

Gun Control Around the World: Lessons to Learn

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In the past few months, widely televised tragedies in France, Germany, and Switzerland have spurred politicians to introduce changes in their countries' already strict gun laws to make them even more restrictive. Perhaps you remember the headlines? A depressed student in Germany ran amok and killed several people in his school after he'd been expelled. In both France and Switzerland, angry individuals have stormed into local councils and began shooting legislators indiscriminately.

This is not a new story. We've seen this show before. First, there is a horrible event, say a disturbed student shoots people in a school, or a maniac goes on a rampage in a public place. Media coverage is intense for a few weeks. "Experts" on television wring their hands in concern about the danger of "gun violence." Then the government feels it must do something to protect the public, so the police are given sweeping new powers, or new restrictions are introduced on owning firearms. Afterwards, the media rush off on a new story, and the public forgets. Later, there is another tragedy somewhere else, and the process starts all over again.

Does this sound familiar? It should. This has been the pattern followed by virtually every gun law that has been introduced in the twentieth century around the world. In the 1990s, we've seen this drama on television from Australia, Great Britain, the United States, not to mention Canada, as well other countries. It's time to pause and ask a few basic questions. If gun laws work to prevent criminal violence, why do these events keep occurring? And not just in places where the gun laws are comparatively lax, but in countries where it is all but impossible for an average person to own a handgun. Guns are banned in schools. How could gun attacks happen in "gun free" zones such as schools?

If gun control is supposed to reduce violent crime, then eventually this must be demonstrated to be true, or gun control is no more than a hollow promise. However, most criminologists admit (albeit reluctantly) that there is very little empirical support for the claim that laws designed to reduce general access to firearms reduce criminal violence (eg, Kleck 1997). Frequently, assertions that gun laws work turn out to be bogus. In

Canada, the government uses the falling homicide rate as support for their claim that gun control laws are working. Unfortunately for this argument, the homicide rate has been falling even faster in the United States.

 Figure 1 – US vs. Canadian homicide rates

The drop in the criminal violence is much more dramatic in the US than it is in Canada (Gannon 2001). Over the past decade, the Canadian homicide rate has declined about 25%, but the violent crime rate has not changed. In the US during the same time period, both the homicide and the violent crime rates have plummeted by more than 40%. We can't credit gun laws entirely with this success. In both countries, the aging population has helped bring down crime rates, and, in the US, long jail sentences for violent criminals has also been effective.

 Figures 2 & 3 – US vs. Canadian violence rates

The United States

Nevertheless, gun laws have played an important role in reducing crime rates in the US. Since 1986, more than 25 states have passed new laws encouraging responsible citizens to carry concealed handguns. As a result, the numbers of armed Americans in malls and in their cars has grown to almost 3 million men and women. As surprising as it is to the media, these new laws have caused violent crime rates to drop, including homicide rates. In his scholarly book, More Guns, Less Crime, Professor John Lott shows how violent crime has fallen faster in those states that have introduced concealed carry laws than in the rest of the US (Lott 2000). His study is the most comprehensive analysis of American crime data ever completed. He shows that criminals are rational enough to fear being shot by armed civilians.

 Figures 4 & 5 – crime rates in concealed-carry states vs. non-carry

These graphs compare the relative drop in violent crimes in those states that recently introduced concealed-handgun laws with those that did not. Since these laws were introduced in various years, from 1986 to the 1990s, these changes are calculated from the year the law was introduced (“0”). As can be seen, crime rates were increasing before

the legislation was introduced, and the rates declined afterwards. Figure 4 examines the impact upon violent crime in general, and Figure 5 looks at homicide specifically.

The drop in the US crime rate is even more impressive when compared with the rest of the world. In 18 of 25 countries surveyed by the British Home Office violent crime increased during the 1990s (Barclay et al, 1999). This contrast should provoke Canadians to wonder what happened in those countries where they believed that introducing more and more restrictive firearm laws would protect them from criminal violence.

Before we leap to the conclusion that our personal safety lies in making it ever more difficult for average citizens to own and use firearms, we should look around the world to see what other countries have done and how successful these experiments have been. Canadians are particularly interested in studying “English-style” firearm laws such as followed by other countries in the British Commonwealth.

