires training.) Putting up your dukes and agreeing to fight has no place in a self-defense repertoire. ^[] 4

Thus, whatever ego problems or impulse-control issues you have should be worked out ahead of time. You should forget about saving face while recognizing that if you ever find yourself in a social-dominance contest you will probably feel a deep urge to say or do the wrong thing. ^[] 5 Deciding on an appropriate course of action in advance is your best protection against being dangerously stupid in the heat of the moment. The challenge for every man is to decline to play an ancient game whose rules and imperatives have been inscribed in his very cells. If you want to avoid unnecessary violence, you must keep your inner ape on a very short leash.

“What are you looking at, asshole?”

“Sorry, man. I was just spacing out. It's been a long day.”

De-escalate and move on.

You should also learn to trust your feelings of apprehension about other people—revising them only slowly and with good reason. This may seem like a very depressing piece of advice. It is. Most of us don't want to see the world this way, and we take great pains to avoid being rude or appearing racist, suspicious, etc. But violent predators invariably play upon this commitment to civility. The truth is that most of us are very good at detecting ulterior motives and malevolence in others. We must learn to trust these intuitions. To read the reports of rapes, murders, kidnappings and other violent crimes is to continually discover how easily good people can be manipulated by bad ones.

You are under no obligation, for instance, to give a stranger who has rung your doorbell, or decided to stand unusually close to you on the street, the benefit of the doubt. If a man who makes you uncomfortable steps onto an elevator with you, step off. If a man approaches you while you are sitting in your car and something about him doesn't seem right, you don't need to roll down your window and have a conversation. Victims of crime often sense that something is wrong in the first moments of encountering their attackers but feel too socially inhibited to create the necessary distance and escape.

Principle #2: Do not defend your property.

Whatever your training, you should view any invitation to violence as an opportunity to die—or to be sent to prison for killing another human being. Violence must truly be the last resort. Thus, if someone sticks a gun in your face and demands your wallet, you should hand it over without hesitation—and run.

If you look out your kitchen window and see a group of youths destroying your car, you should remain inside and call the police. It doesn't matter if you happen to be a Navy Seal who keeps a loaded shotgun by the front door. You don't want to kill a teenager for vandalism, and you don't want to get shot by one for hesitating to pull the trigger. Unless you or another person is being physically harmed, or an attack seems imminent, avoiding violence should be your only concern.

Principle #3: Respond immediately and escape.

If you have principles 1 and 2 firmly installed in your brain, any violence that finds you is, by definition, unavoidable. There is a tremendous power in knowing this: When you find yourself without other options, you are free to respond with full commitment.

This is the core principle of self-defense: *Do whatever you can to avoid a physical confrontation, but the moment avoidance fails, attack explosively for the purposes of escape*—not to mete out justice, or to teach a bully a lesson, or to apprehend a criminal. Your goal is to get away with minimum trauma (to you), while harming your attacker in any way that seems necessary to ensure your escape. ^[] 6

If you find yourself in such a situation, you should assume that your opponent is a career criminal who has victimized many others before you. ^[] 7 Do not waste an instant imagining that you can reason with him. Most victims of violence are so terrified of being injured or killed that they will believe any promise a predator makes. It is not difficult to see why.

Imagine: You are loading groceries into your car and man appears at your side with a gun.

“Get in the car, and you won't get hurt.”

Your instincts are probably bad here: Getting in the car is the last thing you should do.

“Get in the car, or I'll blow your head off.”

However bad your options may appear in the moment, complying with the demands of a person who is seeking to control your movements is a terrible idea. Yes, there are criminals whose only goal is to steal your property. But anyone who attempts to control you—by moving you to another room, putting you in a car, tying you up—probably intends to kill you (or worse). And you must understand in advance that your natural reaction to this situation—to freeze, to comply with instructions—will be the wrong one.

