

*Armand Hammer United World College of American West*

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*Does private gun ownership in America cause  
crime and violence?*



***Two controversial perspectives***

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## *Abstract*

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Gun ownership is, perhaps, one of the most extensively studied fields in the United States. Even though a lot of research has been done in this area for many years and various results and analysis produced, it remains, arguably, one of the most controversial issues of our time. This paper discusses the issue of gun ownership and its prevalence in America and explores its links to crime and violence by bringing together perspectives from various individuals, groups and organizations from both pro-gun and anti-gun arenas. Initially, my interest and intention was to explore various aspects of gun culture in America and its effects on society, but because of time constraints and preoccupation with other schoolwork as well as the textual limitation of this paper, I chose to narrow down my focus to a specific issue within this field of inquiry. Thus, in this paper I discuss private-gun ownership in America and its affects on crime and violence. More specifically, my research question is “**Does private gun ownership in America cause crime and violence?**” The literature review for this paper is based on reviewing online journal articles, news articles, and books on Crime and Gun ownership and control as well as documentary videos. After analyzing the arguments and positions of both pro and anti gun groups and advocates, in this paper, I reject the argument made by pro gun advocates that gun ownership could decrease crime and be a potential means of self-protection. I argue that however strong arguments of pro gun advocates may appear to be, the negative effects of private gun ownership far exceed its positive ones and thus it does contribute to crime and violence.

Word count: 171

## **Does private gun ownership in America cause crime and violence?**

### **Two controversial perspectives**

#### **Introduction:**

Private gun ownership is a common phenomenon in the United States. The prevalence of guns and the frequency with which they are used to commit crimes has made gun ownership and its control a much discussed and contentious issue (Kates, 2004). While there is growing public acceptance of gun ownership as a primary cause of increasing crime and violence, the vast majority of Americans still view it as a means of safety, self-defense and protection (Sugarman, 2001).

While ownership of weapons has a long history in most developed countries both in Europe and elsewhere, United States is the only industrial nation in which the possession of rifles, shotguns, and handguns is lawfully prevalent among a large number of its population (Sugarman 2001). It has one of the world's most lax laws and legislation related to gun ownership and use (Kleck, 2001). Most western European countries and other economically developed nations, on the other hand, have strict national gun laws. These countries require that guns be registered, gun owners be licensed, and that guns be stored and transported with utmost security (Riczo, 2001).

A 2004 survey indicates that there are an estimated 200 to 250 million firearms in America, and of these about a third are handguns. Homicide rate in the United States is six times higher than that of other developed nations (Krug, 2002: 22). And though it varies from year to year, according to FBI, in general, guns are used in about 70 percent of homicides. In 2000, for example, 52 percent of homicides were committed with handguns, and 19 percent were committed with other types of guns (FBI, 2000: 3).

A CBS/New York times poll conducted in January 1993 indicated that 49% of U.S. households reported owning at least one gun (Kleck, 1997: 99). Thus assuming that households with guns and those without guns have the same average number of members, 124, 989,200 (0.49 x 255,082,000 – total population at that time) Americans lived in households with guns and 130,090,800 lived in households without guns (Kleck, 1997).

To keep a narrower focus, this paper will mainly focus around the debates by both those who support gun ownership (pro-gun groups/organizations) and those who oppose (anti-gun

advocates) it. The resources I used for my research included a few books on gun ownership, crime, violence and gun control I collected from a library in Waterloo, Ontario, some online articles through a journal of criminology and extensive Internet search. While for most part, the paper will discuss the debates and pros and cons of gun ownership, below I would to briefly discuss some views about why do/should Americans keep guns in the first place. Reading through the said materials to seek answers, I came across increasingly divergent perceptions as well as some astonishing facts that I really would like to share in this paper. Among several views with regards to the said question, increasing availability of weapons and easy access was regarded as a main reason. I argue that availability of course, is in part a function of demand; but again even if guns are easy to obtain why it is that large numbers of Americans – honest citizens living in a democracy and free country feel they need to own guns?

In my quest for finding more rational grounds in relation to this question, I also found some interesting and expert views shared by several criminologists, experts and historians. Lee Nisbet, a professor of philosophy at Medaille College in Buffalo, New York, for example, calls “heritage”, as one major reason. He maintain that the early frontier experience, the role of the citizen soldier in the Revolutionary War, the continued wars against Indian tribes and bandits while settling the nation’s frontier, together with America’s hunting tradition gave gun an honored place in American culture” (Nisbet, 1968, 21).

