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Violence and Firearms Policy

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One is tempted to characterize the fifteen years since the Violence Commission finished its research on firearms as an era of more of everything. We have more guns, more gun violence, more research on the relationship between firearms and violence, more public concern about the gun problem, and a sharper focus on handguns as the pivotal issue in the debate that was termed, by the late 1970s, the “Great American Gun War.”¹ The investment of attention and political activity on guns produced an increase in the number of citizens who cared deeply about gun control policy—a dramatic increase on both sides of the question.

Blue ribbon commissions should, of course, studiously avoid claiming credit for movements in crime rates or gun ownership. But the work of the Violence Commission did have a profound impact on the focus of the debate about firearms control, the policy options under discussion, and the nature of the data that is available to inform a debate that now concerns questions of fact as well as matters of value.

One substantial part of the legacy of the commission was the empirical work produced by its task force and the effect of that work on subsequent academic empirical study of guns, violence, and gun control. Put simply, there had been no university-based research prior to 1967 on these matters. Almost immediately after the publication of the task force report, the academic community discovered guns. Research to date—while insufficient—is an important part of current policy dialogue. More than twenty researchers, representing a wide variety of social sciences, have made contributions to the empirical understanding of the issues involved.² Four or five scholars of major repute have devoted substantial portions of their research efforts to the issue.³ With the stakes this high, the budding academic interest in firearms and firearms control may seem modest. However, judged against the factual vacuum prior to the late 1960s, any research tradition is of no small importance.

A second contribution of the commission’s work was its heavy emphasis

on handguns as a discrete problem calling for special emphasis in the discussion of policy options. While not without precedent, the commission's emphasis was the first forceful advocacy of separate policy dialogue about handguns and long weapons since the late 1930s.

Related to the special emphasis on handguns was a shift from recommendations of mild handgun controls, such as registration and permissive licensing, to more drastic methods of reducing the number of handguns possessed by and available to civilians. No proposals for a policy of national handgun scarcity had been made prior to the Violence Commission since the 1930s.⁴ The years following the commission report have seen the terms of the handgun debate shift almost entirely to restrictive licensing, handgun "bans," and other strategies to prohibit law-abiding citizens from acquiring handguns except under special circumstances. The commission's rejection of middle-of-the-road proposals of the sort that have been endorsed by earlier national commissions⁵ sharpened the debate at the same time that it intensified opposition to handgun control among anticontrol opinion groups. >

How should this tripartite legacy be judged? Much, of course, depends on the values of those making the judgment. However, even from the perspective of pro-control advocates, the shift in focus may be seen as bold or foolish depending on the ultimate political result. Fifteen years into a new phase of gun policy as a societal decision, the issue is in doubt. The beginning of this essay discusses some of the changes in ownership, use, costs, and knowledge about guns that have occurred since 1968. The second half, somewhat more speculative, attempts to outline future changes in public attitude that will serve as leading indicators of long-run handgun policy in the United States.

THEN AND NOW

If commission efforts are to be judged by immediate legislative results, the Violence Commission's prescription for a policy aimed at eventually reducing civilian handguns by 90 percent was a resounding failure. Legislation based on the commission's national handgun proposal attracted seven votes in the U.S. Senate. Highly restrictive handgun policies were adopted by a scattering of city governments, but restrictive handgun policies at the state level—where federal law and geography suggested more promising results—have proved uniformly unpopular.

If the commission findings and recommendations were intended to alter the structure of the gun control debate, they succeeded in that task almost immediately but with indeterminate results. The nature of public dialogue as well as its outcome are dependent on much more than rapidly aging

policy analysis. The job of this section is to detail some of the other substantial changes that affect the context in which American citizens now debate what to do about civilian handguns.

More Guns

The Task Force on Firearms estimated a civilian inventory of handguns of 24 million, a rough estimate based on averaging production rates in the twentieth century with survey research studies that showed a somewhat smaller civilian arsenal.⁶ Whatever total ownership value one adopted for the late 1960s, the trend in total handgun ownership during the 1960s was clear. New domestic and imported handguns added to civilian inventories grew from 600,000 in 1962 to well over 2 million in 1968, a fourfold increase.⁷

The significance of this trend, independent of civilian handgun population estimates, was not known until seven years later. Analysis of guns confiscated on the street in several police jurisdictions suggested that the maximum period of risk for illegal carrying or illegal use of a handgun occurred during the weapon's first few years after production.⁸ Thus, if the focus shifts from the total number of weapons in civilian inventory to the number of guns at risk, it was clear that the 1960s operated as a near perfect laboratory in which constantly increasing numbers of weapons were introduced as new guns each year. The new-guns finding has two implications when one retrospectively interprets the data about the 1960s. First, whatever the actual civilian inventory of all kinds of handguns of all ages, the large increase in annual introductions to the civilian market could be expected to have dramatic effects on crime and street-carrying patterns. Second, the notion of significant handgun attrition, at least when speaking of weapons at risk for street use, requires analysts to take into account attrition rates even though these are not knowable by any statistical series presently available. One graphic example: If the risk life of a handgun is six years rather than sixty, the introduction of more than 2 million handguns into the civilian market in 1968 replaced one gun introduced in 1962 with four handguns in 1968. By contrast, the introduction of 2 million handguns in 1975 would just replace the average annual introduction figure in 1968.⁹

