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## **Can Gun Control Reduce Crime? Part 1**

**by Benedict D. LaRosa**

In the wake of the shootings at Columbine High School in April 1999 and other schools across the country, there has been a chorus calling for more gun-control measures to prevent similar incidents and to control crime in general. Setting aside the obvious emotional response that such tragedies always engender, is it realistic to expect that more gun-control laws will make our schools and streets safe? To answer that question, we need to understand the relationship between gun control and crime control.

The cry for gun control to solve crime problems, although not new, is finding greater acceptance today among Americans. Throughout most of our history, people armed themselves in response to increased danger from criminals, bandits, marauding Indians, invaders (British in 1814 and Pancho Villa in 1916), or abusive government (as in the case of the American Revolution and the Civil War), a move considered normal and rational until recently.

Today, there are numerous well-funded lobby groups, such as Handgun Control, Inc. (renamed the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence in 2001), the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence, and Million Mom March, that advocate the disarming of Americans as a means to prevent and reduce crime. These organizations use tragedies such as Columbine to focus public attention and influence public opinion in their favor.

At the opposite end of the gun-control spectrum are such organizations as the National Rifle Association, Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership, and Gun Owners of America, which believe that gun control is an ineffective crime-fighting tool.

Who is right? With the assumption that history is a better guide than good intentions, let's consider the arguments pro and con and draw our own conclusions.

Despite thousands of gun laws at the federal, state, and local levels, gun-control advocates insist that guns are still too readily available. They point to statistics that indicate that violent crime is down since the Brady Law (February 1994) and the assault-weapon ban (September 1994) went into effect. For example, a 1999 study by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice, shows that violent juvenile crime by minors 10-17 years old was down 30 percent between 1994 and 1998, the lowest since 1988.

Gun-control proponents advocate everything from gun-free zones, waiting periods, background checks, limited-capacity magazines, safe-storage regulations, gun registration, owner licensing, and owner-only locks to banning firearms entirely from the hands of everyone but the military and police.

On the surface, it seems logical to conclude that making guns more difficult to obtain will keep them from the hands of some criminals. But what does the record of past gun-control measures show?

John Stossel reported correctly in the October 22, 1999, edition of ABC's *20/20* that despite the headlines, schoolyard killings are down 50 percent since 1992. Gun-rights advocates point out that crime began declining two years before the Brady and assault-weapon laws went into effect, because of increased imprisonment rates and improved prosecution.

Gun-control advocates look at guns only as a means to harm others even though they are more often used to prevent injury. According to a 1995 study entitled "Armed Resistance to Crime: The Prevalence and Nature of Self-Defense with a Gun" by Gary Kleck and Marc Gertz, published by the *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* at Northwestern University School of Law, law-abiding citizens use guns to defend themselves against criminals as many as 2.5 million times every year.

That means that firearms are used 60 times more often to protect the lives of honest citizens than to shoot with criminal intent. Of these defensive shootings, more than 200,000 are by women defending themselves against sexual abuse. About half a million times a year, a citizen carrying a gun away from home uses it in self-defense. Again, according to Kleck and Gertz, "Citizens shoot and kill more criminals than police do every year [2,819 times versus 303]." Moreover, as George Will pointed out in an article entitled "Are We a Nation of Cowards?" in the November 15, 1993, issue of *Newsweek*, while police have an error rate of 11 percent when it comes to the accidental shooting of innocent civilians, the armed citizens' error rate is only 2 percent, making them five times safer than police.

Other studies give similar results. “Guns in America: National Survey on Private Ownership and Use of Firearms,” by the Clinton administration’s Justice Department shows that between 1.5 and 3 million people in the United States use a firearm to defend themselves and others from criminals each year. A 1986 study by Hart Research Associates puts the upper limit at 3.2 million.

Those studies and others indicate that often the mere sight of a firearm discourages an attacker. Criminologist John Lott from the University of Florida found that 98 percent of the time when people use guns defensively, simply brandishing a firearm is sufficient to cause a criminal to break off an attack. Lott also found that in less than 2 percent of the cases is the gun fired, and three-fourths of those are warning shots.

### **Guns stop crime**

Long before those studies, history records what happened when the Cole Younger gang of eight tried to hold up the bank in Northfield, Minnesota, in 1876. They were recognized by a citizen who sounded the alarm. The gang was shot to pieces by armed civilians as they exited the bank. Two were shot dead, two wounded, and Cole Younger was captured. Jesse James and his brother Frank escaped, though Jesse was wounded. It wasn’t the police but rather armed citizens who thwarted the gang’s attempt to rob the bank.

