
More Guns, Less Crime: Understanding Crime and Gun Control Laws

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Dr. Lott is the author of *More Guns, Less Crime: Understanding Crime and Gun Control Laws*, published in 1998. He spoke about the research on which the book is based at an American Experiment luncheon in January 1999.

Bad things can happen with guns, but guns can also prevent bad things from happening. No matter what our different views of guns are, one concern unites us all: Does allowing law-abiding citizens to own and carry guns save lives or cost lives? How does it affect the threat of rape, robbery, and aggravated assault?

America may, indeed, be obsessed with guns. My concern is that much of what passes as fact simply isn't true.

Horrible events receive massive news coverage, as they should, but the news media focus only on tragic outcomes while ignoring the many tragic events that are avoided. This focus may be responsible for some false impressions.

Sixteen national surveys—from organizations like the *Los Angeles Times*, CNN, Gallup, and Peter Hart and Associates, as well as several universities—indicate that at least 2 million times a year, people use guns

defensively to prevent crime. Those incidents are rarely discussed. Instances of mothers using guns to prevent their children from being kidnapped by car-jackers seldom make even the local news. Public shootings or bombings that are stopped before they happen are frequently ignored. This asymmetry is somewhat understandable: it is much more newsworthy if somebody is killed or badly harmed than if a woman brandishes a gun and a would-be attacker runs away. But both the crimes that are avoided and those that come to fruition must be taken into account in making policy.

Gun Myths

Mistaken impressions have some real costs for safety. Many myths needlessly frighten people and prevent them from using the most effective means for defending themselves and their families.

The first myth is that if you are attacked, passive behavior is the safest approach. There is a kernel of truth behind this. Compared to all forms of active resistance taken together, passive behavior is, in fact, slightly safer. The problem is aggregating together all forms of active resistance—everything from using one's fists to yelling and screaming, running away, using a baseball bat or Mace or a knife or a gun. Different types of active resistance have vastly different probable outcomes. For a woman in particular, using one's fists is the most dangerous course of action. A woman confronted by a male criminal frequently faces a large strength differential, and using

her fists is likely to result in a physical response from the criminal and serious injury to the woman.

By far the safest course of action for either a woman or a man confronted by a criminal is to brandish a gun. Women who behave passively are 2.5 times more likely to end up being seriously injured than women who resist a criminal confrontation with a gun. Men who behave passively are 1.4 times more likely to end up being seriously injured than men who resist a criminal confrontation with a gun.

The second myth is the notion that friends or relatives are the most likely killers. This myth is based upon two facts. The first is FBI numbers that indicate that almost exactly 50 percent of murders are committed by acquaintances. But few people understand how the FBI defines acquaintance. We tend to think about friends and family members, but the vast majority of acquaintance murderers are rival gang members. Gang murders, murders between drug buyers and drug sellers, and murders between prostitutes and pimps are all classified as acquaintance murders. If a cab driver picks up a fare who is in the cab for two seconds before he stabs or shoots the driver, that is classified as an acquaintance murder because of the potential financial relationship between them.

The second part of this myth is that anybody could be a murderer. This is also false. Murderers are just not your typical citizens. About 90 percent of adult murderers have an adult criminal record. There's a very similar percentage for juvenile murderers. Murderers

are overwhelmingly young males with low IQs and long histories of difficulties getting along with others.

Murder is also geographically concentrated. In any given year, 80 percent of the counties in the United States have zero murders.

A third myth is that the United States has such a high murder rate because Americans own so many guns. There is really no international evidence backing this up. This claim is usually based on a comparison of a few artfully selected countries.

When you look at the data available for dozens of countries, there is no real relationship. Many countries—including Switzerland, New Zealand, Finland, and Norway—have gun ownership rates similar to what we have here in the United States, yet they have relatively low murder rates. Switzerland has a lower murder rate than any of the countries that border it. It has a gun ownership rate about two and a half times Germany's and a murder rate of about 40 percent less. New Zealand, which has about double the gun ownership rate of Australia, has a murder rate that is about a third less. Israel probably has one of the highest gun possession rates in the world, yet it has a murder rate that is about 40 percent below even Canada's.

Another myth we frequently hear is the notion that a family gun is more likely to kill you or someone you know than to kill in self-defense. But when the relatives of people who have been killed by a gun are asked whether that person owned a gun, they aren't asked whether that was the gun that was used

in the killing. Surveys automatically assume that it was. When people have gone back and looked at that, they have found that at most, about 4 percent of those murders could actually be attributed to the gun that was in the home.

