

FBI: Justifiable homicides at highest in more than a decade

By Kevin Johnson, USA TODAY 10 14 08

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The number of justifiable homicides committed by police and private citizens has been rising in the past two years to their highest levels in more than a decade, reflecting a shoot-first philosophy in dealing with crime, say law enforcement analysts. The 391 killings by police that were ruled justifiable in 2007 were the most since 1994, FBI statistics show. The 254 killings by private individuals found to be self-defense were the most since 1997.

The FBI says a homicide committed by a private citizen is justified when a person is slain during the commission of a felony, such as a burglary or robbery. Police are justified, the FBI says, when felons are killed while the officer is acting in the line of duty. Rulings on these deaths are usually made by the local police agencies involved.

Some law enforcement analysts say the numbers represent changing attitudes on the streets, where police have felt more threatened by well-armed offenders, and citizens have taken greater responsibility for their own safety.

Northeastern University criminal justice professor James Alan Fox describes an emerging "shoot-first" mentality by police and private citizens. For several years, police departments have armed their officers with higher-powered weapons to keep pace with criminal gangs. "Clearly there is a message out there that citizens may be able to defend themselves" as well, he says.

Alfred Blumstein, a Carnegie Mellon University criminologist, says the gun "legalization movement" also may have helped create a "greater willingness" among citizens to act in self-defense.

Forty-eight states provide various rights to carry firearms. Illinois and Wisconsin do not, according to the National Rifle Association. In a landmark decision, the Supreme Court in June carved out a right to individual gun ownership, ruling that the Second Amendment allows citizens to keep guns in their homes for self-defense.

The NRA and other analysts say most laws allowing gun possession have existed for years and would not likely account for a recent spike in self-defense killings.

Instead, Wayne LaPierre, the NRA's executive vice president and chief executive officer, says the Sept. 11 attacks and the widespread looting and violence after Hurricane Katrina spurred some people to take more responsibility for their own safety.

Immediately after those events, LaPierre says the group's gun-safety trainers reported "big increases" in NRA-sponsored courses. "Americans are simply refusing to be victims," he says.

Florida State University criminologist Gary Kleck says the FBI underestimates self-defense killings by citizens because the ones that are not precipitated by felony crimes may not get counted. "Less than a third of (citizen killings) are reported," he says.