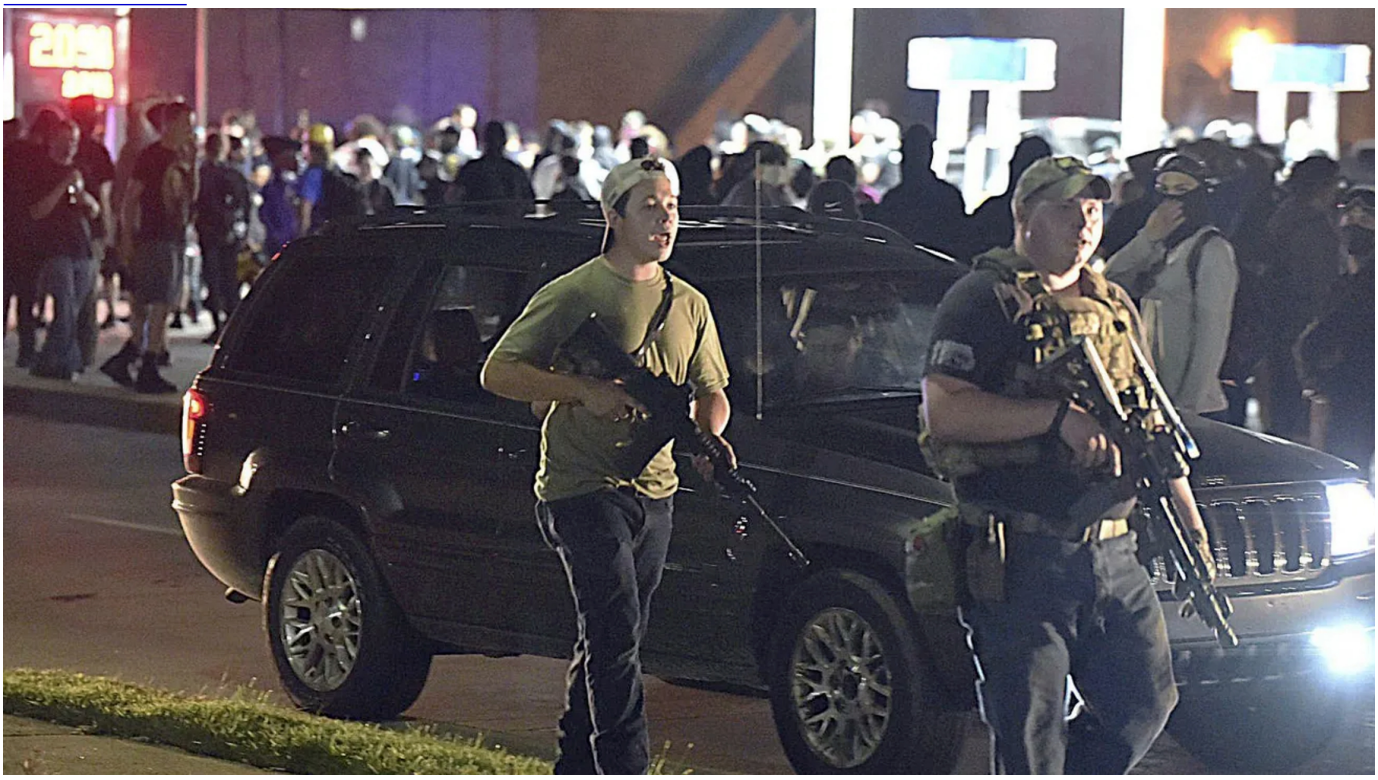
News
NCR Voices



Kyle Rittenhouse, left, walks along Sheridan Road in Kenosha, Wisconsin, Tuesday, Aug. 25, 2020, with another armed civilian. (Adam Rogan/The Journal Times via AP)



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Recent high-profile murder cases in Georgia and Wisconsin show that America's love affair with guns is overwhelming the ability of our laws to protect its citizens.

In Georgia, we saw three white men chasing down Ahmaud Arbery, an unarmed Black jogger whom they suspected of burglary. The chase inevitably ended in gunshots, and murder. The vigilantes portrayed themselves as heroes making a citizen's arrest, though it was an obvious case of racial profiling, without any evidence to back up their suspicions.

There was no emergency, no crime taking place, no stolen property evident. No lives were in danger until they got involved. They could have notified the police of their suspicions and left him to the criminal justice system.

