

Banning Handguns Would Save Lives?

It Just Ain't So!

A *Los Angeles Times* opinion piece by Jennifer Price last February, “Gun Lobby’s Perfect Aim,” asks: why not ban handguns? She was writing in anger and sorrow over the murder of her brother David and his wife, by the wife’s mother.

Emotion is a poor basis for public policy, and the essay demonstrates a poor grasp of the underlying problems. Ms. Price tells us that “Handguns are tools to kill people. It’s what they’re designed to do effectively and well. It’s not surprising that some 11,000 people annually in the United States use them intentionally to do exactly that.”

Most people will take that to mean 11,000 *murders*. Examining the data shows why a handgun ban—even if the government could actually enforce it—wouldn’t save 11,000 lives. It might not save any lives at all.

According to the FBI, in 2001 there were *no more* than 6,790 handgun murders and non-negligent manslaughters. The FBI counts these crimes based on the initial charges filed. About 3 percent of private gun killings initially charged as crimes are, within a year, reclassified as self-defense. The actual handgun-murder count is probably closer to 6,500. There also were probably 700 to 900 justifiable handgun homicides by police officers and private individuals.

The police shootings would not be affected by a handgun ban. But a ban on private handgun ownership probably will substantially reduce private justifiable handgun homicides. Most law-abiding people won’t break the law to own a handgun. The rapists, murderers, and armed robbers, on

the other hand, have already shown us their attitude toward obeying laws. If all 100 million handguns in America today disappeared (an extraordinarily efficient police state would be required), some unknown percentage of those justifiable homicides would be replaced by murders, rapes, and rape-murders. Even if there were still a net reduction in deaths, it would not be an argument for a ban; the life of a criminal is of no value compared to the life or suffering of his victim.

We’re up to about 7,200 intentional handgun killings. So how does Ms. Price get 11,000? The remaining deaths aren’t accidents; they are suicides—and a handgun ban isn’t going to reduce those deaths, because suicide is hard to prevent. According to criminology professor Gary Kleck in *Point Blank*, the percentage of suicide attempts that “succeed” is about the same regardless of method: 84.7 percent for guns, 80 percent for hanging, and 77 percent using car exhaust.

Still, we are talking about 6,500 or so lives cut short by handgun murders. What happens if we ban handguns? Prohibition and the War on Drugs have taught us that as long as a demand exists, someone will try to fill it, no matter how draconian the laws are. Handguns—which already sell for \$90–\$300 a pound—would be very profitable to smuggle. Perhaps smugglers would hide handguns inside bales of marijuana or bags of cocaine to hide them from Customs.

Even in jails—where prisoners are strip-searched when they enter, where there is no physical contact with visitors, where prisoners and their cells can be searched at any time, and where guards have a powerful interest in keeping prisoners disarmed—guns still slip in. Back in the early 1990s, New York City jail inmates were shooting themselves and then suing the city for “inadequate protection by jail officials.” If jail walls can’t keep guns out, does anyone seriously think that our national borders will do even as well?

Almost any medium-sized town in America could make sufficient handguns to satisfy criminals and scared but otherwise law-abiding people. Even with guns legal and cheap, illegal manufacturing still goes on. In 1992 David Ohman was arrested after Alameda County, California, sheriff's deputies found newly manufactured machine guns and handguns in his shop with no serial numbers.

True, a ban on handguns means that someone like Jennifer Price's brother's mother-in-law wouldn't have been able to legally buy a handgun, and she might not have known where or how to buy one illegally. But his mother-in-law is not a typical murderer.

In *Point Blank* Kleck points out that the "average killer has a long history of criminal conduct in his or her past." This includes "perpetrators of domestic 'crime-of-passion' homicides." In 2001, 21 percent of identified murderers were 19 or under—who couldn't lawfully purchase a handgun. The average murderer is already breaking many laws by buying a handgun; as long as handguns are available on the black market, criminals will buy them.

If Guns Disappeared

What if the handguns actually disappeared? Some criminologists convincingly argue that such a ban might actually *increase* murder rates. At least some gun robberies would still take place—but instead of using handguns, criminals would use sawed-off long guns. As Kleck points out, making a handgun requires machine tools and skill; cutting a shotgun or a rifle down to a concealable size only requires a hacksaw and 20 minutes. Since a sawed-off shotgun is substantially more deadly than a handgun, even if the robbery rate stayed the same, Kleck argues, robbery-related murders would probably increase.

As criminologists James Wright, Peter Rossi, and Kathleen Daly put it: "If someone intends to open fire on the authors of this

study, our *strong* preference is that they open fire with a handgun, and the junkier the handgun, the better. The possibility that even a fraction of the predators who now walk the streets armed with handguns would, in the face of a handgun ban, prowl with sawed-off shotguns instead, causes one to tremble."

Ms. Price seems to have missed that handguns can be a deterrent. Unlike in California, where concealed weapon permits are usually available only after making a large campaign contribution to the sheriff, in many American states, law-abiding adults can get a permit to carry a concealed handgun for self-defense. Criminals know that in many of these states about 3–4 percent of the people have permits to carry handguns. The *next* victim a criminal attacks might be the *last* victim he attacks. Liberalization of concealed-weapon permit laws appear to have caused mild but statistically significant reductions in rates for murder, rape, and robbery. (See John R. Lott's *More Guns, Less Crime*.)

As long as we focus on the *instruments* of murder, as Ms. Price does, we'll never solve the underlying problem: violence. I grew up in Los Angeles, but now live in Boise, Idaho, which has lots of handguns and almost no gun-control laws. The FBI says it had five murders in the years 1999–2001. That's 0.95 murders per 100,000 people per year—with all weapon types. Pretty clearly, handguns aren't much misused here.

Ms. Price's loss is a tragedy, and it seems a handgun ban might have prevented it. Her brother's death, however, is not typical of handgun murder in America. The price of saving two lives near to her might well be three or four strangers murdered with other weapons because they were unable to defend themselves from career criminals.

—CLAYTON E. CRAMER

clayton@claytoncramer.com

Author, *Concealed Weapon Laws of the Early Republic: Dueling, Southern Violence, and Moral Reform* (Praeger Press)