GUN CONTROL: HOW IT LEADS TO MURDER

A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis of Gun Control and its Effects

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Throughout history there has been the struggle between society and criminals. The criminal wants to take advantage of others and gain from their loss, while the rest of society tries to exist peacefully. Perhaps the most concerning type of crime is murder. Since the time of Cain and Able, murder has been one of the most destructive and heinous crimes, yet civil society has not been able to prevent and completely disincentivize this act. To make matters more intense, people have always been improving and refining their tools for violence. Murder started with a rock, then evolved into the sword, and today in 2018, a would-be criminal has a wide range of firearms, poisons and other various items to use for nefarious purposes.

In todays world, the spotlight has been shown on guns and the role they play in murders. Some claim that without guns, the world would be much safer and far less murders would occur. Others claim that guns have nothing to do with the problem and removing them would only hurt law-abiding citizens. This paper takes the stance that increases in gun control are directly related to increases in violent crime, and specifically, increases in murder rates. This conclusion is arrived at through examining the basic premise of gun control in the light of various economic and praxiological theories. Furthermore, this paper will look the statistics that surround the various gun bans around the world in an effort to demonstrate the relationship between gun control and murder.

Praxeology

Before diving into the application of specific theories and how they apply to gun control, it is important to start with the basics of human action to set the foundation for this discussion.

Looking to Mises in his analysis of this topic, we can begin with the simple premise that humans act. This action is simple, yet vitally important to look at. All human action is made of 3 components: Ideas, means and ends. The end is the goal of the action. Every human has something that they want to accomplish by any given action. However, one cannot just wish upon a star and their end is realized. They need to do something to achieve the end. This is where the means is applied. In order to reach the end, the individual must apply the means at his disposal. The last element is the idea. This serves as the glue between the ends and means. Without the idea, the person could have both the means and the end but would not be able to make the causal connection between the two required to act. With all of these put together we see that human action is applying means according to ideas to achieve ends.

All of this might seem dry, but it is crucial to understand in the economic analysis of gun control. When policy makers write gun control, they have an end. The stated end is to reduce violent crime. The politicians and media claim that if there were less guns, there would be less crime. In fact, many claim this so strongly that it is easy to get the ends and means confused. The end of gun control, at least how many see it, is to reduce violent crime. However, some people change this and act as if reducing guns is the real end. This can be problematic because it just assumes that gun control is the way to reduce violent crime. In reality, gun control is just a means to try and achieve the end of less homicides, muggings and the sort.

Keeping with the discussion of praxeology it is necessary to examine human action, not only from that of the policy maker, but also from the criminal. Suppose there is a man who

wishes to murder another. The homicide is in itself the end[1]. The motive in this case, whether it be jealousy or anger or even insanity, is irrelevant because the underlying human action is still the same. The criminal has an end to murder someone and the means can be any range of items[2]. The most common and contentious means today is a firearm.

Substitutes

This brings us the discussion of substitutes. When an actor wishes to attain an end, they must use means. However, the key in understanding the economic principle of substitutes is that for any given end, there are generally a host of means at the person's disposal to use[3]. The actor will of course choose whichever means suits his preferences, but if one option is stripped away, they can still reach the end by using a substitute means.

In the case where the end is murder, the would-be criminal has a plethora of potential means that would get the job done. Currently in most places around the world, the firearm is simply the most common choice for its effectiveness and ease of use. This, however, does not mean that a gun ban would prevent violent crime. It would simply reduce violent gun crime[4]. Suppose that there was a country that contained precisely zero firearms of any kind. Could a

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[1] (Robinson 2009)
[2] (Robinson 2009)
[3] (Robinson 2009)
[4] (Robinson 2009)

criminal still commit murder? Well, according to the principle of substitutes, yes, that individual could. They could turn to items such as knives or machetes which are relatively common around the world. Let us take it a step further and say that this same country, in an effort to reduce murder, banned and confiscated all bladed objects. Even in this world, the criminal could still seek out the use of substitutes like a car or even something as extreme as a home-made bomb[5].

