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Unsafe in Any Hands

Why America Needs to Ban Handguns

Introduction

The United States leads the industrialized world in firearms violence of all types—homicides, suicides, and unintentional deaths.¹ Most of this violence involves the use of a handgun.² Handguns are easily concealed, engineered for maximum lethality, relatively inexpensive, and easy to acquire. On average, handguns are used in nearly 70 percent of firearm suicides³ and 80 percent of firearm homicides.⁴ The United States has not so much a firearms problem as a handgun problem.

The Toll of Handgun Violence

The call to ban handguns is not inspired by a generalized hatred of guns. It is a response to the blood price that our nation has paid for the explosive growth of the handgun population over the past generation.⁵ More than two out of three of the one million Americans who died in firearm-related homicides, suicides, and unintentional shootings since 1962 were killed with handguns—i.e., 667,000.⁶ This weapon, which has inflicted pain and death in such a disproportionate degree, is owned by a distinct minority of Americans—only one out of six adults.⁷ Out of the current total firearms population of some 190 million, rifles and shotguns outnumber handguns two to one, yet handguns account for the majority of killings, woundings, and gun crimes. For example, of all firearm-related crimes in 1993, 86 percent involved the use of a handgun.⁸

The modern handgun has been honed for decades by the firearms industry to the highest possible level of lethality, just as race cars are continually redeveloped for maximum speed. The handguns that have been introduced into the market in the past two decades—especially high-caliber, high-capacity, semiautomatic pistols—meet the lethality standard admirably.⁹ The increased efficiency of the handgun as a killing machine is the result of a strategy by the gun industry over the past decade and a half to boost sales.¹⁰ This growth in killing power is the result of three variables deliberately designed into handguns—

- Greater *capacity*, i.e. the ability to hold more bullets.¹¹
- Higher *caliber*, meaning bigger bullets.¹²
- Increased *concealability*, facilitating criminal use.¹³

These variables reached their zenith with the recent introduction of "pocket rockets,"—semiautomatic pistols in higher calibers that can be concealed in the palm of the hand.

Recent data reveal the effect of this decades-long trend. From 1990 to 1997, of the 160,000 homicides committed in the United States, more than half (55.6 percent) involved a handgun.¹⁴ This block of 89,000 handgun homicides is larger than that of all other weapons used in homicides *combined*.

As the debate over gun violence is almost always framed in terms of fatalities, it is easy to overlook that, for every person killed with a firearm, approximately three others require medical treatment for wounds inflicted with a gun.¹⁵ One conservative estimate places the annual cost of immediate medical care for all gunshot wounds at \$4 billion.¹⁶ Other researchers take into account lifetime care and long-term economic loss, calculating the overall cost of gun violence in any given year to be in excess of \$20 billion.¹⁷ Statistics for the costs of handgun violence in particular are not available. Nonetheless, since handguns cause the majority of firearm injuries, it follows that handgun injuries are responsible for the majority of firearm-related expenses.

There are an estimated 65 million handguns in America.¹⁸ The deleterious impact of this large handgun population on our murder rate becomes evident when making comparisons to countries that strongly regulate private firearms ownership with an emphasis on minimizing access to handguns. For example, in 1995 the U.S. firearms death rate was 13.7 per 100,000; in Canada 3.9 per 100,000; in Australia 2.9 per 100,000; and,

in England and Wales it was 0.4 per 100,000.¹⁹ Contrary to a common rationalization, the United States is not especially more violent than other "older" cultures; in fact, as Western Europe grows more violent, the U.S. becomes less so.²⁰ The main difference between those nations and our own is that we have more than 60 million handguns. The lesson to be learned from this is, as one public health researcher stated: "People without guns *injure* people; guns *kill* them."²¹

The Handgun as Consumer Product

The mythology woven around the handgun by the gun lobby clouds the reality that a handgun is a consumer product that ought to be judged and regulated by the same standards applied to all other products. However, the firearms industry is exempt from basic federal consumer product health and safety regulation. Aside from the issuance of pro forma licenses for gun manufacturers and dealers, no federal agency has the authority to review the firearm industry's products in terms of their relative costs and benefits.²² Using this cost/benefit standard, two reasonable and essential questions need to be posed about the handgun—