If someone puts a gun to your head and demands your purse or wallet, hand it over immediately and run. Don't worry about being shot in the back: If your attacker is going to shoot you for running, he was going to shoot you if you stayed in place, and at point-blank range. By running, you make yourself harder to kill. Any attempt to move you, even by a few feet—backing you off a sidewalk and into an alley, forcing you behind a row of bushes—is unacceptable and should mobilize all your physical and emotional resources. ^[] [8](#)

If you find yourself in a situation where a predator is trying to control you, the time for listening to instructions and attempting to remain calm has passed. It will get no easier to resist and escape after these first moments. The presence of weapons, the size or number of your attackers—these details are irrelevant. However bad the situation looks, it will only get worse. To hesitate is to put yourself at the mercy of a sociopath. You have no alternative but to explode into action, whatever the risk. *Recognizing when this line has been crossed, and committing to escape at any cost, is more important than mastering physical techniques.*

Herein lies a crucial distinction between traditional martial arts and realistic self-defense: Most martial artists train for a “fight.” Opponents assume ready stances, just out of each other's range, and then practice various techniques or spar (engage in controlled fighting). This does not simulate real violence. It doesn't prepare you to respond effectively to a sudden attack, in which you have been hit before you even knew you were threatened, and it doesn't teach you to strike preemptively, without telegraphing your moves, once you have determined that an attack is imminent.

Whatever your physical skills, when you commit to using force against another person, your overriding goal is still *to escape*. Even if you are at home, in possession of a firearm, and well trained to use it, when confronted by an intruder your best defense is to get out of the house as quickly as possible. In such a circumstance, a gun is a means of ensuring that no one can block your exit. ^[] [9](#)

Nothing good ever comes to people who allow themselves to be moved to a remote location at the mercy of a violent predator. The police call such places “secondary crime scenes.” They are always better for the attacker and worse for his victim because they are more isolated than the first point of contact. And although your home may be the most familiar place on earth to you, the moment an intruder enters, it becomes the equivalent of a secondary crime scene. You should also expect that any criminal who breaks into your home when you're inside it has come prepared to murder you and your family. To naive readers, this may sound like an extraordinarily paranoid assumption. It isn't. Mere burglars generally make sure a house is empty before breaking in.

If a window shatters in the middle of the night and someone comes through it, your life is on the line. There is nothing to talk about, no offer of cash or jewelry to muster, no demands worth listening to. You must do whatever it takes to escape.

One of the most common and disturbing features of home invasions is how the victims' concern for one another and desire to stay together is inevitably used against them. By exploiting these bonds, even a single attacker can immobilize an entire family. By merely holding a knife to the wife's throat, he can get the husband to submit to being tied up. Again, it is perfectly natural for victims in these circumstances to hope that if they just cooperate, their attacker will show them mercy. If you get nothing else from this article, engrave this iron law on your mind: *The moment it is clear that an assailant wants more than your property (which must be assumed in any home invasion), you must escape.*

What if your attacker has a knife to your child's throat and tells you that everything is going to be okay as long as you

cooperate by lying face down on the floor? Don't do it. It would be better to flee the house—because as soon as you leave, he will know that the clock is ticking: Within moments, you will be at a neighbor's home summoning help. If this intruder is going to murder your child before fleeing himself, he was going to murder your child anyway—either before or after he killed you. And he was going to take his time doing it. Granted, it is almost impossible to imagine leaving one's child in such a circumstance—but if you can't leave, you must grab a weapon and press your own attack. Complying in the hope that a sociopath will keep his promise to you is always the wrong move.

Here is how the police look at it:

From a cop's point of view, citizens seem to keep making the same mistakes over and over, until all cases begin to sound alike.... The objective of a violent criminal is to control you, emotionally and physically. Everything he does—his threats and promises—is intended to terrify and control you. The more control you give to the violent criminal, even if you see it as temporary, the less likely you are to escape. For most crime victims, their temporary cooperation backfired into full control over them. Time works against the victim and for the criminal. The longer you stall, the more you talk, the deeper you sink.

(S. Strong. *Strong on Defense*. pp. 49-50).