Looking to the real world, we see examples of this on a very regular basis. Just to mention two very famous cases, remember the Paris train bombing and the Turkish truck massacre. Both of these events happened in countries with very stringent gun control laws. The criminal very possibly might have used a firearm to commit these heinous acts, but because they were not available, they sought out substitutes and achieved their ends of murder and chaos anyway. The last example comes from the recent spree of school shootings in America. These have become perhaps the largest force behind the gun control movement in the United States. These acts are truly terrible, but would banning the means truly stop the end? The answer is most likely no. To address this question, one can turn to China, a country that has long had a ban on firearms. If you look at their statistics on school shootings you might be swayed into thinking that the gun ban worked, however, there is a much more alarming statistic behind the curtain. That is the rise of knife killings in their school system[6]. This is just another example of the law only preventing the means, but not the ends.

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[5] (Robinson 2009)
[6] (N/A, A note on mass victim knife attacks around the world 2014)

In this discussion of substitutes, it is important to examine both sides and look at the actions of the ordinary citizen and potential victim. Because policy makers do not have perfect knowledge, they cannot predict who will commit a crime and who will not. This means that gun control policies affect everyone indiscriminately. Just as the criminal must seek out substitute means to reach his goal of murder or any other crime, so to must the everyday person seek out a substitute means to get the end of self-protection[7]. Without gun control, the firearm is the choice means to reach this goal for many people because of its effectiveness and its ease of use and carry. However, when this option is taken off the table, they must seek alternative means of protection such as pepper spray, knives or even taking lessons in various fighting styles just to name a few. Additional substitutes can even be provided by the government such as increasing the size of the police force and trying to improve response times. All of these substitutes have difficulties associated with them which will be addressed later in this paper.

Comparative Advantage

The next economic principle that is important for this discussion is that of comparative advantage. In economics, we say that someone has the comparative advantage in some task when they are the one with the lower opportunity cost. Opportunity cost is the cost of the forgone activities in place of the one chosen instead. In a world where guns may be freely

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[7] (Robinson 2009)

purchased and carried, the opportunity cost is fairly low. The cost here would be the money spent on the firearm that could have been spent elsewhere, perhaps a few hours of training that could have been used to do other activities and one could argue that there is a cost of carrying the firearm daily in one's pocket or waistband. In this scenario, the criminal bears virtually the same costs to possessing a firearm to commit crime. Since the lethality of firearms is relatively universal and the fact that they don't require much skill to use, everyone who has a firearm is on a relatively fair playing field. If a young man attacks an elderly woman, but they both have a gun, the outcome is rather unpredictable because the firearms keep the fight on an even ground. However, in a world where firearms are illegal, the criminal receives a large comparative advantage in violence.

For starters, if guns are illegal, the criminal now has a lower cost in attaining an illegal one. This is because they are already planning to commit a crime that could result in jail time if caught, so the risk of a few more years behind bars simply is not a huge deterrent. However, the cost of obtaining a firearm is now heightened drastically for the law-abiding citizen because the threat of jail could potentially ruin the life that they have planned and cost them their job and livelihood. This means that the citizen would have to search for substitute means to reach his goal of self-defense as outlined previously. The issue with substitutes like knives, pepper spray or fighting lessons is that they all have higher opportunity costs associated with them. In the case of martial arts training; this a skill that takes months if not years develop and many people simply don't have the time for such commitment. In the case of knives, they might take less training to use, but physical prowess is a necessity because an old lady with a knife will be no match for a fit younger male with a similar weapon. It is also important to keep in mind that

as long as the black market for firearms exists, criminals will still have access to them, so the case of a criminal with a gun versus a victim who only knows karate is a very likely scenario and the man with the gun will win every time. It is exactly this disparity in effective violence (or comparative advantage) that is created by outlawing the use of firearms.

Asymmetric Information

It is also important to make a short note of the economic problem of asymmetric information. This is the problem created when one party has more information regarding a particular transaction than the other. Although this theory is typically used in contracts and the sale of goods, it still pertains to this analysis of violence and guns. In a society where guns are illegal, most people have no idea who has a firearm or not, in fact most would likely assume that nobody does. However, the criminal who secretly possesses a gun knows exactly who has a gun; himself[8]. We see this being an issue even in America today where firearms are not totally banned nationwide, but only in specific location. A prime example of this is schools. They are filled with signs prohibiting the possession of firearms on their grounds, under the threat of legal penalties. These gun-free zones create the problem of asymmetric information because outside of them the criminal does not know who might possess a gun. In a gun-free zone however, he alone knows that he is the only one with a firearm and therefore he need not fear

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[8] (Robinson 2009)

strong resistance[9]. This asymmetric information also explains why such an inordinate proportion of shootings happen in gun free zones. Because when the mass shooter is selecting his target, he will try to choose the place with the lowest cost to himself, so it only makes sense that the shooter would choose a place where he alone has a firearm.