This complication introduces the problem of calculating the impact of handgun introduction in the 1970s on handgun availability and the proportion of crimes committed with pistols and revolvers. The decade of the 1970s witnessed a high but more stable rate of handgun introductions over time usually at or near 2 million during those years when it could be determined.¹⁰ Unlike the 1960s, *if* attrition rates were high, handguns being shipped into commerce in the mid-seventies were replacing older handguns mysteriously absent from risk categories, such as street carrying and use in crime on a one-to-one basis. If, in fact, a handgun had a risk life of six

years, 1975 introduction figures would have counterbalanced only the 1968 bumper crop of handguns previously discussed. This refinement in the notion of guns at risk leaves us with a theoretical structure beyond our present competence to test rigorously. The introduction of 20 million handguns in a decade probably did not leave the civilian inventory undisturbed. The question of how much and when handgun inventories expanded is an open one, inviting further empirical research.

One result of acknowledging the possibility of early and substantial handgun attrition is an increased margin of error when guesses are made about the total civilian handgun inventory in the United States. Recent survey research yields an estimate of from 30 to 40 million pistols and revolvers in civilian hands.¹¹ When the focus is guns likely to be involved in criminal activity, a lower number of handguns at risk is suggested by the findings on new guns and street crime.¹² Further, careful analysis of fluctuations in the rate of handgun transfers may be more important than trying to estimate the total population of handguns. If attrition is high, interventions designed to minimize transfers of new or existent handguns show promise of earlier and more substantial impact than would occur if most guns, regardless of age or status, exhibited similar risks of being used abusively.

More Gun Violence

During its first months of research activity, senior Violence Commission staff were divided on the question of whether the United States was experiencing and could expect a sustained increase in serious violent crime. Opponents of this thesis argued that homicide rates had been escalating for a short period of time, and other measures of violent crime were unreliable. Those who thought violence was increasing substantially (and this view ultimately prevailed) pointed to the sharp rate of increase in general levels of violence and the changing pattern of life-threatening violence, principally the growing role of firearms in assault, robbery, and resultant homicides. Hindsight renders that debate moot. The explosive growth in life-threatening violence and the increasing proportion of violent crimes committed with guns continued almost without interruption through the mid-1970s, moderated temporarily, and returned at the end of that decade to rates at or near the highest levels experienced in the twentieth century.

Homicide statistics, the most reliable data available on violent crime, provide a striking example of the growth of violent crime and the disproportionate contribution of firearms. Between 1963 and 1973, the aggregate homicide rate in the United States grew from 4.3 to 9.3 per 100,000, an increase of 116 percent.¹³ A more dramatic contrast emerges when firearm and nonfirearm homicide trends are separately analyzed during this period. Nonfirearm homicide increased from a rate of 2.0 per 100,000 in 1963 to 3.1 in 1973, an increase of 55 percent.¹⁴ Firearm homicide rates increased

from 2.5 per 100,000 in 1963 to 6.2 in 1973, an increase of 148 percent in eleven years.¹⁵

Gun crime played a disproportionate role in periods when homicide rates were moderating or declining as well. Between 1975 and 1976, criminal homicides reported by the police decreased by almost 10 percent. Separate analysis of homicide statistics by weapon type revealed that handgun killings decreased at a rate that was over twice that of killings by all other means.¹⁶ National statistical breakdowns on assault and robbery do not permit the separate analysis of handgun involvement. However, area studies suggest the prominence of handguns in big-city firearms robbery and only slightly less handgun dominance for big-city firearms assault.

The number of assassination attempts is too small for elaborate statistical analysis. It may be worthy of note, however, that every assassination attempt publicly reported since 1968 involved a handgun. Further, handguns were involved in three-quarters of all police killings throughout the 1970s and early 1980s.

It would, of course, be interesting to compare trends in handgun violence with patterns of net introduction of handguns into the civilian population over the past fifteen years. The most formidable obstacle to this research strategy is our inability to estimate handgun attrition over time, discussed above. A further difficulty is that estimates of domestic production of handguns for civilian use are extremely weak for the period 1969 through 1972.¹⁷ The best evidence on this matter comes from the 1960s, a period when a sharp increase in annual introductions overpowers any rate of attrition that would be stable relative to the number of guns introduced in earlier years. Less rigorous cues are available in statistics on handgun introduction in the 1970s.

More Research

The 1970s produced a substantial number of interdisciplinary studies on patterns of gun ownership, the relationship between firearms and crime, and the impact of gun control initiatives. Less encouraging, little research has been undertaken on the relationship between firearms and accidents, the impact of firearms on death rates from suicide, and the costs and benefits of handguns as a mechanism of household self-defense.

