GUN CONTROL

ISSUES AND ANSWERS

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This book brings together current information on the impact of guns on American life. The author first provides data on the role of guns in violent crimes, accidental deaths, and suicide. He then focuses on the extent of gun ownership in America, differences between people who own guns and those who do not, and criteria for deciding who should or should not be permitted to own a gun. Police involvement with guns is discussed also; their unique involvement both as victims of civilian attacks and as agents of society with permission to use deadly force receives close attention. Final chapters describe the influence of gun control on personal violence, examine attitudes toward gun control, review proposals made for and against gun control, and offer suggestions for public policy, including a rationale for registering guns and licensing owners.

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For Mary
who guided me and worked with me
in this endeavor

PREFACE

THIS book reviews information collected by social scientists that pertains to the role that guns play in everyone's life and the effects that gun control might have on this role.

First, the role that guns play in violent crime (including homicide), accidents, and suicide will be examined. It will be clear that guns account for a large number of injuries and deaths each year in the United States.

Next, the available data on who owns guns in America will be examined and some criteria for refusing permission to allow certain individuals to own guns will be proposed.

The police are closely involved with guns, both as victims of civilian attacks and as agents of the society with permission to use deadly force under certain circumstances. In Section III, the police involvement with guns will be reviewed.

In Section IV, the effects that gun control laws have had will be examined. Also public attitudes toward gun control will be discussed.

Finally, the various proposals that have been made for and against gun control will be reviewed and some suggestions for public policy will be made.

All of this book was written by David Lester, except for Chapters 6 and 9.

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GUN CONTROL

Section I
THE ROLE OF GUNS IN DEATH

CHAPTER 1

THE ROLE OF GUNS IN VIOLENT CRIME

COOK (1982) has recently reviewed the role of firearms in violent crime, discussed theories, and proposed solutions for the problem. He noted first the magnitude of the problem. In 1977, there were 682,000 violent crimes committed with firearms in the United States, 11,300 homicides, 367,000 assaults, 15,000 rapes, and 289,000 robberies.* Cook noted that the social problem presented by these crimes is a major one. Clearly large numbers of American citizens have access to guns and use them for violent crimes.

Cook noted that guns have several characteristics that make them superior to other weapons for use in crimes of violence. They can be used by weak and unskilled assailants. They can kill impersonally at a distance, kill quickly, and minimize the risk of counterattack by the victim. The mere display of a gun often immobilizes the victim.

*Anon (1981) reported on national crime statistics for the United States eleven percent of violent crimes in the period 1973 to 1980 involved a firearm. For armed violent incidents, guns were used in about 62 percent of homicides, 26 percent of rapes, 32 percent of robberies and 30 percent of aggravated assaults.

Guns are not as important to the assailant if the victim is unarmed, alone, small, or frail or under the influence of drugs. But, for attacking a powerful victim, such as a police officer or a bank, then a gun becomes much more crucial. Cook suggested that the assailant knows this and so his choice of a weapon is affected by his appraisal of his task. The choice of a weapon is a possible indicator of the assailant's intent. An assailant who intends his victim to live will not fire a gun at him. The assailant who plans to kill the victim probably will use a gun.

Cook also argued that gun attacks have a higher likelihood of killing the victim than attacks with other weapons. Not only is the assailant using a gun more likely to have planned the killing, but also assailants planning to simply incapacitate the victim may be more likely to kill the victim inadvertently if a gun is used.

Fisher (1976) studied homicide in Detroit in the 1960s and found that the increase in the homicide rate from 1963 to 1971 was due solely to the increase in the homicide rate by guns. In particular, the homicide rate by handguns rose dramatically. The proportions of homicides using firearms rose from 47 percent in 1963 to 76 percent in 1971.

Fisher found that gun availability (measured by the number of firearm registrations each year and the number of permits to buy guns issued) correlated with the homicide rate over this time period. In addition, Fisher found that the homicide rate and the proportion of homicides committed by firearms were positively correlated over time in Detroit and in twenty-five cities in the United States.