Incentives

Perhaps the most important part of this discussion is the role of incentives. In some respects, gun control can actually incentivize criminals to commit more crime. Thanks to many of the previously discussed principles like comparative advantage and asymmetric information, the criminal is much more likely to engage in crime because the costs associated with crime are lowered. Without gun control, the criminal must always bear the potential cost of death or serious injury because any given target could also have a firearm with which to defend themselves. However, when guns are outlawed or heavily restricted, the chances of a criminal running into such a threat is lowered. Now the criminal need only fear someone with pepper spray or a blue belt in karate. Without the fear of immediate lethal consequences, the criminal is much more likely to commit crimes due to the lower costs.

Along a similar line of thought, these gun control laws incentivize ordinary citizens to become criminals. Firstly, many will still have the basic end of self-protection in mind and

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[9] (Robinson 2009)

because many of the alternative means may not be suitable, they may decide to turn to the black market and purchase a firearm illegally. This would of course make that person a criminal and actions like this could land them in jail. Secondly, it incentivizes ordinary people to become criminals because the main alternative to legally earning a living is to make money illegally. This of course can take many forms, but if law abiding citizens aren't able to protect themselves or their property effectively, it raises incentives for others to take it. Lastly, it incentivizes ordinary citizens to become criminals by increasing the incentives to join a gang. As one searches for means of self-protection, the option of joining a gang becomes more appealing. This way, they would be protected by the other gang members. The issue with this is that most gangs get their revenue and power through illicit activities like drugs and violence.

The role of incentives also has another role to play in this discussion, because thus far, we have been examining gun control and its theoretical implications on violent crime and it has come up lacking. This is because gun control at its foundation is a misdirected effort. If policy makers truly want to stop the end that is violent crime, trying to remove the means is simply not an effective tactic. If you want to stop an end, you need to disincentivize that end. This can take many forms, but by raising the cost of committing a violent crime like murder, the criminal will seek alternative means of venting whatever it is that lead to the crime. If it was anger, perhaps they could turn to counselling or even violent video games. This of course is just a potential example because there are many motivations for violent crime and each motive would have its own set of distinct alternatives.

Moral Hazard

Before diving into the statistics that support all of these previously outlined economic principles, I would like to make a short note about the moral hazard created by gun control and gun free zones. A moral hazard occurs when someone is in a situation where they do not bear the consequences of their actions. When a policy maker enacts gun control or creates a gun free zone, they are in fact creating a moral hazard[10]. Let us examine the case of school shootings. Of course, the policy makers involved would like to see school shootings end, but by creating a gun free zone around the school, they are merely washing their hands of the entire situation rather than actively preventing it. This is because without the gun free zone, if a shooting were to take place, political activists may hold the policy makers partially responsible for this terrible act. So, to avoid any public back lash, they erect a gun free zone. This way, if a shooting occurs, they can step back and proudly claim that they did what they could to prevent the shooting[11]. But the issue is that, as we already discussed, these gun free zones actually attract criminals, so they make the shootings more likely. But because the policy makers are not sitting in the class rooms that get shot, they do not have to bear the direct consequences of their policy.

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[10] (Robinson 2009)
[11] (Robinson 2009)

Introduction to Statistics

All of the theory provided in this paper is robust and stands on its own right due to the logic in which it is founded. However, the exploration of real-world examples and statistics is still a valuable venture. Before diving head first into a detailed look into the statistics surrounding this area of thought, it is important to understand some of the difficulties in utilizing the cross-section data on homicide rates. John Lott explains this problem particularly well in his work "The Bias Against Guns":

