

More Guns, Less Crime?

What Canada Can Learn from Gun Control Around the World

by Gary A. Mauser

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.

The story is not new. First, a horrible event takes place: a disturbed student shoots people in a school, or a maniac goes on a rampage in a public place. Media coverage is intense. "Experts" voice 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 on owning firearms are introduced. Afterwards, the media rush off to a new story. 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

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virtually every gun law that has been introduced around the world in the twentieth century. In the 1990s, we saw this drama on television in Australia, Great Britain, the United States, Canada, and other countries.

It is 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 can gun attacks happen in "gun free" zones such as schools?

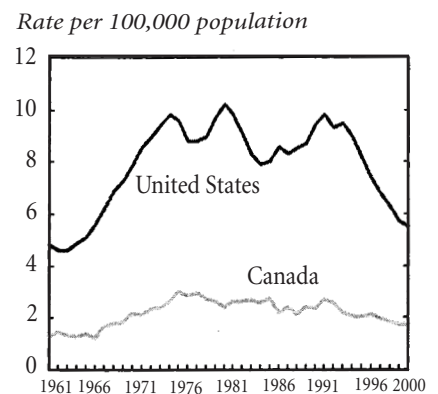
If gun control is supposed to reduce violent crime, then eventually this must be demonstrated to be true, or gun control is no more than a hollow promise. However, most criminologists admit (albeit reluctantly) that there is very little empirical support for the claim that laws designed to reduce general access to firearms actually reduce criminal violence (e.g., Kleck, 1997). Frequently, assertions that gun laws do work turn out to be bogus. In Canada, the government uses the falling homicide rate as support for its claim that gun control laws are working. Unfortunately for this argument, the homicide rate has been falling even faster in the United States.

The drop in 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 percent, but the violent crime rate has not changed. In the US during the same period, both the homicide and the violent crime rates have plummeted by more than 40 percent. 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 have also been effective (Kopel, 1992; Kleck, 1997).

The United States

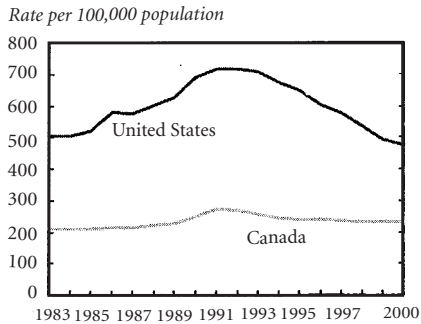
Nevertheless, gun laws have played an important role in reducing crime rates in the US. Since 1986, more than 25 states have passed new laws encouraging responsible citizens to carry concealed handguns. As a result, the numbers of armed Americans in malls and in their cars has grown to almost 3 million men and women. As surprising as it is to the media, these new laws have caused violent crime rates to drop, including

Figure 1: Rates of Homicide in Canada and the United States, 1961-2000



Sources: Uniform Crime Reporting Program, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics; Uniform Crime Reporting Program, FBI.

Figure 2: Rates of Violent Crime¹, Canada and the United States, 1983-2000



¹Violent crime includes homicide, aggravated assault, and robbery. For comparison purposes, the Canadian category of aggravated assault includes attempted murder, assault with a weapon, and aggravated assault. Trend analysis starts in 1983 due to the reclassification of Canadian assault categories in 1983.

Sources: Uniform Crime Reporting Program, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics; Uniform Crime Reporting Program, FBI.

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.

Figure 3 shows the relative drop in homicide rates in those states that recently introduced concealed handgun laws compared 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 the figure shows, murder rates were gradually increasing before the legislation was introduced, but declined afterwards.

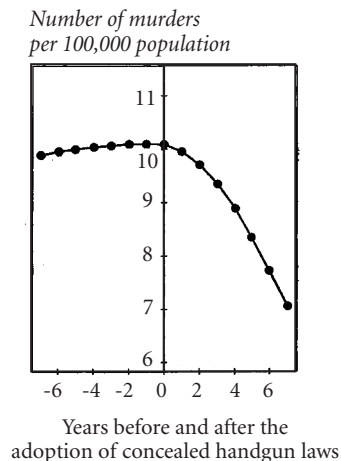
The drop in the US crime rate is even more impressive when compared with

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). Canadians might want to question what happened in countries that introduced more and more restrictive firearm laws to protect their citizens from criminal violence. How successful have these experiments been? Of particular interest are the “English-style” firearm laws, which have been followed by other countries in the British Commonwealth.