- Is it innately dangerous to the user or to anyone else?
- What does its use cost society in human and monetary terms in contrast to its beneficial applications? Indeed, by making a simple comparison between the costs of civilian handgun ownership versus the benefits these weapons are purported to deliver, the case for banning handguns becomes self-evident. For example, for every time in 1997 that a civilian used a handgun to kill in self-defense, 43 people lost their lives in handgun homicides alone.²³ This passes any point of rational justification for condoning the existence of such a product on the open market, especially in an unregulated state.

Through the use of dubious methodologies, the National Rifle Association and other pro-gun advocates have created wildly inflated numbers supposedly showing handguns to be an effective means of self defense.²⁴ This claim is false. Although handguns are marketed primarily for their self-defense value, bringing one into the home has exactly the opposite effect, placing residents at a much higher rate of risk. A person living in a home with a gun is three times more likely to die by homicide²⁵ and five times more likely to die by suicide.²⁶

Data from 1997 buttress the point that self-defense handgun uses are rare. In that year there was—

- A total of 15,690 homicides.
- Of these, 8,503 (54.2 percent) were committed with handguns, contrasted to 2,207 involving *all other types of firearms* (14.1 percent).
- Among handgun homicides, only 193 (2.3 percent) were classified as justifiable homicides by civilians.²⁷

For decades handguns have been marketed and purchased as the strongest bulwark a law-abiding citizen could have against a legion of dangerous strangers. However, of the 8,503 handgun homicides in 1997, only 110 (1.3 percent) were justifiable killings of an assailant previously unknown to the person using a handgun.²⁸ Instances in which a person uses a handgun in self-defense against an unknown attacker do occur, but compared against the total universe of gun crime and violence, they are extremely rare.

Handguns are employed extensively in violent crimes such as assaults and robberies. In 1993 there were about 1.3 million such crimes committed with a firearm²⁹—and 86 percent of the time the weapon was a handgun. Conversely, an analysis of four years of National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) data indicated that gun owners claim to defend themselves with a firearm of any type approximately 65,000 times in an average year—a minute percentage compared to the total figure for violent crime.³⁰

Contrary to the National Rifle Association's standard portrayal of gun violence, most gun deaths do not take place during the course of felony crime.³¹ Considering what the FBI has been reporting year in and year out—that most homicides result from arguments between people who know each other³²—it is clear that a handgun purchased for self-protection poses the gravest danger to the very person it is supposed to protect.

Suicide And Unintended Shootings

Throughout the long and bitter debate over gun violence, the fact that the largest number of gun deaths is suicides, not homicides, has been consistently overlooked. For example, from 1990 to 1997 there were 147,000 suicides committed with a firearm in contrast to 100,000 firearm homicides.³³ An estimated 90,000 of these suicides were accomplished with a handgun³⁴—a tribute to the operational simplicity and high lethality that make it the ideal suicide machine. Perhaps because of a lingering sense of suicide as a shameful act, this calamitous by-product of handgun ownership has been largely disregarded by even gun control advocates. Obviously handguns by themselves do not make people suicidal. But their ready availability has

increased their use in suicide attempts and the use of a firearm all but guarantees that a suicide attempt will end in a fatality.³⁵

People living in a household with a gun are five times more likely to commit suicide than those living in a gun-free home³⁶—and seven times out of 10 a handgun will be their weapon of choice.³⁷ The deadly link between handgun ownership and suicide was decisively established in a 1999 study of California handgun purchasers showing that the suicide rate during the first week after the purchase of a handgun is *57 times higher* than for the population as a whole. During the first year after purchase, suicide remained the leading cause of death among handgun purchasers.³⁸

In sharp contrast, unintentional shootings involving children, which receive the lion's share of media attention, actually generate the smallest number of firearm deaths in any category. In 1997 there were 981 victims of unintentional shooting deaths, of whom 142 were aged 14 years old or younger.³⁹ Regardless of the means, the violent death of a young person is a catastrophe, but it is still important to note that, while 300 young people between the ages of 15 years to 24 years old died in unintentional shootings in 1997, more than eight times as many died in firearms suicides,⁴⁰ most involving handguns.