True self-defense is based not on techniques but on principles. Yes, it is good to know how to deliver a palm strike or elbow to a person's head with real power (technique), but it is far more important to know when to unleash with whatever tools you have for the purpose of immediate escape (principle). You must install a trigger in your mind—to act explosively once a certain line has been crossed—and you must understand that your inclination will most likely be to freeze and acquiesce, in the hope of avoiding injury or death. Mental preparation is a matter of resolving, in advance, to burst past these inhibitions and escape immediately, or fight with everything you've got until escape is possible.

Certain scenarios are intrinsically confusing and should be discussed with your family in advance: What if a person dressed as a police officer comes to your door and asks to be let in? Unless you are absolutely certain that he is a cop—e.g. you can see that he arrived in a marked police car—you should explain that you have no way of knowing who he is and then call the police yourself. Thousands of crimes are committed each year by people impersonating cops. (Anyone can buy a uniform and a badge over the Internet.) Similarly, many home invasions begin with a criminal's acting like a person in distress: A woman or a teenager might come to your door reporting an accident or some other emergency. Again, the safe move is to keep your door locked and call the police.

Finally, you do not need to learn hundreds of techniques to become proficient in the physical aspects of self-defense. Rather, you should train a small number of skills nearly to the point of reflex. Although you cannot do this by simply reading books or watching videos, I have recommended a few resources below that will help you start thinking along practical lines.

It is unpleasant to study the details of crime and violence—and for this reason many of us never do. I am convinced, however, that some planning and preparation can greatly reduce a person's risk. And though there are exceptions to every rule, I don't believe that there are important exceptions to the advice I have given here. May you never have occasion to find

it useful.

Recommended Reading

G. de Becker, [The Gift of Fear](#).

R. Miller, [Meditations on Violence](#).

R. Miller, [Facing Violence](#).

S. Strong, [Strong on Defense](#).

G. Thompson, [The Fence](#).

G. Thompson, [Dead or Alive](#).

People who appear to know what they are talking about:

Tony Blauer: <http://www.tonyblauer.com/>

Marc MacYoung: <http://nonnonsenseselfdefense.com/>

Rory Miller: <http://chirontraining.com/Site/Home.html>

Lee Morrison: <http://www.urbancombatives.com/>

Geoff Thompson: <http://www.geoffthompson.com>

Notes

1. There are important differences between effective self-defense training and most martial arts. Training to fight for sport or to master a traditional fighting system, no matter how impressive its techniques, is not the same as training to survive real-world violence. For instance, most students and fans of mixed martial arts (MMA) know that Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu is the gold standard for fighting on the ground. However, a preference for fighting on the ground is a major liability in the real world. An approach that often works brilliantly in MMA makes no sense when one's goal is to end an encounter quickly and escape, when there are no rules to prevent an attacker from gouging your eyes or using a weapon, or when a second assailant arrives and begins kicking you in the head. Of course, it is essential to know what to do on the ground if you ever find yourself there—and for this, Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu is a perfect tool. But from the perspective of self-defense, you want to remain standing and mobile if given the chance. **[NOTE to the note:** I have received a fair amount of grief for this note from BJJ practitioners who misunderstood it. I think BJJ is awesome--which is why I am now training in it. And if you find yourself on the ground, it is exactly what you want to know. I did not mean to suggest that BJJ practitioners were unaware of the liability of being on the ground in a self-defense situation, nor was I denying that many fights (even most) go the ground eventually. However, I am claiming that the first tool you want in your self-defense arsenal (beyond

awareness and avoidance) is to be able to strike hard with good targeting from a seemingly unaggressive posture (e.g. "the fence"). Hit first, fast, and hard--and run. If this plan fails, and your opponent grabs you, BJJ is brilliant.--SHJ

There are also important distinctions between how men and women need to think about the threat of violence. Women are almost never the targets of social-dominance games of the sort I describe here. Rather, they must worry about rapists and other true predators. (For the purposes of this article, I ignore the subject of domestic violence.) And women's attackers often outweigh them by fifty or a hundred pounds. These facts make their security concerns both more pressing and less ambiguous.