Canada

The drop in rates of criminal violence in Canada has had little to do with the gun law. A recent study by Professor Dennis Maki and me that will be published in *Applied Economics* found that this legislation may even have caused an *increase* in armed robbery. Our study evaluated 9 other factors in our model as “co-variables.” Once we factored out the effects of these other variables, the Canadian gun law still had a significant effect. Unfortunately, this effect was positive,

Figure 3: The Effect in the US of Concealed Handgun Laws on Murders



Source: John Lott, Jr. (2000).

that is to say, the gun law actually acted to increase criminal violence.

Great Britain

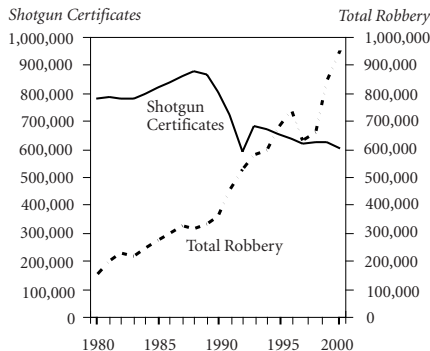
The first country to consider is Britain, which has endured a serious crime wave. In contrast to North America, where the homicide rate has been falling for over 20 years, in England and Wales the homicide rate has doubled over the past 30 years. In the 1990s alone, the homicide rate jumped 50 percent, going from 10 per million in 1990 to 15 per million in 2000 (British Home Office, 2001).

In response to rising crime, British politicians have brought in laws to increasingly restrict firearms ownership by the general public. Important changes to the firearm laws were made in 1988, and then again in 1992, before all handguns were banned in 1997 (Greenwood, 2001; Munday and Stevenson, 1996). The Home Office has also tightened enforcement of regulations to such an extent that the firearm community has been virtually destroyed. Shotgun permits have fallen almost 30 percent since 1988 (Greenwood, 2001). The result of this Draconian gun control law? No end appears in sight for Great Britain’s continuing crime wave.

Clearly, the firearm laws have not caused violent crime to fall, and the gun laws have probably increased criminal violence by ensuring the general public is disarmed. Despite banning and confiscating all handguns in Britain, 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 percent in the past decade. The British Home Office admits that only one firearm in 10 used in homicide was legally



Figure 4: Shotgun Certificates and Total Robbery, England and Wales, 1980-2000



held (British Home Office, 2001). Still, 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 licensed owners (Lawson, 1999). The result? Violent crime continues to increase.

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 percent 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 1999/2000 only 12 out of 65 (18%) were identified

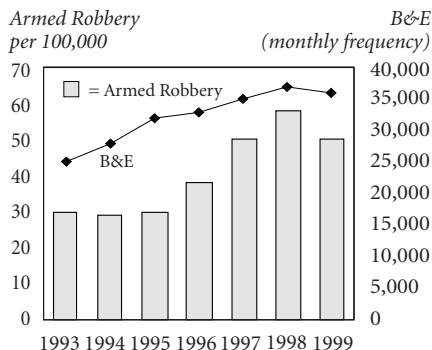
as being misused by their legal owner (Mouzos, 2001).

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 always been illegal. The truth is we live in a dangerous world, and the government can't completely protect us.

English-style gun laws appear to have failed to reduce violent crime, although more research needs to be done before we can draw this conclusion with confidence. So far, my research has only examined simple two-way analyses. We now need to conduct econometric studies to disentangle the complex events that occurred at the same time the new firearm laws were introduced. Nevertheless, we can say that disarming the public has not reduced criminal violence

Figure 5: Trends in Australian Violent Crime, 1993-1999



in any country examined here: not Great Britain, not Canada, and not Australia. Only the United States has witnessed a dramatic drop in criminal violence, and one important reason for it having done so is that many states in the past two decades have encouraged responsible citizens to carry concealed handguns. Perhaps it is time we in Canada encouraged more individual self-reliance.

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