

Will gun control make us safe? Debunking the myths.

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"Those that give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety."

Ben Franklin, (1759)

The treacherous attack on the World Trade Center on September 11th opened our eyes. Canadians now realize that our government can't protect us. The government's efforts to control violence have been badly misdirected. It was not wise to freeze the RCMP budget for a decade, slash CSIS, let violent criminals roam around on probation, and eliminate the Vancouver Port Police. And for what? To create a massive bureaucracy to register the guns of ordinary Canadian citizens.

It's not easy telling the Emperor he has no clothes. Not many of my colleagues at SFU have supported me during the past 15 years that I have pursued my research into gun control. A few have though, and I cherish them.

When I started, I knew little about guns. What I did know, I'd learned from television: guns were scary, and gun owners were dangerous. I remember thinking that tighter gun laws would probably help to reduce gun crime. The results of my research, first, made a skeptic of me about the usefulness of gun control laws, and then, later, convinced me that firearm ownership was a social 'good.' Here are some of the facts that helped change my mind.

Myth #1: The typical gun crime is a man using a gun to terrorize a woman.

The image in the media is that murderers are normal and anyone could suddenly attack you. Consider the facts. Most (two-thirds) homicide victims are male, and less than one-third (30%) of homicides involve a firearm.

Murderers are not normal people. In 1999, Statistics Canada found that a typical homicide is committed by a drunk or drugged criminal. About two-thirds of those accused of homicide have violent criminal records. The majority also has a history of alcohol or drug abuse. Almost 3/4 of the spousal murderers had a history of spousal abuse prior to the killing. At the least, these statistics suggest that firearm registration won't be useful in stopping violent crime.

Myth #2: Canadians do not use guns in self-protection.

I've conducted three surveys of the public in Canada and my studies find that between 60,000 – 80,000 Canadians report using firearms annually to protect

themselves, their families or their property. Between 19,000 and 35,500 of these cases involved defense against criminal violence; the rest (more than half) involved defense against dangerous animals.

Self-defense incidents are all but invisible to authorities. The participants have no motive to report them to the police, and indeed every reason to keep them quiet. Defensive gun use doesn't mean Hollywood-style shoot-outs. Surprise: TV doesn't reflect real life. Research in the US shows that over 95% of the times a gun is used in self-protection, the gun is not fired but merely displayed. There is no victim.

Each of my three surveys had a different sponsor: the National Rifle Association, the Canadian government, and the Langley Symposium. All three found roughly the same results. The key factor in judging the validity of a scientific study is the research methodology used. It's not enough just to know the sponsor.

Myth #3: Canadian gun laws keep us safe.

Little empirical support can be mustered for such a claim. American criminologists widely admit that solid empirical research showing that any gun law has had a significant effect on crime rates is lacking. Shocked? Many researchers are very disappointed.

Handguns have been registered for over 60 years in Canada, but handgun crime is increasing. At the same time that homicides have been declining, handgun homicides have increased from around 25% to over 50% of gun homicides. The Solicitor General admitted in Parliament that handgun registration has never been useful in solving a crime.

Canada has long had strict gun laws. Nevertheless, each new law is introduced as if there had never been any previous firearm legislation. A number of studies, including my own, have evaluated Canadian gun laws. These researchers vary considerably in their position on gun control. In finding no significant effect, my research is consistent with all other academic studies of Canadian firearm legislation. The only exceptions are unpublished governmental studies with flawed methodologies.

Conclusion

I have tried here to debunk some of the "urban myths" about firearms and gun laws. Many people have warned us that, in fighting terrorism, we shouldn't wage war on Islam, but only on terrorists. Islam isn't the problem, terrorists are. It is particularly important to distinguish between the terrorist minority and the majority of Muslims. Not only on the grounds of basic fairness, but also on important strategic grounds. It is crucial to isolate the terrorists in order to get help from the rest of Islam.

Unfortunately, we have not been so thoughtful when fighting crime in Canada. Rather than aiming at violent criminals, the federal government launched a cultural war against traditional Canadians. Gun owners aren't the problem, criminals are. Canadians have owned firearms for centuries; and done so responsibly. Firearm registration fails the test of good police strategy. In order to stop violent criminals – society needs the support of gun owners.

Firearm registration may have won votes for Chrétien in Toronto and Montréal, but it alienated the rest of the country. Opponents include most provincial governments, all territorial governments, and many aboriginal bands. At least one-quarter of all gun owners have decided not to comply.

The new bill to fight terrorism is déjà vu. The government is exploiting the current tragedy to grab more power. The problem isn't that government needs more laws, it's that the government is afraid to enforce the ones it has. There is no need to sacrifice the Charter of Rights and Freedoms if the government would focus on terrorists and violent criminals, not ordinary Canadians. We would all be safer if the government would have the courage to screen immigrants better, to vigorously deport security risks, and to keep violent criminals in jail longer.

September 11th frightened and confused us all. Nevertheless, it is important not to panic. We shouldn't surrender our cherished individual freedoms in a rush to buy safety.

There is a need to tell the Emperor he has no clothes. Thanks to Nora and Ted Sterling, SFU has a more supportive environment for dissenters than is found at many other universities. That is no small accomplishment.

For more information, please see my web page (www.sfu.ca/~mauser).

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