Research on acquisition of firearms depends on two data sources: annual government figures on new production and imports of firearms and public opinion polls that periodically ask cross sections of Americans how many firearms they own and what kinds. The aggregate picture of civilian firearms ownership in the late 1970s suggests high numbers of annual introduction and uneven distribution among households in weapon ownership. The proportion of households owning long guns did not change, whereas the proportion of households owning handguns did increase substantially

in the 1960s and 1970s. By 1980, about half of all American households report some gun ownership, a rough guess consistent with earlier poll results. However, gun-owning households own more firearms per household than was the case in the late 1960s.¹⁸

The proportion of all households reporting handgun ownership has increased substantially over a twenty-year period. It is difficult to estimate the increase with precision, because public opinion polls taken at roughly similar times report large differences in the proportion of households owning handguns.¹⁹ During the 1960s, the sharp expansion of household handgun ownership was consistent with an expanding demand for self-defense guns. By the end of 1968, 80 percent of handgun-owning households owned only one.²⁰ The pattern for the 1970s is somewhat more ambiguous: one 1978 poll estimates that about 60 percent of handgun-owning households own only one, but that represents a significant increase in multiple handgun ownership in ten years.²¹

Survey research has yet effectively to probe motives for handgun acquisition and attitudes about loaded guns in the home among the families that have acquired them and those who have considered but rejected handgun acquisition. We can guess that between a fifth and a quarter of U.S. households own handguns, but rich insight into why handguns are acquired, patterns of household use, and attitudes toward loaded handguns among gun-owning and non-gun-owning citizens will have to depend on future research.

FIREARMS AND CRIME

The predominant firearms crimes in the United States are assault and robbery. Assault typically involves a victim and offender known to each other in a conflict setting, although random attacks are more than occasionally reported. Robbery is the attempt to gain property by the use of threat of force. Events classified as criminal homicide are an amalgam of assaults and robberies that lead to the victim's death and lethal attacks in which the victim's death was one of the intended consequences of the offender.

Studies of assault with firearms and other frequently used weapons show that gun attacks lead to death far more frequently than attacks using other widely available weapons. The key issue in assault research is whether the differential death rate can be wholly attributed to the different motives of gun and other attackers or whether the dangerousness of the weapon, independent of intention, contributes to the death rate from assault. A series of studies dating back to 1967 but continuing through the 1970s suggest that guns make a substantial impact on the death rate per hundred assaults when they are used.²² And comparing the proportion of all attacks com-

mitted with firearms over time to the death rate per hundred reported attacks gives circumstantial support to this hypothesis.²³

Lacking the capacity to perform controlled experiments, studies of instrumentality effects have fallen short of a positive proof that guns significantly contribute to death rates. Further, the magnitude of the increase in death rates attributable to gun use rather than knife use cannot be estimated with precision.

Reviewing fifteen years of research, Phillip Cook recently concluded that “the likelihood of death from a serious assault is determined, *inter alia*, by the assailant’s intent and the lethality of the weapon used. The type of weapon is especially important when the intent is ambiguous. The fraction of homicides that can be viewed as deliberate (unambiguously intended) varies over time and space and is probably fairly small as a rule.”²⁴

Cook’s conclusions are worthy of attention and not simply because they accurately reflect the substantial weight of available evidence. The qualifications, puzzles, and unresolved questions generated by a review of existing research suggest a greater research sophistication and greater sense of particularity to be found in recent studies of firearms and crime.

As to robbery, Professor Cook finds “the objective dangerousness pattern applies to robbery as well as assault, for reasons that remain a bit obscure.”²⁵

Gun use in robbery presents a different set of research issues, because most robberies involve the threat of weapon use rather than an unconditional intention to injure the victim. Guns are the most credible threat available to robbers. And availability may thus encourage a greater number of robberies as opposed to other forms of property crime. Gun availability may also encourage robbery of “harder targets,” such as commercial establishments and banks. The credibility of a firearm as a weapon may discourage victim resistance, increasing the success rate of robberies and decreasing the proportion of robbery attempts where victim resistance leads to victim injury. Finally, the lethal nature of firearms may increase the death rate from robbery by escalating the chances that death will result if the weapon is fired.

Serious research on the relationship between firearms and robbery was born in the 1970s. Studies of samples of robberies in metropolitan areas and robbery over time and comparative studies of robbery patterns in a variety of cities were the most substantial research contribution of recent years. Research to date generates two broad areas of agreement and one issue on which the research findings point in opposite directions. The two consensus conclusions are that the injury rate from nonfirearm robbery is higher than the injury rate resulting from gun robbery, although it is not known whether the characteristics of the offending groups or the situations generate that result. Further, the death rate from gun robbery is substan-

tially higher than death rates experienced in other forms of robbery encounters.²⁶

Preliminary indications suggest that the conclusion drawn about the influence of gun availability on robbery volume is dependent upon the methods of analysis used. A robbery study over time in Detroit suggests a high correlation between the volume of robberies and the proportion of robberies involving firearms.²⁷ A cross-sectional study of fifty cities suggests no substantial relationship between gun availability and the total volume of robbery.²⁸ Both time studies and multivariate correlational cross-sectional analysis are relatively weak tools for examining the complex relationship between gun availability and robbery volume. Yet more rigorous assessments are difficult to design and remain a prime agenda item for future research.

THE EFFECTS OF GUN CONTROL INITIATIVES

A number of studies of legal or law enforcement changes designed to decrease gun availability, reduce firearms crime, or deter potential criminals from using guns began to appear in the mid-1970s. Almost without exception, the studies were undertaken after a change in law or law enforcement strategy, and statistics on trends in firearms versus nonfirearms crime before and after the change was the measure of whether the initiative succeeded.