> First, the cross-sectional studies: Suppose for the sake of argument that high-crime countries are the ones that most frequently adopt the most stringent gun control laws. Suppose further, for the sake of argument, that gun control indeed lowers crime, but not by enough to reduce rates to the same low levels prevailing in the majority of countries that did not adopt the laws. Looking across countries, it would then falsely appear that stricter gun control resulted in higher crime. Economists refer to this as an "endogeniety" problem. The adoption of the policy is a reaction to other events (that is, "endogenous"), in this case crime. To resolve this, one must examine how the high-crime areas that chose to adopt the controls changed over time —not only relative to their own past levels but also relative to areas that did not institute such controls.[12]
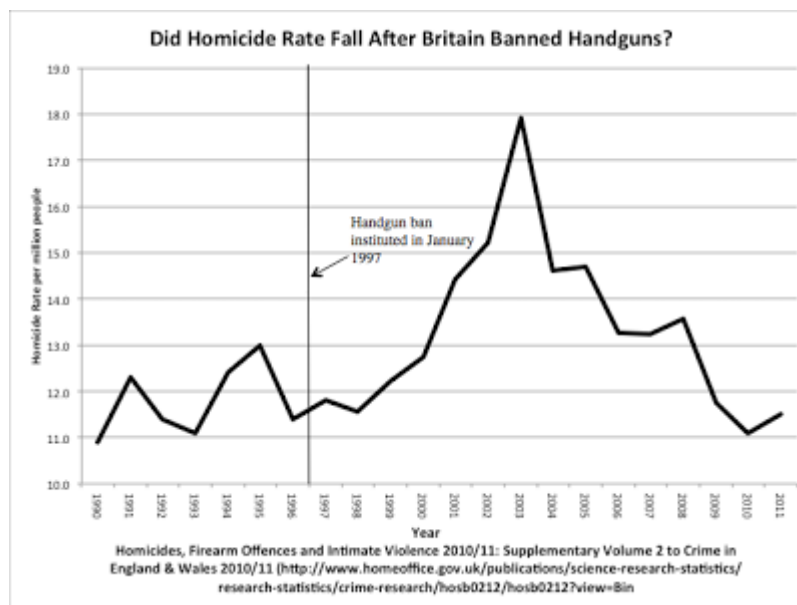
He then continues by saying:

> Unfortunately, many contemporary discussions rely on misinterpretations of cross-sectional data. The *New York Times* recently conducted a cross-sectional study of murder rates in states with and without the death penalty, and found that "Indeed, 10 of the 12 states without capital punishment have homicide rates below the national average, Federal Bureau of Investigation data shows, while half the states with the death penalty have homicide rates above the national average." However, they erroneously concluded that the death penalty did not deter murder. The problem is that the states without the death penalty (Alaska, Hawaii, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, Rhode Island, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Vermont) have long enjoyed relatively low murder rates, something that might well have more to do with

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[12] (Jr., The Bias Against Guns 2003)

other factors than the death penalty. Instead one must compare, over time, how murder rates change in the two groups – those adopting the death penalty and those that did not.[13]

U.K.

With these words of caution from John Lott in mind, the example of the U.K. gun ban is particularly useful. The U.K., for most of its recent history has had rather strict laws on assault style rifles and the sort. In 1997 England and Whales instituted more stringent gun control
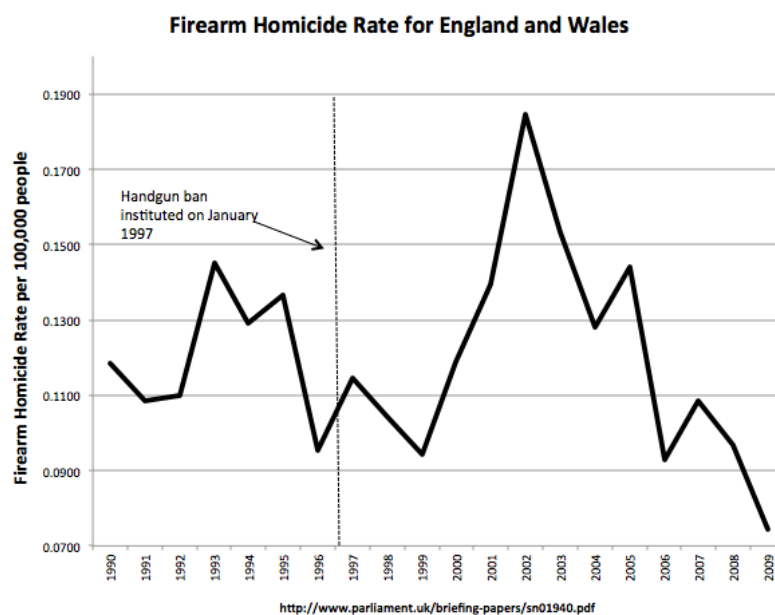
Did Homicide Rate Fall After Britain Banned Handguns?