Canada

Despite the drop in rates of criminal violence in Canada, the gun law has little to do with it. In a study Professor Dennis Maki and I did recently, that will be published later this year by Applied Economics, we found that this legislation may even have caused an increase in armed robbery. In our study we evaluated 9 other factors in our model as “co-variates.” Once we factored out the effects of these other variables, the Canadian gun law still had a significant effect. Unfortunately, this effect was positive, that is to say, the gun law actually acted to increase criminal violence.

Figure 6 – M&M t-test table

Great Britain.

The first country to consider is Britain, where they have endured a serious crime wave. In contrast to North America, where the homicide rate has been falling for over twenty years, the homicide rate in England and Wales has doubled over the past thirty years. In the 1990s alone, the homicide rate jumped 50%, going from 10 per million in 1990 to 15 per million in 2000 (British Home Office 2001).

In response to rising crime, British politicians, both Conservative and Labour, have brought in laws that increasingly restricted firearms ownership by the general public. Important changes to the firearm laws were made in 1988, and then again in 1992, before banning all handguns in 1997 (Greenwood 2001; Munday and Stevenson 1996). The Home Office has also tightened up on enforcement of regulations to such an extent that

the firearm community has been virtually destroyed. Shotgun permits have fallen almost 30% since 1988 (Greenwood 2001). And the result of this Draconian gun control law in Great Britain? It's not pretty. No end appears in sight for the continuing crime wave.

 Figures 7 and 8 – increase in crime rates vs. decline in registered guns

Clearly, the firearm laws have not caused violent crime to fall, and the gun laws have probably increased criminal violence by disarming the general public. Despite banning and confiscating all handguns, violent crime, and firearm crime, continues to grow. The number of violent crimes involving handguns has increased from 2,600 in 1997/98 to 3,600 in 1999/00. And firearm crime has increased 200% in the past decade. The British Home Office admits that only one firearm in 10 used in homicide was legally held (British Home Office, 2001). But, the politicians continue their policy of disarming responsible citizens.

Australia

English-style gun laws have failed in Australia too. In 1997, the Australian federal government panicked, following the horrific murders by a deranged man in 1996, and banned and confiscated 600,000 semi-automatic “military style” firearms from their licenced owners (Lawson 1999). The result? Violent crime continues to increase.

 Figures 9 and 10 – increase in crime rates [Oz]

The destruction of the confiscated firearms cost Australian taxpayers an estimated \$A 500 million, and there has been no visible impact on violent crime. Robbery and armed robbery rates continue to escalate. Armed robbery has increased 166% nationwide -- jumping from 30 per 100,000 in 1996 to 50 per 100,000 in 1999 (AIC, 2001). The homicide rate has not declined, and the share of firearm homicide involving handguns has doubled in the past five years (Mouzos 2001). As in Great Britain and Canada, few firearms used in homicide are legally held; in 99/00 only 12 out of 65 (18%) were identified as being misused by their legal owner (Mouzos 2001).

Conclusion

Gun laws may not reduce violent crime, but crime causes gun laws. The loser in this drama is individual freedom. The winner is bureaucracy. Since it is a truism that only

law-abiding citizens obey gun laws, or any other kind of law for that matter, it is an illusion that further tinkering with the law will protect the public. No law, no matter how restrictive it is, can protect us from people who decide to commit violent crimes. There have always been criminals, and there have always been deranged people. Murder has been illegal for hundreds if not thousands of years. The truth is we live in a dangerous world, and the government can't completely protect us.

This brief review of gun laws in the British Commonwealth suggests that English-style gun laws have failed to reduce violent crime. However, more research needs to be done before we can draw this conclusion with much confidence. All I've been able to do so far is to examine simple two-way analyses. Before we can have any confidence in our conclusions, we need to conduct econometric studies in order to disentangle the complex events that occurred at the same time that new firearm laws were introduced.

Nevertheless, we can say that disarming the public has not reduced criminal violence in any country we've examined here: not Great Britain, not Canada, and not Australia. Only the United States has witnessed a dramatic drop in criminal violence. One of the important reasons is that many states in the past two decades have encouraged responsible citizens to carry concealed handguns. Perhaps it is time criminologists encouraged more individual self-reliance.

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