When you look at the other side—how many criminals are killed—you find that 98 percent of the time, simply being able to brandish a gun defensively is sufficient to cause a criminal to break off an attack. The gun is fired less than 2 percent of the time, and only seldom fired directly at the criminal. The numbers ignore the warning shots and the huge percentage of times when the criminal runs away and no attack takes place; they concentrate on incidents in which the would-be attacker is killed.

When you add data for accidental gun deaths and suicides to the number of murders, net increases in gun ownership still show a dramatic increase in the number of lives that are saved.

Finally, there is the myth that gun locks save lives. There are a couple of things to consider here. My guess is that the number of accidental gun deaths—particularly involving children, who are the primary focus of gun locks—is smaller than most of you might think. For children under the age of fifteen, there were two hundred accidental gun deaths of all types in the United States in 1996. For children under the age of five, there were thirty. If you look only at handguns, the number is in the low teens each year.

Compared to other risks that exist in the home, the accident rate for guns is trivial. About 80 million people in the United States own between 200

million and 240 million guns; it is hard to think of any other item in the home that is anywhere near as prevalent and anywhere near as dangerous that has such a low accident rate. Children under the age of five are more likely to drown in water buckets or die in fires that they themselves start with cigarette lighters. Much more common causes of death range from bicycle accidents to fires started by space heaters to drowning in swimming pools.

As the father of four young children, I find it painful to imagine children dying in any way, but it is puzzling to me why there is so much coverage of this one type of accidental death when others are so much more frequent. It is hardly consoling to point out that swimming pools and space heaters are much more lethal than guns, yet there is a benefit to thinking about that for a moment. Most of us understand the other trade-offs better. We realize that we could end the 950 drownings that occur each year if we banned pools for children under the age of fifteen, but we choose the pools. There are also costs and benefits with regard to guns. Accidental gun deaths represent a real cost, but you also allow parents to protect their families. When you look at both sides, you find a net gain: guns save many more children's lives than they cost.

The sophisticated electronic locks advocated in recent lawsuits against gun makers add hundreds of dollars to the price of a gun. You have to balance the number of lives that might be saved against the impact on people's ability to defend themselves. Poor peo-

ple who live in high-crime urban areas generally benefit the most from being able to protect themselves and their families—and they are the very people who are priced out by expensive restrictions.

The Debate about Concealed Handguns

The debate about concealed handguns illustrates two conflicting views of the relationship between guns and crime. Advocates of gun control believe that introducing guns into a violent encounter increases the probability that someone will die. The notion is that murder results from unintentional fits of rage, and simply keeping a gun out of reach may prevent a murder. There is also the belief that more guns lead to more accidental gun deaths.

On the other side are the notion of deterrence and the belief that criminals attack those they perceive to be relatively weak. In the case of the concealed-handgun debate, there are some simple questions that we can answer quickly before we get into the more difficult ones. One of the simple questions is whether people who obtain permits to carry concealed handguns themselves represent a risk to others in their communities.

First I want to define different types of handgun laws. Thirty-one states have so-called "shall-issue" laws: if you apply for a permit, pay the fee, and meet certain criteria—age, a criminal background check—you automatically get a permit. About half of these thirty-one states require some type of training.

Twelve states, including Minnesota, have what are called “may-issue” laws: you have to demonstrate to a public official that you have a legitimate need to carry a concealed handgun, and the official subjectively determines whether you qualify for a permit.

Seven states don’t allow citizens to carry concealed handguns.

Quite a few of the thirty-one states with shall-issue laws keep detailed records on what happens with guns owned by citizens who have permits. Between October 1, 1987, and December 31, 1997, Florida issued over 444,000 permits. During that time, eighty-four permits were revoked because of firearm-related violations by license holders. Most of those violations were people accidentally carrying guns into a restricted area such as an airport or a school.

You might remember, for example, that Barry Switzer, the former Dallas Cowboys coach, accidentally carried a handgun into the Dallas/Fort Worth airport; he simply forgot that he had it with him. That is the most common type of violation. Even the entire eighty-four permit revocations represent only about two one-hundredths of a percentage point.

In 1996 and 1997—the first two years a new gun law was in effect—Texas issued 163,000 permits. Five permit holders were arrested for deadly conduct or discharge of a firearm, and two more were arrested for deadly conduct or display of a firearm. Ultimately, all of the permit holders were deemed to have acted in self-defense, and all seven cases were dropped.

Here are some results from other states.

In Virginia: “Not a single Virginia permit holder has been involved in a violent crime.”