One study of the Federal Gun Control Act of 1968 found no measurable impact on gun crime in those tight-control cities where the 1968 legislation presumably would produce its greatest benefits. The failure of the legislation to make a measurable dent in interstate handgun migration could plausibly be explained by a lack of emphasis on this goal by the enforcement agency or it could reflect the structural difficulties of the state-aid approach of the 1968 law, or both.²⁹ A follow-up study of special enforcement efforts in the District of Columbia and Chicago claimed success for the enforcement initiative, because the drop in firearms crime in the test cities was larger than the drop in nongun crime in those cities or in firearms crime in two comparison cities.³⁰ There are, however, problems with attributing this drop to the special federal enforcement level. Chicago experienced only a modest special federal enforcement effort, and its crime patterns were compared to those of Los Angeles during one of the coldest winters in Chicago history. More important, the mid-1970s was a period when a number of cities that did not experience federal enforcement efforts had substantial drops in firearms crime.

The coincidence of declining rates of urban violence and periods selected for the "after" measurements of a before-and-after design also bedeviled the most scrutinized firearms control initiative of the 1970s, the Massachusetts legislation requiring a mandatory minimum jail term of one year for

defendants convicted of unlawfully carrying handguns.³¹ Careful research pointed to a decrease in gun crime in Boston shortly before and after the effective date of the legislation but no measurable impact in the second year of the law.³² The problem, again, is separating out the effects of the passage of time from the impact of the legislation.

Three basic problems weaken the initial efforts to assess the impact of gun control enforcement. First, social scientists can only study policy changes that occur, and dramatic shifts in gun control policy were infrequent during the early 1970s. Future research will have the opportunity to examine more ambitious undertakings, such as the changes that occurred in the District of Columbia in the mid-1970s.

A further problem with the first-round studies is the extremely short time frame after an initiative covered by the studies. Two years is the longest follow-up period reported for all but one of the studies.³³ Yet efforts to reduce the availability of handguns, if successful at all, should take years before the collective impact of enforcement on handgun availability shows maximum impact.

The third problem of the first-round studies was the exclusive reliance on reported crimes as the measure of legal impact. Future research can supplement trends in crime statistics with information on the age, street price, and origin of confiscated weapons before and after changes aimed at producing handgun scarcity.

The coming decade will provide the opportunity for careful, multiple-measure, long-range evaluations of the experience in the District of Columbia and any other major jurisdictions that attempt to engineer substantial shifts in handgun availability.

SOME OTHER QUESTIONS

I have previously suggested that the pattern of empirical research through the 1970s has been uneven. This section covers a few of the more important research questions that have been stepchildren in recently published research. The number and determinants of gun accident injuries and deaths was the subject of one scholarly study during the decade, a time series analysis of Cuyahoga County, Ohio.³⁴ But no sustained attention has been paid to changes in reported firearm accident rates in the vital statistics or the proportion of handgun accident deaths to total gun accident deaths over time. Changes between urban and nonurban areas in the distribution of gun accidents have gone unstudied. There has been no further research on the relationship between firearms availability and suicide rates. Most surprising, the critical issue of the costs and benefits of keeping a loaded handgun as an instrument of self-defense has not received the careful and sustained attention the question demands.

More Attention

Through the late 1960s, public attitudes toward firearms control were vaguely positive but episodic and unfocused. Within the last decade, the focus has sharpened. The emergence of single-issue lobbies on both sides of the handgun question has created a high level of public awareness and persistent efforts to reform the law. This, in turn, has polarized public opinion: the number of Americans willing to take drastic steps to control handguns has increased, but so has the number of citizens who oppose them. From city councils to the Congress, each new year brings a bumper crop of legislative proposals that range from repealing laws already on the books to an outright ban on the sale and manufacture of handguns to civilians.

Thus, we have *already* entered a new era in the political career of the American handgun. The issue simply refuses to go away. Compromise is not merely elusive; neither side wishes to search for middle ground. The 1980s begin with an acrimonious stalemate in the political arena that accurately reflects a divided and more intense mix of public feelings about handguns than at any time in previous history. Eventually, something has to give.

At the heart of this tug-of-war is a struggle between two competing images of the loaded handgun in the American urban household.

The anticontrol forces, pushed to a specific defense of the handgun, portray it as the individual's last and only resort to defending his household in an environment of predatory crime and ineffective law enforcement. Procontrol groups portray the self-defense gun as futile and dangerous to the household, and argue that it exposes the community to further risk of violence when the gun is stolen. In the antihandgun view, the high level of gun availability produced by household use necessarily results in high availability as an instrument of violent crime.

No matter who wins the debate, the shape of federal, state, and local gun control laws will change over the next decades. But the outcome of the conflict over handguns and civilian self-defense will have an important influence on how far public policy can change. We thus must shift from discussing past developments to guessing about emerging trends in order to outline alternative policy futures. This is the task of the following section.

NOTES TOWARD A POLICY FUTURE

If the last thirty years are an appropriate guide, forthcoming decades will bring a national handgun strategy composed of three parts: (1) federally mandated or administered restrictions on handgun transfers that amount to permissive licensing and registration;³⁵ (2) wide variation in state and municipal handgun possession and transfer regulation, with an increasing

number of municipal governments adopting restrictive licensing schemes or bans on handgun ownership; and (3) increasing federal law enforcement assistance to states and, more particularly, to cities attempting to enforce more restrictive regimes than the federal minimum. Under such a scheme, federal law will neither set quotas on the number of handguns introduced into civilian markets nor dictate ownership policy to the states. Rather, designated high-risk groups, such as minors, convicted felons, and former mental patients, will be excluded from ownership, as is presently the case.