Handgun ban instituted in January 1997

Homicide Rate per million people

Year

Homicides, Firearm Offences and Intimate Violence 2010/11: Supplementary Volume 2 to Crime in England & Wales 2010/11 (http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/science-research-statistics/research-statistics/crime-research/hosb0212/hosb0212?view=Bin

policies banning handguns for most uses[14]. This was of course in an effort to reduce violent crime rates. However, upon looking at the homicide rates per million before and after the ban, quite the opposite appears to be true.

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[13] (Jr., The Bias Against Guns 2003)
[14] (N/A, Updated: Murder and homicide rates before and after gun bans 2016)

The immediate effect of the ban was a roughly 50% increase in homicides[15]. Although we do see murder rates fluctuate, there was only one year, 2010, in which murder actually fell to a lower level than before the ban. This holds with the economic theory that a gun is simply the means to and end and removing one means will not deter crime. In fact, here the increased advantage and incentives to criminals are clearly demonstrated by the statistics. Perhaps even more alarming is the fact that not only did overall murder rates spike, but gun homicides rates spiked as well because the opportunity cost to obtaining a firearm was not raised for criminals nearly as much as it was for law abiding citizens[16].
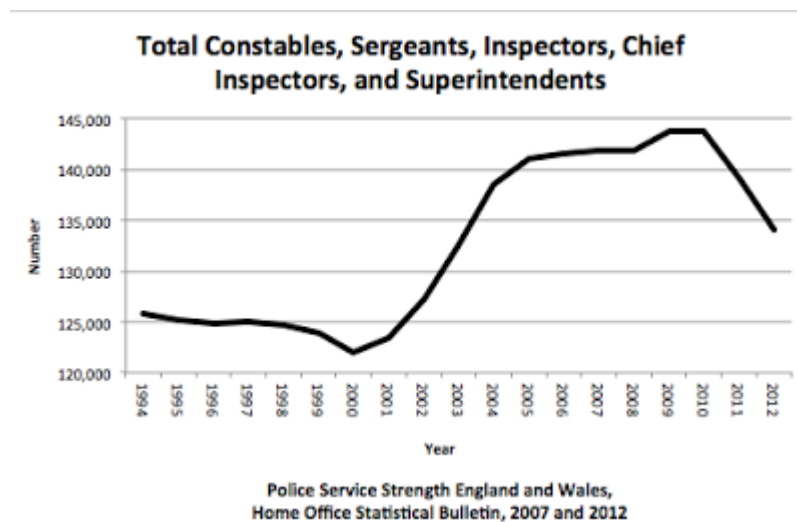
Firearm Homicide Rate for England and Wales

Handgun ban instituted on January 1997

http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/sn01940.pdf

This chart clearly shows that firearm related homicides doubled in the year following the gun ban[17]. The next important feature of both of these graphs is that the homicide rates do

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[15] (N/A, Updated: Murder and homicide rates before and after gun bans 2016)
[16] (N/A, Updated: Murder and homicide rates before and after gun bans 2016)
[17] (N/A, Updated: Murder and homicide rates before and after gun bans 2016)

eventually decrease somewhere around a decade after the ban was instituted. Many are

tempted to claim that this is due the gun control actually being effective. This conclusion

however overlooks a very important piece of the puzzle. As the crime rates rise following a gun

ban, citizens need an alternative means of protection. In many cases, this one included, they

turn to the government for protection in the form of increased police presence[18]. The sharp rise

in law enforcement officials can be seen on the following graph.

Total Constables, Sergeants, Inspectors, Chief Inspectors, and Superintendents

Police Service Strength England and Wales,
Home Office Statistical Bulletin, 2007 and 2012

One can easily see that the rise in police force directly coincides with the gradual

decrease in homicides[19]. It is very crucial to note two things about this happening. First, this

increase in law enforcement is extremely expensive and bears a large fiscal cost on any country,

state, or municipality that chooses this path. And second, it is a less effect way of reducing