After Nevada’s first year: “Law enforcement officials throughout the state could not document one case of a fatality that resulted from irresponsible gun use by someone who obtained a permit under the new law.”

A Kentucky police chiefs association spokesman said after the state’s law had been in effect for a year, “We haven’t seen any cases where a concealed carrier permit holder has committed an offense with a firearm.”

In North Carolina: “Permit-holding gun owners have not had a single permit revoked as a result of a use of a gun in a crime.”

From South Carolina: “Only one person who has received a permit since 1989 has been indicted on a felony charge. A comparison of permit and circuit court records shows that [the] charge for allegedly transferring stolen property last year was dropped by prosecutors after evidence failed to support the charge.”

Nationally, police officers—about 76 percent of street officers and 59 percent of managerial officers—support permits that allow people to carry concealed handguns. Those who oppose concealed handguns often change their minds after their states move to shall-issue laws. The president of the Dallas police association said in December 1998, “I lobbied strenuously against the law in 1993 and 1995 because I thought it would lead to wholesale

armed conflict. That hasn't happened. All the horror stories I thought would come to pass didn't happen. No bogeymen. I think it has worked out well, and that says good things about the citizens who have permits."

In Kentucky, a sheriff speaking for the state sheriffs' association said, "I . . . changed my opinion of this program. Frankly, I anticipated a certain type of people applying to carry firearms, people I would be uncomfortable with being able to carry a concealed weapon. That has not been the case. These are all just everyday citizens who feel they need some protection."

Two concerns come up in every legislative debate on this issue. One is that in the heat of the moment, someone is going to use a handgun to shoot somebody else. The archetypal case that is brought up in every single legislative debate I've read is this: After a traffic accident, when tempers are frayed, will a permit-concealed handgun be drawn and used?

Right now, several million people have permits to carry guns. Some states have allowed their residents to carry guns for as long as sixty years. Despite all those millions of people with permits and despite all the years that these laws have been in effect, there has been only one case in which someone actually fired a permit-concealed handgun after a traffic accident.

That incident occurred in January 1996 in Texas. It got a lot of attention, so you may have heard about it. Two pickup trucks sideswiped each other, and one of the drivers got out and started pummeling the other driver

through the open window of his cab, detached his left retina, fractured his cheekbone, broke his jaw, and started pulling him out through the open window of his cab. At that point, the person who was being attacked pulled out his permit-concealed handgun and fired it at the attacker.

The other concern that is brought up in legislative debates is the risk that permit-concealed handguns might pose to police officers. From time to time, police officers accidentally shoot other police officers, and the concern is that owners of permit-concealed handguns will magnify this risk. Again, despite millions of people with permits and the decades that these rules have been in effect in many places, there has never been an instance in which the owner of a permit-concealed handgun has killed a police officer.

On the other hand, there have been a couple of dozen cases in which police officers have said that they would not be alive today if it wasn't for a person with a permit-concealed handgun. In one case, a police officer on his own had been struck by a car driven by a criminal, and the criminal was threatening to drive over the officer again. A citizen with a permit-concealed handgun was able to step in and prevent further harm to the police officer.

Research Findings

My book represents the largest study ever done on crime in the United States. I look at crime data for all 3,054 counties in the United States, following each county from the beginning of 1977 through the end of 1994. I also

have information on accidental gun deaths and suicides by county. Besides looking at concealed-carry laws, I try to account for other factors like arrest rates and conviction rates and prison sentences, as well as different types of gun control laws like state background checks or waiting periods, the Brady law, the length of waiting periods, penalties for using guns in commission of crimes. I also tried to account for factors like unemployment, income, poverty, and the most detailed demographic age, sex, and race information that has ever been used in any study that I know of.

I found that by far the most important factors affecting crime rates over time are higher arrest rates and higher conviction rates. There is no doubt that the police and the legal system together are the most important single factor in determining changes in crime rates over time.

But the police virtually always arrive after the crime has been committed. What should victims do when they have to confront would-be criminals by themselves? Among the different types of gun control laws, the only one with any beneficial impact was the right-to-carry law. States that issued the most permits had the biggest drops in violent crimes; over time, as more permits were issued, there were further drops in violent crime.

Let's take a look at states that changed their laws during the eighteen years of my study. [At this point, Dr. Lott began to illustrate his presentation with charts and graphs.] The overall violent crime rate was falling and then

rising slightly right before the right-to-carry laws went into effect, stopped rising in the first full year, and then dropped. A precipitous drop started right when the law was passed—not a couple of years before or after—and the size of the drop is closely related to the percent of the adult population with permits. This is consistent with the notion that the probability that victims can defend themselves raises the cost of crime for criminals.