The two major changes in federal law I anticipate are, first, a registration scheme that will link individual handguns to owners in a central data bank and will require prior notification before handguns are transferred, and second, a federal law prohibiting firearms transfers when the possession of a handgun by the transferee would violate the laws of the municipality in which he resides. Centrally stored ownership data would permit federal law to extend to transfers made by nondealers, and regulations requiring timely prior notice of private transfers through dealers or local officials would be added to existing regulations.³⁶

These changes in federal law would facilitate minimal municipal standards for residents acquiring handguns that could not be frustrated by more lenient state government standards. This new power, and a climate favorable to handgun regulations in the big cities, would produce a much longer list of metropolitan or city governments attempting to impose restrictive licensing or bans on civilian ownership among their populations. Presently existing systems in cities such as New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C., would be emulated in cities such as Chicago and Detroit and in most nonsouthern metropolitan areas. Within the South, municipal or metropolitan governments in areas like Miami and Atlanta might follow suit.

All of this would in turn increase the demand, particularly on the part of cities, for federal law enforcement support to protect city boundaries from in-state guns. Within five years after extension of federal protection to municipal handgun control, the intrastate, rather than interstate, migration of handguns may well emerge as a top priority in federal firearms law enforcement.

It is, of course, one thing to make up a scheme of handgun regulation and quite another to argue that it is historically derived. Why is it that federal regulation will expand? What is the basis for suggesting that municipal handgun controls will increase? The answers to such questions are neither easy nor obvious.

National handgun registration is only peculiar in that it has not yet been accomplished. Public opinion seems solidly behind handgun-owner accountability if registration is viewed solely as an accountability system and not as a first step toward confiscation of all the guns linked to registered owners.

Registration thus seems inevitable if its proponents can make a creditable case that a registration scheme will not be used to facilitate a shift from permissive to restrictive licensing policies. This could be achieved by “grandfathering” all guns registered to eligible owners so that any subsequent shift in federal regulatory policy would exempt validly registered guns.

The momentum toward tighter municipal licensing is easier to demonstrate. In the cities, pressure for handgun restriction has increased dramatically in the past fifteen years, and those cities that have adopted controls almost never repeal them. The momentum toward further handgun restriction in major metropolitan areas appears substantial in all regions except the South and the Southwest.

Substantial changes in municipal regulation of handgun ownership have become the rule rather than the exception in those American jurisdictions that have reconsidered handgun regulation in the last twenty years.³⁷ This has occurred despite complaints about the power of the gun control lobby.

The most likely trend is toward a patchwork quilt of federal, state, and local regulation. This conclusion is not surprising. Significant variations exist in attitudes toward handguns, and it should only be expected that these attitudinal differences would more quickly lead to a wider spectrum of state and local variation than to a unified national strategy. Or will they?

Handgun Scarcity as Federal Policy

State and local variation might not work. Federal attempts to protect tight-control cities and states would continue to be frustrated by interstate and intrastate movement of handguns; the large civilian inventory of handguns would make efforts at accountability based on registration data both expensive and easy to evade at the point of first purchase. Under such circumstances, growing dependence on public transportation, and increased residential desegregation that spreads the risk of violent crime more evenly across metropolitan areas, may lead to demand for more substantial handgun controls.

An alternative federal handgun policy would stress reducing, substantially, the population of handguns and thus reducing general handgun availability. Federal standards might require the states to administer handgun licensing systems that would deny most citizens the opportunity to possess handguns and handgun ammunition. The central features of this scheme are the commitment of federal policy to nationwide handgun scarcity, a policy that would be imposed on states and cities where more permissive approaches were preferred, and a policy shift making continuing possession of handguns by millions of households unlawful.

What one calls such regulation is a secondary matter. Federal “restrictive licensing” is the equivalent of a “national handgun ban”! Indeed, many

“ban” bills would leave more guns in circulation than would restrictive licensing because the exceptions—for example, security guards—are broad. The thrust of such a policy is the transition from a 30-million-handgun society to a 3-million-handgun society. This is no small step.

Even if a national policy of handgun scarcity were wholeheartedly adopted, there are limits on the capacity of federal authorities to implement policy without state and local cooperation. Handgun production quotas and regulations governing the distribution of new weapons could be administered at the federal level. Individual determination of whether citizens who apply for licenses meet need criteria is best left to local officials, however, and removing unlawfully possessed handguns is a by-product of local police activity.³⁸ The only way to shift this burden to the federal level is to create a national street police force, a radical departure from current practice that should not be expected or desired. Thus even federal policies that attempt to centralize authority to reduce existing handgun ownership will operate at the mercy of state and local law enforcement.

Still, any such national standard setting would represent two major departures from present federal law. First, the federal government would attempt to limit the supply of handguns nationwide. Second, in order to substantially reduce the handgun population, citizens would be denied the opportunity to own weapons even if they were not part of special high-risk groups and in spite of less restrictive policy preferences at the state and local level where they reside.

This type of plenary federal policy has never been seriously considered in the United States. Early in the New Deal, Attorney General Homer Cummings proposed tight federal handgun controls that received scant congressional attention.³⁹ In the 1970s, a series of proposals to create federal restrictive licensing was introduced and soundly defeated. The urban experiments with restrictive licensing in New York City and Washington, D.C., both involved jurisdictions with small inventories of lawfully possessed handguns and cooperative local law enforcement. A restrictive national handgun policy would thus represent a relatively sharp departure from previous twentieth-century politics of handgun control.