Instead, they created a problem, then claimed self-defense when the victim tried to defend himself.

In Wisconsin, Kyle Rittenhouse has been labeled a hero because he wandered the streets of Kenosha at age 17 with an AR-15-style semiautomatic rifle, illegally purchased for him because he was underage, to protect property from those protesting the shooting of a Black man, Jacob Blake, by a white Kenosha police officer.

He was warmly welcomed by police, who should have told him to go home. Instead, the wannabe security guard got into a scuffle that resulted in two men being killed and a third wounded by him. The jury believed his claim of self-defense and he is scot-free.

Rittenhouse was not even prosecuted for possession of a dangerous firearm because the judge ruled that the semiautomatic was exempt under the Wisconsin law forbidding minors from carrying dangerous weapons because the barrel was more

than 16 inches long.

Legal experts note that under the judge’s interpretation of the law, Rittenhouse could have been convicted if he had brass knuckles, but not a semiautomatic. Whether the law was poorly written or poorly interpreted, I will leave to legal scholars.

The judge also forbade referring to those shot as “victims” but allowed them to be referred to as looters, rioters, arsonists or any other pejorative term. The latter seems unreasonable, since none of those shot were charged with a crime, let alone convicted.

Meanwhile, 19-year-old Dominick Black, who bought the rifle for Rittenhouse, has been charged with two counts of providing a firearm to a minor, resulting in death. How Rittenhouse’s acquittal will affect Black’s trial is uncertain.

There are several similarities in the cases in Georgia and Wisconsin.

First, both shooters saw themselves as heroes protecting others from criminals.

Vigilante justice is a theme that has been exhaustively idolized in Hollywood films. It is part of the American male psyche, as inculcated by Hollywood, that a real man has an obligation to beat up and sometimes kill bad guys. Violence is OK when used against those breaking the law.

This is not the “liberal” Hollywood condemned by conservatives. It is the Hollywood that knows there is money to be made on movies that portray heroes taking the law into their own hands when the criminal justice system fails to deal with crime.

To counter this narrative, liberals must support the arrest and prosecution of vandals and looters who use legitimate demonstrations as a cover for their crimes.

Second, both Rittenhouse's and the Georgia men's first thought was to pick up a gun, rather than an alternative. Instead of reaching for their firearms, they should have reached for their cellphones.

The Georgia men should have called 911 and reported their suspicions, as they did in the past. They could have offered to follow the “suspect” until the police arrived. They could have asked the police for advice before approaching the jogger.

They did none of these things. Instead, they grabbed their guns and went Rambo.

Likewise, Rittenhouse could have used his cellphone to photograph anyone committing vandalism or any other crime and then given the pictures to the police to be used as evidence in an arrest and trial.

Instead, he put himself with a straw-purchased gun in the middle of a chaotic situation for which he had no training.

Third, the cases show the toxic mix of inadequate laws governing guns, citizen arrest and self-defense.

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The U.S. Supreme Court is currently reviewing a New York law restricting the carrying of handguns outside the home. The judges appear ready to overturn the law although even some conservative "originalists" — who argue the Constitution should be interpreted using the views of the founders — say the law is constitutional because there were laws regulating carrying guns in public in Colonial times.

Laws covering citizen arrest should be repealed or severely restrained. Such actions have proved to be too dangerous. The first rule of self-defense, meanwhile, should be to stay away from trouble.

Now that Rittenhouse has been acquitted, the next step could easily be confrontations between armed vigilantes and armed demonstrators. The former will claim to be protecting the public and the latter will be prepared to defend themselves.

Finally, racism played a role in both cases.

It's difficult to imagine that Arbery would have been pursued if he were white, or that Rittenhouse would not have been confronted, if not shot, by Kenosha police if he were a Black teenager with a semiautomatic.

In other words, the killings would not have happened if the races were reversed.

America sacramentalizes guns. They are God’s gift to the good and just to protect our way of life. This is heresy.

According to the Brady Center, 316 people are shot every day in the United States, of whom 106 die. One hundred and thirty-four are shot intentionally on a daily basis, of whom 39 die. Each day, self-inflicted gunshots account for 74 shootings, with only 10 people in those cases surviving. Accidental shootings involve 91 people, one of whom dies every day.

This is a high price to pay for our love affair with guns. Rather, we should listen to Isaiah, who tells us during Advent that in the redeemed Jerusalem, “They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.”