Murder rates were flat in these states right up to the point at which they passed the laws, and this is after taking into account arrest rates and conviction rates and national trends, so these are drops over and above the national declines in violent crime that we have been observing in the United States since 1991. Again, right at that point, not a couple of years before or after, we start seeing a drop in murder rates.

Robbery rates are the most dramatic. They were rising right up until these states adopted right-to-carry laws and then began to fall precipitously.

Rape rates were fairly flat, falling slightly, then rising slightly right up until the right-to-carry-laws went into effect, and then there was a very large drop in rape rates.

The largest drops in violent crime occurred in the most crime prone, most densely populated poor areas. I also found that women benefit much more from concealed handguns than men do, and this is true across the board. Women benefit for a very simple reason: when a criminal—typically a man—attacks a woman, there is a large strength differential; the presence of a

gun represents a much bigger change in her ability to defend herself than it does for a man.

When more women have concealed handguns, you see a drop in murder rates for women. When more men have concealed handguns, you see a drop in murder rates for men, but the effect for women is much larger. For each additional woman who obtains a concealed-handgun permit, the drop in murder rates for women is three to four times larger than the drop in murder rates for men from an additional man having a handgun permit.

Not all crimes fall with gun ownership, though. When right-to-carry laws get passed, you see some evidence of criminals switching from violent crimes to relatively safer property crimes, particularly larceny. Criminals are more hesitant to commit crimes in which they come into direct contact with the victim, and the presence of a concealed handgun can make that crime more costly for them. They seem to be switching to crimes like larceny—stealing a tape deck from an unattended car, for example—with a low probability of direct contact with the victim.

Another type of substitution is geographic displacement. If you buy “the Club” for your car, it doesn’t necessarily mean that there will be less auto theft. An auto thief might see the Club on your car and move on to another car. If enough cars in the parking lot have a Club and he has to spend a lot of time going from car to car, that could have some overall deterrent effect and reduce the number of thefts.

The same type of thing occurs with regard to concealed handguns. Let’s look at murder rates from the perspective of counties bordering states that don’t have right-to-carry laws. When your neighbor adopts a right-to-carry law, your murder rate starts to go up—not two years earlier or three years later, but right then.

You see the same thing with rape and robbery rates: falling until your neighbor adopts the right-to-carry law, then right at that time, they begin to go up.

The increase in displaced crime is about a quarter of the size of the drop in the original state, so there is an overall drop, though the drop overestimates the total social benefit since part of it is simply moving the problem elsewhere. The biggest overall drops in violent crimes occur when neighboring states both adopt right-to-carry laws.

Multiple-Victim Public Shootings

Multiple-victim public shootings get a lot of attention and drive a lot of the debate on guns, though they don’t involve many total murders. The worst ones come readily to mind: Six people were killed during Colin Ferguson’s rampage on the Long Island Railroad in 1993. Twenty-two people were killed in Luby’s Cafeteria in Collin, Texas, in 1991. Five people died at Cleveland Elementary School in Stockton, California, in January 1989, and twenty-one persons were killed at the San Ysidro, California, McDonald’s in July 1984.

I've talked to people who were present at these shootings. They felt utterly helpless while gunmen were methodically shooting people. These shootings have gotten a lot of attention and entered our popular culture—consider the term “going postal.” Different countries have responded to multiple shootings with different policies. Recent public shootings in Tasmania, Australia, and Scotland have led to strict gun prohibitions in those countries. In 1997, when one person was killed at the top of the Empire State Building, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani used the incident to call for national gun licensing. Other cases have been used to justify waiting periods in many states.

In Israel, on the other hand, mass killings led to a liberalization of concealed-handgun laws in the early 1970s. In the 1960s, it seemed as though a terrorist with a machine gun would go into a school or a mall or a business office and start firing virtually every month. They don't do that anymore, and the change occurred very rapidly, right around the early 1970s. You can read newspaper and magazine accounts of how terrorists would go into a mall and all of a sudden elderly ladies would pull pistols out of their purses and fire at the terrorists, and the terrorists would complain that nobody had warned them.

The shootings that have occurred since then are the exceptions that prove the rule. In March 1997, seven young Israeli girls were shot to death by a Jordanian soldier while they were visiting Jordan's so-called Island of Peace.