A Turning Point?

Many factors can influence the direction of future handgun policy. A sharp decline in public fear of crime would decrease demand for handguns; at the same time, if this resulted in reduced violent crime, it would reduce the need for handgun control. An increase in burglary rates or, more significantly, in rates of home-invasion robbery would work the other way.

However, the most important element of future policy is not the crime rate, but social notions of appropriate crime countermeasures. The social status of the household self-defense handgun in our cities and suburbs will

emerge as a critical leading indicator of future federal handgun control. Public opinion research has indicated that self-defense in the home is the most important “good reason” given for handgun ownership.⁴⁰ If citizens continue to believe that possessing a loaded handgun is a respectable method of defending urban households, handgun demand and opposition to restrictive policy will continue. If owning loaded handguns in the home comes to be viewed more as part of the gun problem than as a respectable practice, the prospects for restrictive control will improve over time. The residual uses of handguns—informal target shooting, collection, and hunting sidearms—are peripheral to the handgun control controversy.

Early indications of how the debate on handguns will be resolved may be found in the actions and beliefs of key opinion leadership groups in the next ten or fifteen years. My short list of such opinion leaders includes women, blacks, the elderly, the young, and of course, the mass media.

Women Rapid change in the status of women is one of the most important social changes associated with America’s recent past and near future. At the same time, women have played a remarkable dual role in public opinion about handguns. Female ownership of self-defense handguns has historically been low, but female vulnerability to violent crime has been one of the most persuasive reasons offered as a justification for household handguns. President Reagan wasn’t alone when he justified a gun in the dresser drawer as particularly suited for periods when he would be away from the ranch. Generations of men, who are not themselves supposed to be afraid in their own households, have kept handguns “for the little woman.”

Two things are striking about women’s dual role. First, both low ownership and the woman’s role as justification for the gun are based on traditional sex roles and patterns of family organization. Second, it is inevitable that either female handgun ownership patterns or “the little woman” as an excuse for household self-defense guns will have to change in the near future.

The reason for this is simple demographics. In the 1960s, when 7 percent of the people who bought handguns were women, fewer than a fifth of all American households were headed by females.⁴¹ Since the mid-1960s, the growth in female-headed households has been enormous, and the majority of these are women living alone. Since 1969, the number of households without men has gone from under 13 million to over 20 million and from under a fifth to over a quarter of all households.⁴² Either these women will acquire weapons at historically unprecedented rates or they will blow the cover on female vulnerability as a justification for gun ownership. The American woman of the 1980s and 1990s will thus be the first and most important leading indicator of the social status of self-defense handguns in the more distant future.

If female ownership of self-defense handguns increases dramatically, the climate of opinion for drastic restriction of handguns can't happen. Women are physically more vulnerable to crime than men, and this special vulnerability, other liberations aside, will be an important part of our culture for generations. Women, predominantly, are targets of sexual violence.

Further, female attitudes toward household burglary, far and away the most frequent form of home victimization, seem to diverge sharply from male attitudes. Many men tend to shrug off burglary as a loss of property; women experience it as a gross invasion of personal privacy that produces high levels of fear and insult. If single women demand guns for self-defense purposes, federal firearms control will, at maximum, require screening, waiting periods, and some registration. The 50-million-handgun society of the future may be foreordained.

But what if a substantial majority of America's single women reject the handgun as a personal option? There are other antiburglary options: dogs, alarm systems, deadbolt locks. And there are indications that women feel differently about gun ownership. One Harris poll showed that total gun ownership in female-headed households was less than half that reported by households including an adult male.⁴³

The political and cultural implications of persistently low handgun ownership by single women are potentially enormous: a large and growing segment of the electorate will not own handguns. And the special vulnerability of this group makes them immune to arguments that other groups really need handguns or that they are being insensitive to the fear of crime.

Even more important is the impact of single women's behavior on the sexual politics of handgun ownership within marriage. Women, particularly mothers, don't like to have lethal weapons in their homes. How does Mr. Smith convince Mrs. Smith that a gun is necessary for her "when he is away" if some of her best friends live alone without guns? This is the kind of moral ammunition wives may put to effective use as they become more confident of their capacity to participate in such decisions as equal partners.

Continued low handgun ownership by females is not a sufficient condition to stigmatize handgun ownership, but it will be necessary to any emerging long-range consensus. Already, antihandgun meetings are composed in unequal proportion of emphatic wives and reluctant husbands. Perhaps, in searching for the eventual solution to the American handgun stalemate, we should redirect our attention from the *New York Times* to *Ms* magazine and the *Ladies' Home Journal*.

Black Americans White America lives in fear of violence in a rather abstract way. An astonishingly high proportion of black Americans have tasted violence firsthand in the lives of their families and close friends. The enor-

mous difference in levels of crime victimization between urban minorities and the rest of the country makes the issue of the self-defense handgun far more urgent for urban blacks and gives the black community special credentials for teaching the costs and benefits of the handgun.⁴⁴

To date, blacks—absorbed by other pressing problems—have not played a role in the heated debate over handgun control. Indeed, one of the most striking characteristics of both pro- and antihandgun lobbies is their lily-white leadership. This will change. A large and growing black middle class, imprisoned by residential segregation, lives next door to the urban American ghetto and in constant fear. For the black urban family, there is often no middle ground: handguns are either purchased or detested.