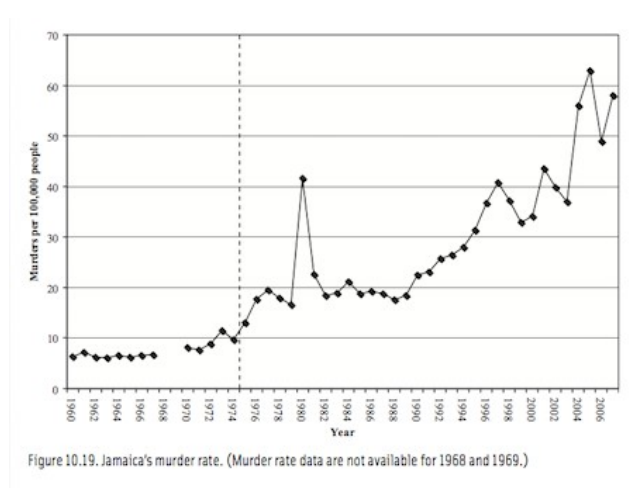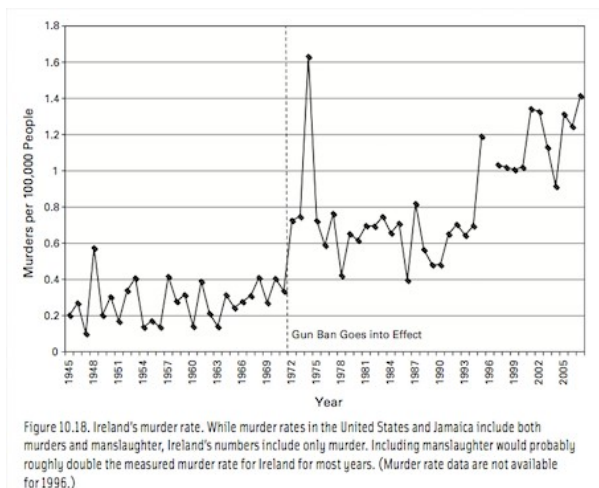crime than simply allowing citizens to own firearms for self-defense. This can be seen by the

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[18] (N/A, Updated: Murder and homicide rates before and after gun bans 2016)
[19] (N/A, Updated: Murder and homicide rates before and after gun bans 2016)

fact that homicide rates in the U.K., with the exception of 2010, consistently remained slightly

higher than the immediate pre-ban rate[20].

Ireland and Jamaica

The cases of Ireland and Jamaica offer very similar results. They both instituted gun bans;

Ireland in 1972 and Jamaica in 1975[21]. And just as with the U.K., homicide rates spiked

drastically. However, both counties have relatively less funding than the U.K. so an expansion of

the police force was much less attainable. As a result, a clear and rising trend of violence has

surfaced with the following year often having more murders than the previous year[22]. The

graph for Ireland can be seen on the left with the statistics for Jamaica next to it on the right.

Figure 10.18. Ireland's murder rate. While murder rates in the United States and Jamaica include both murders and manslaughter, Ireland's numbers include only murder. Including manslaughter would probably roughly double the measured murder rate for Ireland for most years. (Murder rate data are not available for 1996.)

Figure 10.19. Jamaica's murder rate. (Murder rate data are not available for 1968 and 1969.)

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[20] (N/A, Updated: Murder and homicide rates before and after gun bans 2016)
[21] (N/A, Updated: Murder and homicide rates before and after gun bans 2016)
[22] (N/A, Updated: Murder and homicide rates before and after gun bans 2016)

D.C. and Chicago

The United States offers many interesting stations in the discussion of gun control because gun laws vary from state to state and even city to city. Two cities of particular intrigue are Chicago and D.C. because relative to other large cities in the U.S. they have very strict gun laws making nearly impossible to legally carry a firearm.

The following graphs, Chicago on the left and D.C. on the right, demonstrate each cities' murder rates relative to the other largest cities in the U.S. The line represents the year where the gun ban was enacted.

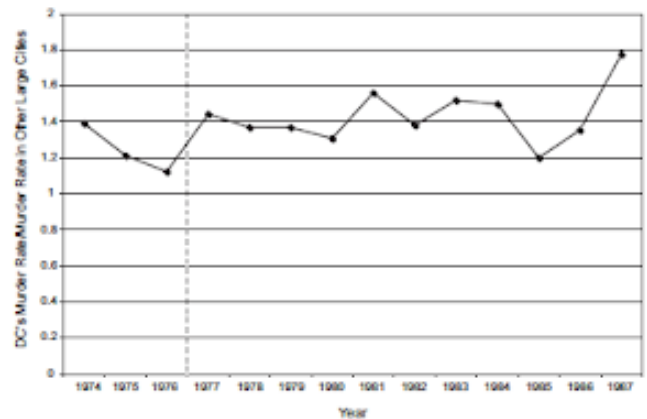Figure 10.14. Chicago's murder rate relative to the other nine largest cities (weighted by population)

Figure 10.2 Changes in DC's murder rate relative to the other forty-eight largest cities (excluding Chicago from top fifty list, weighted by population)

It is important to note that each city, prior to the gun ban, did have a slightly higher than average murder rate per capita. Following the ban, however, murder rates did not decrease as policy makers would have liked, but rather they trended up[23].