In 1978, 41 percent of robberies involved the use of a gun (Cook, 1982). Skogan (1978) found that victims of robbers using guns are less likely to resist than victims of robbers using other weapons. However, Skogan found little association between the success of the robbery against persons and the type of weapon used. For commercial robberies, the robber using a gun was much more successful than robbers using other weapons. For attacks against persons, Cook noted that robbers are more likely to use guns if they are attacking adult males and people in groups. Cook noted that two possible explanations exist for these findings: (1) robbers who plan particular kinds of robberies take care to choose an appropriate weapon, or (2) the presence of a particular type of weapon tempts

robbers to attack more lucrative and less vulnerable targets.

Zimring (1977) showed in Detroit that the death rate in armed robberies was higher if the weapon used was a gun. However, as noted above, it may be that robbers who are more intent on killing take a gun rather than that robbers with a gun are more likely to kill the victim because of the higher lethality of their weapon.

For murder, Cook (1982) found that vulnerable victims, such as women and the old, were less likely to be killed by guns than less vulnerable victims. Cook speculated that, first, homicidal attacks are more likely to fail if the victim is strong and the likelihood of failure is greater if the attack does not employ a gun. Second, the likelihood that a person will act upon a homicidal impulse is less if the perceived probability of success is small. Third, if the murder is planned, the killer will try to obtain a gun, since it is the most efficient murder weapon. All of these possibilities lead to the conclusion that reducing the availability of guns will reduce the murder rate.

Cook also noted that many murders are not planned. The motivation is ambiguous. Often an altercation takes place with participants who have been drinking. The presence of a weapon may stimulate the aggression in the altercation (*see* Chapter 2), and the presence of a more lethal weapon will increase the likelihood of death resulting from its use.

EFFECTS OF REDUCED GUN AVAILABILITY

Seitz (1972) noted that scholars disagree on the nature of the relation between firearms and violence. Wolfgang (1958) has argued that potential murderers deprived of guns would simply turn to other lethal weapons. Zimring (1968) argued on the other hand that other weapons were not as lethal as guns and would be less likely to result in death.

Seitz noted that in 1967 the correlation between the firearm homicide rate and the total homicide rate for the fifty states was 0.98, almost a perfect correlation, and so he agreed with Zimring. (In fact, Seitz should have compared the firearm homicide rate with the homicide rate not involving guns. If firearms are commonly used for homicide, then the correlation between the firearm homi-

cide rate and the total homicide rate will be high because the first rate determines in large part the numerical value of the second rate. Seitz needed to show that firearm homicide rate and homicide rate not involving guns are independent.)

Zimring (1968) felt that many homicides do not result from an attack committed with the single-minded intention to kill. He noted that 82 percent of homicides in 1967 in Chicago were a result of altercations, 71 percent involved the death of a friend, a family member, or an acquaintance, and 70 percent of the gun murders involved only one bullet.

Zimring felt that a reduced availability of guns would lower the incidence of murder. Even if the murderers switched to knives, Zimring noted that attacks with knives were less likely to result in deaths than attacks with guns. Zimring noted that he could not *prove* that switching to other weapons would lower the homicide rate, but he thought it likely.

Tanay (1972) argued that ego-dystonic homicides are more common in the United States than ego-syntonic homicides. Ego-dystonic homicides are dissociative homicides in which the murderer's superego is overcontrolling, there is a sadomasochistic relationship between the murderer and the victim, the murderer is in an altered state of consciousness, and there is the presence of a weapon. The reduced availability of guns would lessen the rate of ego-dystonic murder, according to Tanay, since the murderer would not have access to as lethal a weapon during his dissociative mental state. (Ego-syntonic murders are rational, purposive, and goal-directed.) Etzioni and Remp (1972) also felt that the reduced availability of guns should cut the homicide rate.