Many black women, mothers of sons, are involuntary experts on handguns in the house and on the streets. Their men and male children, living high-risk lives, have better reasons to buy guns than any other segment of American society and better reasons not to buy guns. Handguns loom as a major source of friction between the sexes, between the classes, and between generations in the black community.

The outcome of such conflicts is difficult to forecast. Decisive rejection of self-defense guns on the fringes of the American urban ghetto could be an important message to mainstream America. On the other hand, an increase in self-defense handgun ownership within the black middle class, and particularly among female-headed households, would represent a major obstacle to the political climate that might promote handgun scarcity.

Older Americans The numbers and influence of what we used to call senior citizens have increased dramatically in the past two decades and will continue to increase. This segment of the population is politically active and well informed and lives in constant fear of crime in the city. The combination of substantial political clout and special vulnerability to crime has already produced special legislation stiffening the penalties for those who victimize the elderly. There is, to my knowledge, no consensus among Americans over sixty-five on the issue of handgun restriction. But this group, predominantly female, is another source of potential leadership in building social consensus against the loaded household handgun.

In male-headed households, however, gun ownership patterns may tend to persist. Because the loaded handgun in the urban home is a relatively new phenomenon, the coming years will witness the first large generation of urban handgun owners becoming older. The mix of factors that might change ownership and attitudes in an aging population is substantial: an increase in proportion of female-headed households, increasing fear of crime, perhaps a decrease among older men in the need for machismo artifacts, and a general shift in life situations from offensive orientations toward crime to more defensive adaptations.

Whether all this leads to consensus is anybody's guess. However, the potential impact of a unified senior citizens lobby is substantial. For those who view the power of the National Rifle Association as awesome in legislative circles, imagine what would happen if that organization had opposed the last round of Social Security increases. The critical questions, therefore, are whether older America can come close to consensus on the handgun issue and what that consensus will be.

The Young Habits are easier to avoid than to break. It is probably much easier to talk a young person out of acquiring his first home self-defense handgun than to persuade his father that the household appliance he has retained, loaded, and kept ready for twenty years is of no use to his family. If this is the case, the emerging generation of late adolescents and young adults is a leading indicator here as in so many other areas of manners, morals, and behavior.

The urban house gun is a relatively recent phenomenon in American urban life. Perhaps it can fall out of fashion. The first leading indicator might be the behavior of the young upper middle class in major urban areas. But antihandgun sentiments must trickle down to middle- and working-class young America before the elements of political consensus fall into place. It is here that the opinion leadership of women, mentioned above, must play a critical role.

The Media This is not the place to debate whether the mass media shape opinion or merely reflect it. They do both. But the performance of television and the print media provide a rare opportunity for common ground between antihandgun and prohandgun groups: Both can show that information leadership in this country is suffering from a bad case of scrambled facts and has profoundly distorted information that is basic to comprehending the role of the handgun in American life.

The reason our information industry fails to ask basic questions or to demand real facts is that facts rarely generate Nielsen ratings or sell papers. The sensational and unrepresentative news angle makes the papers and the ten o'clock news.

The paradox is that no matter how bad a job the media do in covering the handgun issue, media coverage will be an increasingly important part of attitude change toward the urban house gun and the prospects of handgun scarcity. If liberal media sources overstate the handgun problem or promise unrealistic cures, they might shift attitudes against household handguns but only at the cost of their eventual credibility. If, on the other hand, the sensational and unrepresentative news angle dominates our television screens, we may experience a self-fulfilling prophecy. If ABC reports an artificial epidemic of female handgun ownership, the false prophecy can move closer to reality as viewers react.

The American handgun is not a hot story; it is a chronic condition. And facts are facts. One of the horrifying glories of American democracy is that no central directorate exists to teach the press professional responsibility. A zealous antihandgun campaign, when dedicated to the sensational and exceptional case, can backfire profoundly. And some recent treatment of the handgun issue suggests a new libertarian radical chic: a celebration of loaded guns as an individual urban solution rather than an urban problem. One can hope that the American information industry will begin to do its homework on the question of firearms control. Misinformation on either side of this explosive issue is a public disservice.

A Tentative Bottom Line

A realistic view of the future provides hope only for optimists among anti-handgun groups but small comfort as well for the friends of the urban American handgun. Only an agnostic is on safe ground. In the complexities and pace of American social change, there is a potential coalition of opinion that could lead to change in public attitude and public law regarding handgun ownership. But potential, of course, is the word we hear most often from coaches of losing football teams. And the bitter rhetoric and inflated claims associated with some current "antigun" propaganda and legislation may retard the evolution toward a constructive consensus.

Opinion-leading groups may identify the boundaries of American handgun policies in the next generation far more quickly than they or we suspect. In making this assertion, I do not mean to understate the role of spectacular tragedies in prompting political action on guns. The Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy killings were absolutely necessary to the passage of the federal gun laws in 1968. The mindless murder of John Lennon and shooting of President Reagan had powerful impact on public opinion. No doubt, some future horror might provide the spur for further legislation. But these episodes explain more about when we pass laws than how far our gun laws can be pushed as an instrument of social change.