Kennesaw, Georgia

To provide the counter example to Chicago and D.C., one might look to the town of Kennesaw Georgia. This is a landmark town because in the year 1982 the city passed a law requiring each household to own and maintain at least one firearm[24]. Although this town is not the perfect counter balance to the previously mentioned big cities for various cultural, geographic and political dissimilarities, towns that require gun ownership are extremely rare, so this will have to suffice.

Just prior to the enactment of the law, Kennesaw had a crime rate of 4.3% which was actually higher than the national average of the time at 3.9%[25]. Following the law being passed, crime rates in Kennesaw dropped. Although crime rates across the country dropped, the rates in Kennesaw dropped by a significantly larger margin. By 2005, the national crime rate had fallen to about 3.8%, but the crime rate in Kennesaw Georgia dropped to just barely over 2%[26]. Even more specifically, Kennesaw boasts an exceptionally low murder rate. In the past 6 years

[23] (N/A, Updated: Murder and homicide rates before and after gun bans 2016)
[24] (Jimenez 2018)
[25] (Jimenez 2018)
[26] (Matthew Friedman n.d.)

there has only been one murder in the town[27]. This is much lower than the national average of

5.3 murders per 100,000 per year[28]. Adjusting for population, Kennesaw should have seen

about 2 murders per year. Theoretically this all makes perfect sense, because if you wanted to

attack someone, picking a location where everyone did not own a gun might be wise.

Mass Shootings

The topic of mass shooting is a very hot button issue that gets a lot of media attention.

Certainly, this is an issue that many policy makers seek to address, but the question is, does gun

control stop them? The statistics would seem to say no, gun control does not help. Relative to

most other developed countries, the U.S. has very lax gun control laws. Despite this, the Crime

Research Prevention Center found that the U.S. ranked 64th out of 97 for amount of mass

shootings and 65th in terms of fatalities[29]. In fact, most European countries like France, Russia

and Switzerland, which have some of the most stringent gun laws, had 25% more mass

shootings than the U.S.[30]. Some like to point to the fact that the rate at which the frequency of

mass shootings occur is increasing. This is a valid concern, but the rate is increasing 291% faster

in Europe which has far stricter gun control laws than the U.S.[31]. Lastly it is key to discuss the

relevance of gun free zones in mass shootings. Of the 2,354 mass shootings between 1998 and

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[27] (Matthew Friedman n.d.)
[28] (N/A, Murder n.d.)
[29] (Jr., How Gun Free Zones invite mass shootings 2018)
[30] (Jr., How Gun Free Zones invite mass shootings 2018)
[31] (Jr., How Gun Free Zones invite mass shootings 2018)

2015, 98% occurred in gun free zones[32]. It is no mystery why these statistics are so alarmingly strong, given the many economic principles previously outlined, such as substitutes and asymmetric information.

Conclusions

Gun control advocates claim to have good intentions and say that they want to reduce murders and other violent crimes, but this method is simply broken. Gun control fails on both its theoretical foundations and its empirical results around the world. There are many more examples and statistics that were not outlined in this paper, but the cited sources below can provide ample further reading and case studies from around the world.

After examining all of the facts, it is clear that gun control is not only ineffective at reducing violent crime and murder, but it actually helps incentivize it and only leaves the law-abiding victim even more helpless. The analyses of both theory and statistics are both crucial. Together they paint the whole picture: Gun control is directly related to violent crime and murder rates. When gun control is increased, this causes an increase in murder. It all boils down to human action. We as people are very resourceful. When we have an end, we apply all the means at our disposal to accomplish it. When someone wants to murder another, if he has no stick, he can use a rock, and if he has no gun, he can use a knife. Gun control does not work because it is all about taking away the gun, not the end.

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[32] (Jr., How Gun Free Zones invite mass shootings 2018)

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