

Do Gun Laws Improve Public Safety?

Abstract: Should the US copy British gun laws? Politicians claim that restrictive firearm regulations will make society safer, but in a recent report published by the Fraser Institute in Vancouver, BC, in Canada, I found that restrictions on gun ownership did not reduce either homicide rates or the rate of violent crime in any of the countries I examined. If the goal truly is to improve public safety, governments are urged to seek more effective approaches.

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Gun violence frightens many Americans. Some claim we'd be safer if only we had the political courage to introduce stricter gun laws like they have in the British Commonwealth; even ban all handguns like they do in the United Kingdom?

Gun laws must be demonstrated to cut violent crime, or gun control is no more than a hollow promise. It's time to pause and ask: do gun laws actually work.

A study I conducted recently shows that recent gun laws in the Commonwealth have had no discernable impact on violent crime. In "The Failed Experiment: Gun Control and Public Safety in Canada, Australia, England and Wales," published by the Fraser Institute, in Vancouver, BC, in Canada, I examine trends in violent crime in Commonwealth countries that had recently introduced firearm regulations.

The widely ignored key to evaluating firearm regulations is to examine trends in total violent crime, not just gun crime. Firearms are involved in only a small fraction of criminal violence. The real problem is criminal violence, not just gun violence.

The criminal justice system in the United States differs dramatically from those in the Commonwealth. Not only are criminal penalties typically more severe in the United States, often much more severe, but also conviction and incarceration rates are usually much higher.

Perhaps the most striking difference is that qualified citizens in the United States can carry concealed handguns for self-defense. During the past few decades, more than 25 states in the US have passed laws that relax the rules for allowing responsible citizens to carry concealed handguns. Entering 2004, there are 36 states where qualified citizens can get such a permit.

As surprising as it may seem to some, violent crime rates, and homicide rates in particular, have been falling in the United States. The drop in America's crime rate is even more impressive when compared with the rest of the world. In 18 of the 25 countries surveyed by the British Home Office, violent crime increased during the 1990s. This contrast

should provoke thinking people to wonder what happened in those countries where they introduced more and more restrictive firearm laws.

Recent gun laws introduced in the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia have failed to improve public safety. In the past 20 years, the UK has introduced increasingly restrictive laws on firearm ownership, finally banning handguns in 1997. The result? Police statistics show that the homicide rate in England and Wales jumped 50% in the 1990s, going from 10 per million in 1990 to 15 per million in 2000. Violent crime rates are twice as high in England and Wales as in the United States.

Canada increasingly restricted firearm ownership during the 1990s. New laws were introduced in 1991 and again in 1995. Licensing and registration are still being phased in. The result? Even while violent crime has plummeted in the US, it continued to rise in Canada. Supporters of Canada's restrictive gun laws point out that the homicide rate have been falling in Canada since the early 1990s. Unfortunately for such an argument, the homicide rate is falling even faster in the U.S. And homicides have dropped fastest in those states that allow their residents to carry concealed handguns.

The effort to register all firearms, which was originally claimed to cost only \$2 million, has now been estimated by the Auditor General to top one billion dollars. Final costs are unknown. Given that the violent crime rate in Canada is now twice as high as it is in the US, how can the Canadian government justify its gun laws?

The Firearms Act requires law-abiding gun owners to report a change of address within 30 days or risk a jail term of up to 2 years, but the law doesn't require the same from the 131,000 convicted criminals who have been prohibited from owning firearms.

At the same time that funds seem to flow freely for registration, the RCMP, Immigration, and prisons were starved for money. Starved for funds, the government disbanded the Ports Police early in the 1990's, rarely mounts investigations of the Hells Angels, and fails to keep track of violent criminals who had been released from prison. Immigration Canada has lost track of over 30,000 people it has ordered deported. Some may actually have left, but how many have done so is unknown.

The Australian government made similar Draconian changes to its firearm laws during the 1990s, even confiscating a large number of firearms from hunters and target shooters. Unfortunately, this effort has not made Australia any safer. Homicide and violent crime continue to increase in Australia, while both are decreasing in the United States. Robbery and armed robbery rates have doubled in Australia, while they are decreasing in the US. The homicide rate in Australia has started climbing again.

Restrictive firearm legislation has failed to reduce violent crime in Australia, Canada, or the UK. The policy of restricting gun ownership has been an expensive failure. Unfortunately, policy dictates that the current directions will continue, and, more importantly, it will not be examined critically.

It is an illusion that restrictive gun laws protect the public. What works is cracking down on criminals and allowing decent citizens of all races to protect themselves. That really does save lives.

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