NOTES

1. B. Bruce-Briggs, "The Great American Gun War," *Public Interest* 45 (1976):1-26.
2. See Philip J. Cook, "The Effect of Gun Availability on Violent Crime Patterns," *Annals of the Academy of Political and Social Science* 455 (1981):63-79.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Carol S. Leff and Mark H. Leff, "The Politics of Ineffectiveness: Federal Firearms Legislation, 1919-38," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 455 (1981):48-62.
5. George D. Newton and Franklin E. Zimring, *Firearms and Violence in American Life* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1969), pp. 151-62.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 171-74.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

8. See Franklin E. Zimring, "Street Crime and New Guns: Some Implications for Firearms Control," *Journal of Criminal Justice* 4 (1976):95-107.
9. Compare Zimring, "Street Crimes and New Guns," with Newton and Zimring, *Firearms and Violence*, p. 174.
10. Philip J. Cook, "The Role of Firearms in Violent Crime: An Interpretive Review of the Literature, with Some New Findings and Suggestions for Future Research," in *Criminal Violence*, ed. Marvin Wolfgang and Neil Weiner (Beverly Hills, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1982).
11. See, e.g., James D. Wright, P. H. Rossi, K. Daly, and E. Weber-Burdin, *Weapons, Crime, and Violence in America: A Literature Review and Research Agenda* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, Social and Demographic Research Institute, 1981).
12. See Zimring, "Street Crimes and New Guns."
13. Franklin E. Zimring, "Firearms and Federal Law: The Gun Control Act of 1968," *Journal of Legal Studies* 4 (1975):133-98, fn. 2.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*
16. Murders by handguns dropped by approximately 14 percent from 1975 to 1976, whereas murders by all other weapons dropped by only 2.5 percent; Federal Bureau of Investigation, *Uniform Crime Reports, 1976* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), pp. 9-10.
17. See Philip J. Cook, "Gun Availability and Violent Crime," in *Crime and Justice: An Annual Review of Research*, ed. Michael Tonry and Norval Morris (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 5:78-81.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*, p. 78.
20. Newton and Zimring, *Firearms and Violence*, pp. 175-77.
21. See Cook, "Gun Availability and Violent Crime," pp. 78-81.
22. Franklin E. Zimring, "Is Gun Control Likely to Reduce Violent Killings?" *University of Chicago Law Review* 35 (1967):721-37.
23. A flawed version of such a statistical argument is presented in Seitz, "Firearms, Homicide, and Gun Control Effectiveness," *Law and Society Review* 6 (1972):595.
24. Cook, "Gun Availability and Violent Crime," pp. 71-72.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.
26. Franklin E. Zimring, "Determinants of the Death Rate from Robbery: A Detroit Time Study," *Journal of Legal Studies* 6, no. 2 (1977):317, 321-23.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 327.
28. Philip J. Cook, "A Strategic Choice Analysis of Robbery," in *Sample Surveys of the Victims of Crimes*, ed. Wesley Skogan (Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger, 1976).
29. See Zimring, "Firearms and Federal Law."
30. United States Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, *Concentrated Urban Enforcement CUE* (Washington, D.C., 1978).
31. Rossman et al., "The Impact of the Mandatory Gun Law in Massachusetts," (Boston: Boston University School of Law, 1979), mimeo.
32. *Ibid.*
33. The exception is the 1968 federal law; see Zimring, "Firearms and Federal Law," and Wright et al., *Weapons, Crime and Violence in America* (Washington, D.C.: National Institute of Justice, 1981), pp. 501-46.
34. Norman B. Rushforth, A. B. Ford, C. S. Hirsh, N. M. Rushforth, and L. Adelson, "Violent Death in a Metropolitan County: Changing Patterns in Homicide (1958-74)," *New England Journal of Medicine* 297 (1977):531-38.
35. As used in this article, the terms *permissive licensing*, *restrictive licensing*, and *registration*

- are defined following Newton and Zimring, *Firearms and Violence*, pp. 83–84. See also Franklin E. Zimring, "Getting Serious about Guns," *Nation* 214 (1972):457, 459–60.
36. Central storage of ownership data is possible even if records of purchase continue to be maintained by individual dealers. Duplicate forms could be forwarded to automatic data processing systems probably without any changes in the provisions of the Gun Control Act of 1968. See Zimring, "Firearms and Federal Law," pp. 151–54.
 37. See Edward D. Jones III, "The District of Columbia's 'Firearms Control Regulations Act of 1975': The Toughest Handgun Control Law in the United States—Or Is It?" in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 455 (May 1981):138–49.
 38. See Franklin E. Zimring, "Street Crime and New Guns, Some Implications for Firearms Control," *J. Criminal Justice* 4 (1976):95, 101–02.
 39. See Zimring, "Firearms and Federal Law," p. 138. See also "The Politics of Ineffectiveness: Federal Firearms Legislation, 1919–38," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 455 (May 1981):48–62.
 40. Newton and Zimring, *Firearms and Violence*, p. 62.
 41. *Ibid.*, p. 175; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports*, Series P-20, no. 130 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1964).
 42. U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Current Population Reports*, Series P-20, no. 376 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982).
 43. Newton and Zimring, *Firearms and Violence*, p. 175.
 44. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics, 1980* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1981), pp. 242, 249.