Cook speculated about the effects of reducing the availability of guns in a country. First, the switch to other weapons by criminals will mean a switch to less lethal weapons. Thus, the felony murder rate should decrease. Second, the lack of availability of guns will cause intelligent criminals to avoid crimes that require the use of guns. For example bank robberies may decrease. However, crimes that do not need a gun, such as muggings of elderly citizens, may increase. This second effect may be all the stronger since the criminal will know that it is less likely that the potential victim will have a gun.

Finally, the reduced availability of guns will decrease the likelihood of unplanned murders resulting from altercations between people.

Of course, it is hard to obtain evidence to support these ideas. Experiments are impossible. Zimring (1977) showed that attacks with .38 caliber guns were more likely to kill than attacks with .22 caliber guns, even controlling for the number and location of wounds. Thus, weapon type is important in the lethality of the outcome.

Cook (1982) has tried to measure the availability of guns in cities by looking at the proportion of guns used for murders and for suicides. He assumed that the more often guns were used for murder and suicide, the more available they must be in the community. This gun availability measure was strongly associated with the total murder rate, both over time and over locale. But the proportion of murderers and suicides using guns is *not* a measure of the number of guns per capita in a city, and a correlational study does not prove cause and effect. Thus, Cook's work is at best merely suggestive. (Cook also found that cities with a lower gun availability index had a lower robbery-murder rate and lower gun-robbery rate, but a higher rate of robbery without the use of guns.)

Zimring (1976) noted that only 34 percent of the handguns confiscated from criminals in 1973 and 1974 were guns made before 1968. He concluded that the majority of guns used by criminals were "new" guns. Thus, restricting gun availability (by the passage of new stricter gun control laws or by the limitation of the production and sale of new guns) might have a large impact on the use of guns in criminal activity.

CONCLUSION

It seems clear that guns play a large role in violent crime and in particular homicide. It would, therefore, seem likely that restricting guns would have an impact on their use in violent crime. However, there is little evidence that restriction of guns would have this desired effect. Furthermore, it is difficult to anticipate the side effects of reducing the availability of guns, such as the possible in-

crease in nonlethal injuries that would accompany a rise in the rate of armed robberies using weapons other than guns.

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CHAPTER 2

DOES THE PRESENCE OF FIREARMS INCITE VIOLENCE?

IN 1967, Berkowitz and LePage (1967) published a seminal article on the factors instigating violence. Berkowitz, along with others, had long argued that cues of violence incite violence. For example when people watch violent films, their subsequent behavior is usually more violent than after they watch nonviolent films.

In their 1967 study, Berkowitz and LePage had students receive electric shock as a punishment for a poor academic performance. They were then asked to rate the performance of the person punishing them and to administer electric shock to this person as a punishment for his poor performance. Berkowitz and LePage found that the subjects administered more electric shocks if guns were present in the room than if they were not. This effect of administering more electric shock if guns were present was found regardless of whether the subjects were told that the guns belonged to the other person or to a stranger. However, the presence of the firearms had an effect only if the subjects received several shocks for their own performance and not when the subjects received only one shock.

Berkowitz concluded that a "weapons effect" existed. When people are punished more than mildly at least, then the presence of guns stimulates them to greater desire to punish the person who has just punished them.

Page and O'Neal (1977) replicated this weapons effect by presenting slides of guns to subjects prior to the shocking task. Subjects given slides of firearms to rate shocked their punisher more than those shown slides of innocuous objects. The effect was the same regardless of whether the gun was pointing toward or away from the viewer in the slides. Berkowitz (1974) reviewed two foreign studies that also supported the weapons effect, and Turner et al. (1977) have concluded from a review of the literature that the weapons effect exists.

Fraczek and Macauley (1971) replicated this weapons effect, but only for subjects who did not respond emotionally to a word association test that included aggressive words. (Those who responded emotionally to the aggressive words did not show the weapons effect.)

Several investigators have tried to make the experimental situations more realistic. Buss et al. (1972) had subjects fire a firearm before punishing a learner with electric shocks. They found no effects from firing the gun, whether it was a shotgun or a heavy pistol. Experience with guns in the past also had no effect on the amount of punishment given in the learning task.