Another possible factor for the increased use of guns in America was provided by historians Lee Kenneth and James Anderson in their classic volume “The gun in America”. They argue that the increase in nineteenth century urban crime, social unrest, and the public’s perception that the police could not effectively protect citizens from criminals were the major factors in leading to this gun culture (Kennet and Anderson, 1980). Here is how they put it. “the general tendency to keep arms or carry them on the person may well be linked to the “urban explosion” that transformed American cities in the period 1820-1860. Its mechanism of everyday law enforcement did not keep pace with its growth so that the inhabitant felt an increased need to fend for himself. ...this sense of personal insecurity in the face of crime probably did more to hasten the trend toward personal armament than anything else” (Kennet and Anderson, 1980: 22).

The rest of the paper will discuss the competing debates and controversies over the question I ask in the beginning of this paper ‘Does private gun ownership cause violence and crime in America’? I will present some general views and perceptions held by two sides including facts and statistics for each argument. Next, I will present what pro-gun advocates have to say in response to specific claims made by anti-gun or gun control advocates. Moreover, I focus on this part, partly because I was interested in understanding the fundamental grounds pro-gun groups have in establishing their position – that’s lobbying for more guns.

### **Perspectives on causes of gun ownership**

Among several unresolved and contentious issues in the world, I believe that the controversy over the implication of gun ownership is a never ending one. As alluded to earlier, there are gun control advocates and criminologists who strongly oppose gun ownership law staunchly arguing that guns and their use are the very cause of prevailing violence and crime in the United States. They maintain that while guns maybe generally presumed to be purchased by responsible citizens, they often fall in the hands of criminals and offenders. They further argue that regardless of who gets the guns, there is sufficient evidence to suggest that owning a gun increases the rate of several other incidences such as suicide (Kates, 2001). On the other side of debate are pro-gun economists and private firms such as the National Rifle Association that strongly reject this concept. Suggesting gun ownership can actually reduce crime and violence. “Guns are an effective means for self-protection against criminals”. “Guns are not the cause of rising crime; however, it’s crime that increases the rate of guns” (Drinan, 1976: 54).

### **Anti-gun perspectives**

Far from the crimes and murders committed by criminals, anti-gun advocates present a very different theory suggesting gun possession as causing murder by ordinary people not pre-disposed to crime. This theory holds that thousands of gun murders are committed by law-abiding citizens who might have stayed law-abiding if they had not possessed firearms for, the majority of homicide victims die not as a result of criminal activity, but because of

arguments between people who know each other, not from guns in the wrong hands, but from the guns in the hands of normal citizens (Hemenway, 2004)

Findings from an internet search I did, suggest that Gun violence in the United States is associated with the majority of homicides and over half the suicides. It is considered a significant public concern, especially in urban areas and in conjunction with youth activity and gang violence. Referring to the assassinations of President Abraham Lincoln in 1865, and of Presidents James Garfield, William McKinley, and John F. Kennedy, it is argued that gun violence is not new in the United States (Violent Crime, 1999). High profile gun violence incidents, such as the assassinations of Robert F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr., and, more recently, the Virginia Tech massacre, the Columbine High School massacre and the Beltway sniper attacks, have also fueled debate over gun policies (Gun Violence in America, 2007).

U.S. Statistics on crimes rates for the year 2005 suggest that the homicide rate in the United States of America is higher than that of other developed countries, with firearms used to commit 68% of the 14,860 homicides in the United States (Gun Crimes, 2005). This makes the U.S. to have the highest rate of gun related homicides among developed countries. Many more suffer non-fatal gunshot wounds, with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimating 52,447 violence-related and 23,237 accidental gunshot injuries in the United States during 2000 (CDC, 2006). The majority of gun-related deaths in the United States are suicides, with guns used in 16,907 suicides in the United States during 2004 (Gun Crimes, 2005). It is important to note that legal policies at the Federal, state, and local levels have attempted to address gun violence through a variety of methods, including restricting firearms purchasing by youths and other "at-risk" populations, setting waiting periods for firearm purchases, establishing gun "buy-back" programs, targeted law enforcement and policing strategies, stiff sentencing of gun law violators, education programs for parents and children, and community-outreach programs (Riczo, 2001). Research, however has shown mixed results, finding some policies such as gun "buy-back" programs as ineffective, while Boston's Operation Ceasefire (a gang violence abatement strategy), for example, as effective

intervention strategy (Gun Control, 2004). Gun policy in the United States is also highly influenced by the Second Amendment to the United States Constitution, which prohibits infringement of "the right of the People to keep and bear arms." Gun rights advocates generally encourage a strict preservation of the right protected by the Second Amendment (Rizco, 2001).