The Los Angeles Times reported that the Israelis had complied with Jordanian requests to leave their weapons behind when they entered the border enclave. And in the United States, shootings like that in Luby's Cafeteria were, in fact, used to justify the passage of concealed-handgun laws in many states in the United States.

I talked to a woman who lost both of her parents in the Luby's shooting. She saw her father charge the gunman with a butter knife when his back was turned. He got within about ten feet before the gunman killed him. Her mother ran to her dying father, and the gunman killed her mother. Until that week, this woman—an expert marksman—had been illegally carrying a concealed handgun. She sometimes worked late at night and she was concerned about her safety, but she had decided it was wrong to be violating Texas law and so she had stopped carrying the gun. The day of the shooting, she had her pistol with her; in order not to break the law, she walked back to her car and locked the gun in the glove box. While the shooting was going on, she could see her car through the broken plate glass windows at the front of the restaurant. The police arrived twenty-five minutes after the first shot was fired.

A couple of school shootings were stopped by citizens with guns long before the police arrived. In Pearl, Mississippi, where two students were killed, the assistant principal had a pistol in his car, which was parked well off school property in order to obey a law that prohibits a gun within 1,000 feet

of a school. When the shooting started, he ran to his car, got the pistol, ran back, ordered the gunman to the ground, and held him there for about four minutes before the police arrived. In the Edinboro, Pennsylvania, case where a teacher was killed, a citizen held the gunman for over eleven minutes before the police arrived.

The most dramatic work I've ever done on crime shows that the only thing that seems to affect the rate at which these shootings occur is the passage of right-to-carry laws—not the death penalty, arrest rates, execution rates, waiting periods, different types of gun control laws.

In the fourteen states that changed their laws between 1977 and 1995, the probability that somebody would be killed or injured in a so-called multiple-victim public shooting was rising consistently until the change. And then, when the right-to-carry laws were passed, you see a huge drop in the rate at which these incidents occur: a 90 percent drop in the rate at which shootings occurred, a 92 percent drop in the rate at which people were killed.

There is only one possible explanation for this. The people who are getting permits to carry a gun—about 5 percent of the adult population—are randomly out there. If I'm a criminal wanting to attack somebody who is walking home late at night, there is a one in twenty chance that the person I attack might have a gun. Let's say there are a hundred people in a restaurant; even though only 5 percent of the adult population have permits, the probability that someone in that

restaurant is going to have a permit—and a gun—is very high. This seems to have a huge deterrent effect.

Following his talk, Dr. Lott took questions from his American Experiment audience.

Tom Prichard: What is the other side of the argument, the side favoring handgun laws? Do they offer any evidence? Have they attempted to attack or undermine yours?

John Lott: I made the FBI Uniform Crime Report data that I put together immediately available to any academic who asked for it. I've shared the data with academics at 36 universities. Some people have argued that they can find even larger drops than I've found; three papers have been critical of my approach. But no one, not one academic who has looked at this, has found a bad effect from concealed-handgun laws. Even the three who are critical maybe find some small drops or drops that they say start to occur a couple of years after the law has been in effect. There is no one who argues that there is a pernicious effect.

I'm not arguing that permits are the only thing that affect crime rates. In fact, I argue that arrest and conviction rates are the most important things. I don't think there is any doubt about it. But it is costly to increase the arrest rate and the conviction rate.

Doug Jones: Have you been asked to testify in any of the class action lawsuits against gun manufacturers?

John Lott: I continually turn down

requests to testify in court cases because I feel that it would affect my ability to speak freely on these issues. I think it is highly probable that in a couple of years guns will not be sold legally in the United States. I think fifty to a hundred cities will be bringing suit against gun manufacturers, and it is going to be very difficult if not impossible to combine them into one type of class action suit. The plaintiffs are purposely making it impossible to do that.

A small gun company may be facing, conservatively, legal costs of a couple million dollars per suit. Ruger, which is the largest manufacturer of rifles and the second-largest manufacturer of pistols and revolvers in the United States, made \$25 million in

profits last year from all of its sporting lines, including guns and golf clubs and everything else that they produce. Something like \$18 million probably came from guns. If you are facing \$120 million or more in legal costs, you have to make a decision about whether or not you will be staying in business. Beyond the top ten gun manufacturers, you are talking about companies that produce only a few thousand guns a year. Even if only a couple cities bring suits, it is going to be very difficult for them to withstand the legal costs.

I don't believe the cities think they have strong legal arguments. I think they are hoping to overwhelm the gun companies with legal costs so they will just give up and declare bankruptcy. n