Halderman and Jackson (1979) held up drivers in traffic unnecessarily for several seconds in a stalled pickup truck, which sometimes had a shotgun visibly mounted in the cab. The presence of the shotgun had no effect on whether the drivers of the delayed cars used their horns or not. Similarly, the presence of a person on the street carrying a shotgun had no effect on the use of horns by the delayed drivers. Turner et al. (1975) also failed to find an effect on the use of horns by drivers in a similar situation.

Several investigators, however, have failed to replicate the study by Berkowitz and LePage. Buss et al. (1972) found the opposite effect, with fewer shocks administered in the presence of weapons. Page and Scheidt (1971) also failed to find the weapons effect, but they found that the amount of experience as a subject in research and suspiciousness about the goals of the experimenter affected the phenomenon. While Page and Scheidt found that experienced students showed the weapons effect, Turner and Simons (1974) found

that naive students showed the weapons effect. Turner and Simons also found that students with low anxiety levels about their performance in the experiment showed the effect.

Despite these nonrelications, Berkowitz (1974) considered the weapons effect to be a reliable phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

The demonstration of a weapons effect by Berkowitz would have important consequences for decisions about the role of guns in violent assaults. If it were true that the presence of guns in a situation is a stimulant of increased violence, then this fact could be used to support stricter gun control laws. However, the research evidence is not completely consistent, and several studies have failed to find the weapons effect. Until the reasons for these failures to find the weapons effect are understood, then the effect cannot be considered reliable.

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CHAPTER 3

THE ROLE OF GUNS IN ACCIDENTAL DEATHS

ACCIDENTAL deaths due to firearms are relatively infrequent. In 1976, for example, there were 100,761 accidental deaths in the United States, of which only 2,059 were due to firearm missiles. (In contrast, there were 14,728 suicides due to firearms and explosives and 12,766 homicidal deaths due to firearms and explosives.) However, nonlethal injuries due to firearms accidents are not counted in the United States, and so we do not have a good estimate of how many of such injuries occur each year.

Newton and Zimring (1970) noted too that accidental deaths from firearms were only a small fraction of accidental deaths. In 1967, firearm accidental deaths ranked fifth behind deaths from motor vehicles, falls, fire/burns, and drowning. Newton and Zimring noted that the average age of accidental death victims was forty-one years old, yet the average age of those dying accidentally from firearms was twenty-four. The most common ages were ten to nineteen years, and 40 percent of the victims were children or teenagers. The incidence of accidental firearm deaths across America paralleled

roughly the pattern of firearms ownership. Most accidental firearms deaths took place in the home and while cleaning, playing with, demonstrating, or examining the firearm.

Morgan et al. (1971) documented a large increase in spinal cord injuries in Baltimore over a twelve-year period due primarily to gunshot wound cases.

Khella and Stone (1977) studied people with traumatic spinal cord injuries in Philadelphia, including fifty-three paraplegics and forty-eight quadriplegics. Sixty-six of the 101 cases were a result of gunshot wounds, including 43 percent of the quadriplegics and 90 percent of the paraplegics. The victims were primarily young, black males.

Is the regional variation in the accidental death rate from firearms associated with the homicide and suicide death rates from firearms? This association was explored over the forty-eight continental states of the United States for 1970, and the results are presented in Table 3-I.

TABLE 3-I
THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN DEATH RATES FROM FIREARMS IN 1970

	Accidental Death Rate	*Suicidal Death Rate*	*Homicidal Death Rate*
Accidental death rate	–	0.54†	0.45†
Suicidal death rate	–	–	0.29*
Homicidal death rate	–	–	–

*one-tailed $p < 0.05$
†one-tailed $p \leq 0.001$

It can be observed that states with the highest accidental death rates from firearms also had the highest rates of suicidal and homicidal death rates due to firearms.

Would stricter gun control laws have any impact on the incidence of accidental deaths from guns? Lester and Murrell (1981) found that states with stricter handgun control laws in 1968 did have a lower incidence of accidental deaths from guns in 1960 and 1970.