There’s no question that demand for weapons – and people want the deadliest weapon they can get when they’re afraid – is fuelled by insecurity. If you’re afraid at home, you’re afraid on the street, you’re going to want a weapon to protect yourself. That’s the short term. But there’s also a long term insecurity phenomenon that’s been very well studied in the United States and now we’re starting to really understand it around the world. This is what some people call the “cultures of violence” or more appropriate term “cultures of honor.” Cultures of honor are the vendetta cultures, the places where revenge is exacted very harshly, and these arise historically from groups that had weak states and low security as a way of living as a tradition. So in the English speaking world, well it’s us Scots from the mountains who hold these kinds of beliefs. In Africa it’s nomadic groups generally. And the common thread is a historical tradition of no clear legal title to land, and no strong state system to maintain the order in the community. So people have to take the law into their own hands, and they have to develop a reputation that they’re dangerous. And so if you mess with them, you know, they’re going to kill you. This is obviously epitomized in the United States in the concept the cowboy, and the cowboy culture. “Wanted dead or alive,” and “shoot first and ask questions later,” and this whole phenomenon that has been perpetuated by mass media. You might be interested to know that when film makers write a script for a film about young black men in the city, they go to old western films from 50 years ago, and they change the sheriff to the drug dealer, and the sheriff’s wife becomes the drug dealer’s wife. Do you follow what I mean? And it’s all vendetta. It’s vendetta and honor and respect. The same cowboy way of thinking being transmitted cross-culturally if you will.

What we’ve begun to develop some measures of these ways of thinking. It’s a very complex topic but one fairly straight-forward is the acceptance of killing in conflict resolution, whether someone is stealing your automobile or stealing your gold chain as a young man in the city once told me in Houston – “if someone yanks my chain I’ll juke them.” What that means is if they try to take his gold chain he’ll take his knife and stab them because that person’s life is not worth as much as his chain. Another example of a question that measures this is if you ask people “Would you approve if someone kills a person who has raped their child?” This is the ultimate dishonor, and in the cultures of honor people will not only say yes, they’ll say in fact he would not be a real man unless he avenged the rape of the child with death. So this is the kind of way of thinking.
another one that you find in insecure societies is the acceptance of killing of criminals, the extra-judicial killing that we see in Colombia, we see all around the world. We survey that by asking people “Would you approve is someone begins killing the criminals in your community?” And we find variation obviously in agreements with that statement. What we’ve found and what this slide shows – and this is really only pilot work that we’re developing and continuing – but we’re explaining about 50% of the variance in homicide rates across 15 countries so far that we have fairly good data on with attitudes toward killing. 80 is the mid-point on our attitude towards killing scale. As it goes higher, a higher score means you’re not willing to kill. A lower score means you’re more willing to kill, or to accept killing. As you can see there’s a pretty good relationship there. If you factor in the GINI index – many of you must be familiar with the fact that the General Index of National Inequalities explains about 30% of the variance in homicide rates.

In Texas, and here are the actual questions, and you can see the distribution we have in Texas. For example, “Does a person have the right to kill to defend their property?” That means that if someone is coming into your house to steal your television, can you shoot them, is it right? And it’s not so much a legal issue as an ethical issue that’s decided by the jury. Anyway I won’t go into stories on this, we’ve got plenty of them. As you can see, 30% of men and women – by the way there are huge gender differences in these, huge. You have to take the mean for men and the mean for women average that – but as you can see 37% believe you have the right to kill. This is predicting whether they own a gun, whether the gun is used for self-protection. So we have twice as many people have a gun for self-protection if they hold this belief than if they don’t. It’s influencing how they store the gun. As a very close friend of mine who lives one block away said, “why would I want to lock up my gun? If someone gets in my garage I’m going to need it right away. And the very idea of locking my gun up is crazy to me.” This is a close friend by the way. It’s also predicting the opposition to regulations. So we had a lot of publicity about this last year in Texas, these data. Actually the headline was “Survey Shows Gun Owners Split on Regulation.” The point we were making was that there’s two kinds of gun owners. There’s the hunters, whose guns are locked up, who some of us may not like what they do but they’re not going to shoot a human being. It’s very unlikely that they will. Then there’s the others who are ready to kill to defend their home, or to any threat that they might perceive even in the neighborhood. They’ll go carrying their gun out. That’s actually a minority of gun owners, so the National Rifle Association was really after us. They said, “when you’re trying to defeat someone, first you try to divide them. And that’s what these people are trying to do, divide the gun owners.”

So part of this is media advocacy and helping the public understand more clearly what’s driving demand for guns and how the division in the battle isn’t really between the gun owners and those who don’t own guns, but rather between values about killing. We’re
also doing experiments. We did first with a grant from the Carnegie Foundation a small experiment in Houston on propaganda about killing. And basically what we found were we got what we called “role models” who might have accepted killing at one point in their life – these are very young people – and now do not accept killing. And we presented them in television, news stories, mass media, newsletters, in the classroom. And we found that we were able, well for example among the boys – at baseline, 70% of the boys believe you have the right to kill to defend your property. After our intervention it’s all the way down to 50%. So, in public health that’s great actually, that level of change. So that’s what we’re doing in the demand research and demand reduction area.

I just want to add one other thing. We’re also studying demand for military weapons and the factors that make Americans and others want stronger military and higher defense spending. Of course it’s especially relevant today. We’re doing a national survey and 50% of Americans wanted to increase defense spending last month. 80% want to increase defense spending now. We’ve been studying the psychology of that and if any of you would like to look at it you can visit a website, www.peacetest.org I urge you to do that.