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A WOMAN IN A BAR is accosted by a man who offers to buy her a drink and will not take no for an answer. She leaves the bar, but he follows her into the dark, deserted parking lot, talking about her body and what he'd like to do with it. She removes a handgun from her purse and demands that he leave her alone. Instead he lunges toward her, and she fires.

Was firing the gun justified? Could the woman instead have run to her car, hoping to get in, lock the door and get away before this predator closed the distance between them? The premise underlying "stand-your-ground" laws is that forcing victims to answer that kind of question is fundamentally unfair.

Such laws, which about a dozen states have adopted (some recently, others decades ago), abolish the "duty to retreat" outside the home, allowing someone attacked in a public place to meet force with force rather than flee.

The moral justification for this reform is straightforward: Since turning your back on an attacker can be dangerous, it is wrong for police, prosecutors and jurors to second-guess a victim's life-or-death decision to resist rather than run in the face of unprovoked violence.

For example, George Zimmerman claims Trayvon Martin knocked him down and had him pinned to the ground, his hand moving toward Zimmerman's gun, when Zimmerman shot and killed him. Although Zimmerman's shooting of Martin triggered a national debate about the merits of Florida-style self-defense statutes, the right to stand your ground is irrelevant in that case since, by Zimmerman's account, he had no opportunity to get away. The duty to retreat would not have applied.

Furthermore, under laws in many other states, someone who claims to have used deadly force in self-defense still must present evidence that he reasonably believed such force was necessary "to prevent death or great bodily harm." Since that belief must be reasonable, it is not true that the law gives paranoid or panicky people a license to kill. Instead, it revokes a prosecutor's license to treat victims like criminals. ❧



**Christopher W. Brown** is the communications director for the Second Chance Campaign ([www.secondchancecampaign.org](http://www.secondchancecampaign.org)), which is asking lawmakers to take a second look at gun policies in their state.

STAND-YOUR-GROUND laws invite people to shoot first and ask questions later. Since Florida enacted the first stand-your-ground law in 2005, about a dozen other states have followed suit—to dangerous effect.

People have always had a right to use force—even deadly force—to protect themselves or their homes. However, people had a duty to retreat and avoid trouble if they could safely get away. Without the duty to retreat, everyday confrontations in bars, on the highway, even in parks and playgrounds, can—and do—easily escalate into deadly force. And perpetrators may avoid arrest and prosecution simply by asserting they acted in self-defense.

Stand-your-ground laws actually give more leeway to aggressors on our streets than the U.S. military gives to our soldiers in war. The U.S. military's rules of engagement outline what soldiers can and can't do to protect themselves from deadly threats in war zones. The bottom line of the rules of engagement is that it is always preferable to de-escalate potentially violent situations before someone is killed. The new stand-your-ground laws abandon that de-escalation principle. A Floridian, for example, is allowed not only to use a gun, knife or some other deadly weapon first—but to use it more quickly than a member of the U.S. military would in a war zone.

The new stand-your-ground laws have also led to increases in violence and in the number of perpetrators who go unpunished. Since Florida enacted its "shoot-first" law in 2005, justifiable homicides have tripled in the state. According to two recent studies conducted by Texas A&M University and Georgia State University, states with stand-your-ground laws have experienced an increase in all types of homicides—an additional 500 to 700 homicides per year nationally.

Now that we know the harmful effects of these dangerous laws, state legislators should be taking a second look at the laws and reforming them. Law enforcement, prosecutors and more than 250,000 other Americans around the country have joined the Second Chance Campaign, launched by New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg and a coalition of civil-rights groups, including the NAACP, the National Urban League, ColorofChange, National Action Network, the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law and VoteVets.org, to stop new stand-your-ground laws and push for reform legislation across the country. ❧