### **Pro-gun perspectives**

Pro-gun advocates argue that the best currently available evidence, imperfect though it is (and must always be), indicates that general gun availability has no measurable net positive effect on crime rates. This is not to say gun availability has no effects on violence - it has many, but these effects work in both violence-increasing and violence-decreasing directions, with the effects largely canceling out (Levy 2001). For example, when aggressors have guns, they are (1) less likely to physically attack their victims, (2) less likely to injure the victim given an attack, but (3) more likely to kill the victim, given an injury. Further, when victims have guns, it is less likely aggressors will attack or injure them and less likely they will lose property in a robbery (Riczo 2001). This group maintains that taken together, the best available time series and cross-sectional studies show that, the overall net effect of gun availability on total rates of violence is not significantly different from zero (Fellenzer, 2005).

Further, unlike commonly held public perceptions, pro-gun economists groups argue that gun ownership by ordinary people does not increase crime rate and those that commit murders have previous records (Fellenzer, 2005). This theory's attribution of murders by ordinary people flies in the face of 100+ years of homicide studies. These show that, far from being ordinary people, "the huge majority of persons involved in life-threatening violence have a long criminal record with many prior contacts with the justice system." (Spitzer, 2004: 18)

Moreover, it is argued that though only 15% of Americans have criminal records, roughly 90 percent of adult murderers have adult records, with an average career of six or more adult years, including four major felonies. Juvenile crime records are generally unavailable, but to

the extent they are, juvenile killers have crime careers as extensive or more than do adult killers and so do their victims (Sugarmann, 2004: 13). It is said that the typical findings of 19th and 20th Century homicide studies reveal that the great majority of both perpetrators and victims of 1970s Harlem assaults and murders had previous adult arrests, probably over 80% or more" as also did Savannah murderers and victims in both the 1890s and the 1990s; exclusive of all *other* crimes they had committed, 80% of 1997 Atlanta murder arrestees had at least one prior drug offense with 70% having 3 or more prior drug offenses; 1960s-'70s Philadelphia "victims as well as offenders, finally, tended to be people with prior police records, usually for violent crimes such as assault, and both had typically been drinking at the time of the fatal encounter." (Kates, 2000: 11)

### **Pro-gun advocates vs. Anti-gun advocates – *response to specific claims***

#### **#1: "Guns do make us safer."**

The Anti-gun advocates' argument is that the US has a lot of guns and a lot of gun dealers, and it has the highest rate of gun deaths among industrialized nations." What is wrong with their claims? Pro-gun advocates argue that comparisons with other nations regarding crime and violence are simply not valid. The reason for this is that there are many, many differences between our nation and other nations, and many of these differences greatly affect the rates of violence, accidents, and suicide (Drinan, 1976). The comparisons spouted by gun control advocates never account for any of these significant differences. Professional criminologists and students of violence (the people qualified to analyze the violence differences between countries) have never even attempted to account for all the significant differences primarily because most countries don't keep the kinds of records that would permit one to make a valid analysis (Drinan, 1976).

They maintain that the studies that have accounted for even a few significant factors have all found that the evidence does not support the conclusion that gun prevalence causes increased violence (Wright, 1988). Because the US has better records on factors that should be considered in a comparison, it is more valid to compare different states rather than compare the

US with other countries. The most valid and comprehensive analysis ever performed determined that places where more people have guns also have less violent crime, and that places where the government starts to allow good people to carry concealed guns experience greater/faster reduction in violent crime than other places (Alexy, 2003).

The claim that "guns make us safer" is not a claim that guns make us absolutely safe. The claim is that, with guns, we are safer than we would be without them (Wright, 1988). The fact that some people die from incidents in which the instrument used is a gun does not mean that, overall, we are not safer than if we had no guns. To evaluate whether or not we are safer, we must also consider how many deaths, attacks, and attempted murders are prevented as a result of some people having guns (Sloan et al, 1988). Furthermore, we would also have to take into account the fact that nearly all people who commit suicide using a gun would simply commit suicide in some other way if guns were not available (proven fact) and that many people who are murdered with a gun would simply be murdered in another way if guns were not available. That is, the current gun murders and gun suicides would not "go away" if guns went away, they would just convert to some other kinds of murder and suicide (Sloan et al, 1988).