The Politics Of Gun Control

Obsessed with its search for "common sense" gun control and ever fearful of being perceived as radical, most of the American gun control movement has given up on trying to ban handguns. This has helped create the notion that support for a ban is absent or marginal. However, polling data taken over the past 20 years have consistently shown that more than 30 percent of the public favor a handgun ban with this support ranging at times between 40 percent and 45 percent (even hitting 50 percent in one 1999 poll).⁴¹ Nonetheless, many in the gun control movement insist on ignoring the existence of this significant bloc of American voters.

An objection continually raised to gun control is that the Second Amendment to the Constitution somehow forbids it. This is pure myth. No gun control law has ever been overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court on Second Amendment grounds.⁴² Federal bans on machine guns as well as city ordinances banning handgun possession have remained on the books for decades—despite vigorous court challenges. For all its posturing, the National Rifle Association has been reluctant to bring its Second Amendment arguments into court. (The last time it did so was in an attempt to overturn the 1981 Morton Grove, Illinois, handgun ban; the organization was roundly rejected on both the federal and state levels.)⁴³ If Congress or individual states want to ban handguns, they can do so constitutionally—all they need is the will.

Gun Control Laws

Why has more than 30 years of federal gun control legislation failed to slow the carnage? This is in large measure due to the ad hoc nature in which gun control legislation has been enacted often in response to specific acts of violence.

Effective legislation must take into account the following—

- Most victims know their killers and are often related to them.
- Criminals often get their guns through gun stores and are skilled in evading point-of-purchase legal roadblocks.
- The secondary gun market—i.e., the selling of guns at gun shows or over the Internet—is in reality totally unregulated.
- It is the self-defense handgun purchased by "law-abiding" citizens that ends up being used in most handgun violence.

Politicians and gun control advocates alike, however, have a tendency to proffer the same legislative remedies over and over ("licensing and registration" or "background checks") without consideration of these fundamentals or inquiry into the actual effects such laws might have on reducing firearms violence overall.

A contrasting legislative approach to curtailing gun violence begins with the recognition that the firearms industry remains the last unregulated manufacturer of a consumer product. Guns are the only consumer product in America specifically exempted from federal health and safety requirements. The firearms industry maintains this regulatory immunity despite the fact that their products kill more Americans every year than all household and recreational products combined.

To end this era of national denial, Congress should vest the Department of the Treasury with strong authority to regulate the design, manufacture, and distribution of firearms. Such authority should include the ability to remove from the market firearms that pose a serious threat to public health and safety. In every other part of the consumer economy we have long recognized that the damage wrought by some products can be controlled only by an unequivocal ban. Products such as three-wheel ATVs and lawn darts had related death

rates microscopic in comparison to handguns, but were nevertheless banned. Also, under federal regulation, products ranging from cribs to automobiles have undergone major structural alterations to minimize inherent dangers. Firearms and particularly handguns are long overdue to receive the same regulatory scrutiny.

If a handgun ban were enacted, what should be done about the existing supply of some 65 million civilian-owned handguns? Could the nation afford to eliminate them through a program? Since many handguns began as cheap "junk guns," a generous estimate of the average buy-back price would be \$250. The total tab would be about \$16.25 billion, which is slightly more than three SSN-21 nuclear attack submarines.⁴⁴ Considering that by conservative estimates America spends \$4 billion annually on medical care for gun violence victims, the cost of a buy-back could be recouped in a few years.

A clear-cut plan to ban handguns should be developed and implemented soon. Considering the many thousands who are killed or maimed by the handgun each year, how much more motivation do we need?

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The Violence Policy Center is a national non-profit educational foundation that conducts research on violence in America and works to develop violence-reduction policies and proposals. The Center examines the role of firearms in America, conducts research on firearms violence, and explores new ways to decrease firearm-related death and injury.

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