When Pancho Villa attacked Columbus, New Mexico, in March 1916 with more than 600 men, he did so in the early morning, catching everyone by surprise. Although his men damaged a great deal of property, only 17 Americans died, 8 of whom were soldiers from a nearby army post. Because the civilians were well-armed, 94 of Villa’s men were killed and an unknown number wounded, despite the surprise attack.

As nationally syndicated columnist Thomas Sowell has pointed out, shooting sprees are usually stopped “by the arrival on the scene of other people with guns,” whether police or private individuals.

In 1997, assistant principal Joel Myrick used a gun to stop a violent teen who was shooting up his school in Pearl, Mississippi. He succeeded in preventing a massacre, but was prosecuted for having a gun within 1,000 feet of a school. (Go figure!)

In an article published in the August 3, 1999, edition of the *San Antonio Express-News*, Sowell recounts an incident that occurred in July 1999 at a shooting range in San Mateo, California, where a man armed with a handgun took three hostages. A note said he was going to kill the

hostages and then himself. An employee took a gun from the range and shot the gunman, freeing the hostages.

Sowell, who is African-American, correctly points out that gun-control laws don't control guns, "They disarm potential victims. Why do you think they disarmed slaves? Because if slaves had been armed, that would have been the end of slavery."

Several years before the Columbine shootings, Congress imposed a school-zone gun ban which prohibited firearms within 1,000 feet of any school, under the mistaken belief that potential killers obey gun-control laws. That law didn't deter the two perpetrators of the Columbine massacre, but it did get Joel Myrick in trouble.

Gun control advocates argue that the police are there to protect us from criminals and the military from invaders. But in 1992, the National Guard and police refused to engage hoodlums during the Los Angeles riots, effectively abandoning people to their fate. Nevertheless many Korean merchants successfully used firearms with high-capacity magazines, which Congress has since banned, to fend off rioters. Their stores still stood after the riots.

After passage of the 1968 gun-control act, the number of robberies jumped from 138,000 in 1965 to 376,000 in 1972, while murders committed with guns increased from 5,015 to 10,379 in the same period. According to the Census Bureau, the proportion of cases in which the murder weapon was a firearm rose from 57.2 percent to 65.6 percent.

### **Gun control and crime**

In 1976, Washington, D.C., instituted one of the strictest gun-control laws in the country. The murder rate since that time has risen 134 percent (77.8 per 100,000 population) while the overall rate for the country has declined 2 percent. Washington, D.C., politicians find it easy to blame Virginia's less-stringent gun laws for the D.C. murder rate. Yet Virginia Beach, Virginia's largest city with almost 400,000 residents, has had one of the lowest rates of murder in the country — 4.1 per 100,000.

In New York City, long known for strict regulation of all types of weapons, only 19 percent of the 390 homicides in 1960 involved pistols. By 1972, this proportion had jumped to 49 percent of 1,691. In 1973, according to the *New York Times*, there were only 28,000 lawfully possessed handguns in the nation's largest city, but police estimated that there were as many as 1.3 million illegal handguns there.

In 1986, Maryland banned small, affordable handguns called Saturday night specials. Within two years, Maryland's murder rate increased by 20 percent, surpassing the national murder rate by 33 percent. Then Maryland passed a one-gun-a-month law. Yet between 1997 and 1998, 600 firearms recovered from crime scenes were traced to Maryland gun stores. Virginia, one of only two other states with a similar law, ranked third as a source of guns used by criminals in other states.

On the other hand, New Hampshire has almost no gun control and its cities are rated among the safest in the country. Across the border in Massachusetts, which has very stringent gun-control laws, cities of comparable size have two to three times as much crime as New Hampshire.

Vermont has the least restrictive gun-control law. It recognizes the right of any Vermonter who has not otherwise been prohibited from owning a firearm to carry concealed weapons without a permit or license. Yet Vermont has one of the lowest crime rates in America, ranking 49 out of 50 in all crimes and 47th in murders.

States which have passed concealed-carry laws have seen their murder rate fall by 8.5 percent, rapes by 5 percent, aggravated assaults by 7 percent and robbery by 3 percent.

Texas is a good example. In the early 1990s, Texas's serious crime rate was 38 percent above the national average. Since then, serious crime in Texas has dropped 50 percent faster than for the nation as a whole. All this happened after passage of a concealed-carry law in 1994.

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