## **# 2. "Gun ownership is a constitutional right"**

Anti-gun advocates claim that the Second Amendment to the Constitution is not about a right for the individual. It truly is a myth that firearm ownership is a constitutional right if, by that, one means a right granted by the constitution. The truth is that the Bill of Rights was not a granting by the government of rights to the citizen. The truth is that it was an affirmation of pre-existing rights (Seese, 2004). This was so both in the sense that those rights already existed for the citizens of the federated countries that had once been English colonies, and in the sense that the statesmen considered that the people had the rights even before the colonies broke from England. When the new over-riding government was formed, the statesmen believed that men had the rights (Seese, 2004). Some of those statesmen insisted that the federal government guarantee that citizens would continue to have those rights. They thought it's necessary to have those guarantees in the Constitution because they foresaw the possibility that the government being created would become an all-powerful, all-encompassing enslaver of the

people it was supposed to serve. They thought this because they had studied history and were smart (Seese, 2004).

### **# 3. "Gun control won't reduce gun violence or crime"**

The anti-gun advocates state that "most criminals acquire their handguns through legal channels--only 27% get them from the black market. Juveniles obtain 55% of their guns from friends, home or a gun shop (Hemenway, 204).

The truth is that nobody can legitimately say that certain portions of this or that group get their guns in this or that way. There have been several surveys that have yielded fairly different results. Yet, the general idea of what the anti-gun groups say is true, although the specific distinctions are not valid (Pudlo, 2004). For example, if you consider a person 18 years old to be a juvenile but the law in a certain state permits 18-year-olds to buy long guns, should it be considered some failing that some aged 18-20 buy such guns from gun shops? Gun control advocates pick their words to avoid being specific while implying the worst (Sugarmann, 2001).

That said, if a large number of people believe that "gun control won't reduce gun violence or crime," this would be a myth. There are some things one could call "gun control" that could be done to reduce the extent to which criminals and juveniles can obtain firearms (Sugarmann, 2001). The problem is that gun control advocate organizations don't limit themselves to doing such things while avoiding restriction of the law-abiding. "Gun control" is not a single, different thing for which truths may be found and stated. Gun control is a large number of laws and proposed laws, each of which must be separately evaluated (Pudlo, 2004).

### **Conclusion**

There is substantial evidence that crime is the result of social, personality, and situational factors. This has been shown for rational or utilitarian offenses such as theft, crimes providing immediate material advantages, and destructive acts such as suicide (Clarke & Lester, 1989). The availability of means to commit suicide and homicide is, for example, strongly correlated

with the frequency of such events (Killias, van Kesteren, Rindlisbacher, 2001). Because there is no good reason to believe that a high prevalence of suicide increases the motivation of people to buy and keep guns in their homes, there is good reason to assume that the presence of weapons increases the likelihood of violent acts (Hemenway, 2004).

As with most issues in the gun debate, there is merit in both sides of the arguments. Guns confer both benefits and costs. It's true that some gun owners use guns in self-defense, to protect their lives and their own property. Although, evidence suggests that it is also true that some guns were bought for self-protection; however, they were used for criminal purposes (Hemenway, 2001). Furthermore, in some cases criminals are deterred from committing crimes because of a fear of confronting armed victims. In other words, most of the homicides occur in robbery occasions; therefore, if the victim is armed so it's more likely that the criminal will shoot the person who owns a gun (Kleck, 2001).

According to David Hemenway a professor of health policy at the Harvard School of Public Health; where there are more guns, there are more crimes. In other words if a country or in a state where there more guns even for the self-defense; there are more crime and violence - there are more robberies, homicides, suicides, and robbery homicides (Hemenway, 2001). I would like to conclude by stating that while certain arguments for gun ownership may carry some weight, after reading and analyzing various arguments made by pro-gun advocates, I am not quite convinced whether gun ownership will contribute to our safety in the long run.

I believe that if guns can ever protect us that will only be in the case when they are in the hands of law enforcement officers and police – not even in the hands of good citizens. In the latter part of this paper, I purposefully, included pro-gun views, partly because as I said earlier, I was curious about the arguments of pro-gun groups and partly because I believe that no matter how positive statistics data may be presented on crime rates in the United States and its comparison with other nations, the underlying reality is that guns and their availability does increase the chance of violence and crime.

I make this conclusion based on the very facts of life. Peoples' emotional state whether at home, at work, during journeys or in any situations is altering – is not static. It is influenced by the events they experience regularly and they tend to react differently depending on the state of

emotions and perhaps depending on the experience – sad events, happy occasions, and humiliating, embarrassing, demeaning and disgracing, frightening situations and etc...

To my surprise, as noted earlier, pro-gun advocates maintain that even if guns did not exist, people would still commit murders, kill innocent people, commit robberies using other instruments, but it appears that they either do not get the point or simply neglect the reality. Finally, like many anti-gun advocates, I too, suggest that it is the prevalence and availability of guns that have facilitated violent crimes and increased crimes and never the reverse as advocated by pro-gun groups.

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