- The clear exception to this rule is if you happen to have a "safe room"—a fortified room in your house equipped with a phone line that cannot be cut (or a cell phone). Of course, very few people have one. [Note 8/20/15: An analysis of 27, 595 violent crimes revealed that fewer than 2 percent of victims were injured after they had resisted their attacker (and fewer than 0.5 percent were seriously injured). Of crimes in which a victim resisted and was injured, only 10 percent involved injury after the point of resistance. The idea that resistance provokes attackers, increasing the likelihood of victim injury or death, does not fit the data. As the authors of this study wrote, "Once victims resist, the probability that they will suffer any further injury drops almost to zero, regardless of type of crime or resistance." The rate of injury among victims who do not resist was 18.5 percent. It's true that this study found that calling the police was as good as resisting with a weapon (and better than resisting without one), but the authors acknowledge an obvious confound: Confrontations in which victims had the opportunity to call the police (perhaps due to the security provided by a locked door) might have been far less dangerous than those in which they had to resort to more active forms of resistance. It should also be noted that pretending to cooperate, or merely screaming from pain or fear, increased the risk of injury to the victim. See [J.Y. Tark & G. Kleck. 2004.](#)--SHJ
- It is also worth remembering that you can't assess another person's fighting skills just by looking at him. I've trained with some very scary looking guys who didn't know much of anything and hit with very little power. And I have known men who were small and seemingly out of shape but were absolute killers. A word to the macho: You do not know who you are talking to—and you don't know if he is armed.
- Other principles follow from this. If you carry a weapon, you should never draw it to threaten your assailant in the hope that he will back down. As Rory Miller points out, if such a threat display fails, it almost guarantees that you will have to use the weapon, or it will be used against you. (And if you threaten with a weapon, the other person can claim to be acting in self-defense.) Therefore, reach for a weapon only if you are prepared to use it and believe you would be justified in doing so.
- Strangely, carrying a weapon can make it much easier to ignore provocations of this kind. If you are armed, you cannot afford to be lured into casual altercations, no matter how obnoxious your opponent. The impulse to save face easily yields to a deeper form of self-interest: With a weapon, you simply must avoid conflict unless you are given no choice.
- Admittedly, there are some gray areas here. If you are very experienced and attacked by a much smaller man who appears to be unarmed, you might decide to modulate your initial response and give him a chance to realize that he has picked the wrong target. But even here, if you have followed principles 1 and 2, the onus is on your attacker, and it is only prudent to assume that he is armed, or that he may have friends in the vicinity.
- As of 2009, violent offenders in the U.S. served an average of 52 months in prison before being returned to the streets. For murderers the average was 118 months; for rapists it was 94 months ([BJS.gov](#)). Why genuine murderers and rapists are ever released is a mystery to me—and if we didn't have to make room in our prisons for graduate students caught selling MDMA, perhaps we could keep true predators off our streets. To make matters worse, a [Canadian study](#) found that psychopaths are 2.5 times as likely as ordinary criminals to be released from prison--because they successfully con parole boards. And the re-arrest rate for violent offenders is over 60 percent within three years. This paints a rather terrifying picture of our collective masochism: We do not keep dangerous criminals off our streets; rather, we have turned our prisons into graduate schools for predatory violence, and we release their graduates back into society, knowing that most will continue harming innocent people.
- If you are present while a place of business is being robbed and you cannot immediately escape, it makes sense to obey orders—to freeze, to get down on the floor—because the focus is not on you. Most robbers just want to get the

money from the register and run. However, if they begin taking hostages or shooting people, you should immediately do whatever it takes to escape. Better to dive through a plate-glass window than to allow yourself to be herded to the back of the store. Many scenarios of this kind are discussed in the books I recommend here.

- Again, this is provided you don't have a "safe room." Gun tactics are beyond the scope of this essay, but here are a few points to know: You should never attempt to clear your house of intruders yourself. That is a job for the police, and they will probably use five officers with body armor and other specialized equipment to do it. You should also be aware that the interior walls of a home do not stop bullets (and criminals know this). Unless you can get to a fortified position that allows for continuous phone communication with the police, defending in place might entail more risk than attempting to exit the building.

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