

# *The Case for Controlling Handguns*

David S. Anderson



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## **OVERVIEW**

In 1982, when David S. Anderson wrote the article below, there were more than 30 million handguns in American homes. The public was still reeling from the attempted assassination of President Ronald Reagan the year before, and the controversy over handguns reached a peak. These excerpts from Anderson's article present some solutions to the argument about guns that continues to engage many Americans.

**GUIDED READING** As you read, consider the following questions:

- Does Anderson seem to believe that social pressures alone curb handgun demand?
  - What are the solutions to handgun violence outlined here?
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**J**EAN HARRIS, Mark David Chapman and John Hinckley generated a new national debate over gun control, and for a reason that is less than obvious. Harris, convicted of murdering Dr. Herman Tarnower with a .32 caliber Harrington & Richardson revolver, Chapman, who pleaded guilty to killing John Lennon with a .38 caliber Charter Arms revolver, and Hinckley, accused of wounding President Reagan and his aides with a .22 caliber Roehm RG 14 pistol, did not emerge from some criminal netherworld; instead all are familiar-seeming, middle-class folks.

In addition to reflecting the potential for violence in all of us, their proven or alleged crimes are disturbing reminders that the handgun is a pervasive element of American life. It makes that violent potential deadlier than ever. . . .

In the 1960s, in the wake of urban riots and perceived increases in urban crime, handgun sales increased dramatically from fewer than 750,000 in 1964 to more than 2 million in 1968, where they remain today. Most of the new sales, experts believe, were to fearful homeowners. Today about half of all American households contain some kind of firearm, and half of them are handguns. . . .

A recent issue of the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, a scholarly journal, collects a number of articles . . . that summarize recent thinking of criminal justice experts about gun control. The points they make permit a fresh look at a debate that often deadlocks between gun foes who equate an interest in firearms with sexual hang-ups and National Rifle Association devotees who believe gun control is an effort to soften up America for Communist takeover. . . .

Articles . . . suggest that the proliferation of urban household handguns clearly increases the dangerousness of life rather than making it any safer, and

not just by creating the potential for more accidents. "If current rates of handgun violence persist, the approximately 2 million new handguns sold this year will eventually be involved in almost 600 thousand acts of violent crime—a rate of involvement that vastly exceeds the corresponding rate for rifles and shotguns," write Philip J. Cook and James Blöse.

Harvard professor Mark H. Moore, in a fascinating study, traces the ways a vast arsenal of guns falls into the hands of "proscribed persons" each year. Between 300,000 and 700,000 change hands in private transactions, with an unknown number winding up in the clutches of criminals. And a huge number—between 60,000 and 200,000—are stolen. By definition, they wind up in criminal possession, and almost certainly are bound for criminal use.

But if all those criminals were denied guns, wouldn't they just use other weapons to commit crimes? Perhaps, says Cook in another study, but the results wouldn't be so deadly. "The type of weapon matters in violent crime, both in terms of its seriousness and its distribution." The number of deaths resulting from robberies and assaults would decline, he concludes, though that benefit would have its price: nondeadly robberies and assaults might increase, and predatory criminals would shift their sights from the young and strong to the old and weak. . . .

While wrangling between politicians and lobbyists frustrates efforts to enact serious gun control laws, public opinion remains fairly unified on the issue. Sociologist James Wright points out that, although most Americans believe they have a right to possess guns, they also realize that guns are dangerous and ought to be regulated by the government. . . .

Surveys agreed that between 20 and 25 percent of Americans have handguns in their homes (about 30.85 million guns), with 40 percent of those citing protection or self-defense as the reason. Analysis of the surveys also showed widespread belief that private citizens have a right to own guns, and that criminals will find ways to obtain guns no matter what. But they also indicated wide support for registration and licensing of all privately owned handguns, and a belief that such registration would not violate the individual's right to own a gun. . . .

The public support for government regulation of the gun trade might also indicate support for other sensible measures. Cook and Blöse, in their article, point out, for example, that 23 states, including 64 percent of the population, now already require that police be notified and permitted to check into the background of a customer before he may purchase a handgun. Writing such a requirement into Federal law would strengthen existing legislation that prohibits sales of guns to categories of people considered dangerous. . . .

A public that favors regulating guns the way we regulate automobiles would not be likely to oppose such measures. They would constitute the politically feasible first step that, in the opinion of Cook and Blöse, would cause "modest reduction in firearms violence rates." They would also give the

government a handle on the problem, with the potential for more than modest reduction as time goes on.

In light of these speculations, two further points contained in this substantive volume are worth noting. The first is Moore's conclusion that since stolen handguns are such an important part of the illicit traffic, local police departments, rather than Federal agencies, are the best places to mount major efforts to control the criminal gun trade. "The best approach is likely to be high volume, relatively unsophisticated undercover investigations aided by patrol efforts and a few informants." . . .

The second point is contained in an article by Franklin Zimring, perhaps the nation's most respected authority on handguns and crime, who contemplates the future of handgun use and policy for the rest of the century. A basic problem, Zimring says, is that existing inventory of some 30 million handguns, to which another 2 million are added each year. The prospect that police will show up one day to search your home and confiscate your handguns is remote; but short of that, it's hard to see how any Federal policy can reduce the number of handguns in circulation. In fact, a Federal registration program would legitimize ownership as much as limit it.

A far more powerful factor, he suggests, is public opinion. "An increase in the social stigma associated with household defense guns will influence the demand for handguns long before it affects national policy toward handgun supply," Zimring writes. Once it becomes fashionable to talk about your guns at middle-class dinner parties, he suggests, no effective limits on the supply would be possible. But should gun ownership remain a little embarrassing, a sign of an extreme personality, then some hope remains for an eventual decline.

Which prompts a final suggestion: Perhaps the people who oppose the spread of handguns should take their money out of Washington lobbying efforts and put it into television commercials. They worked quite well, after all, for antismoking groups who wanted to counter the fashionable image of cigarettes.

And the dramatic possibilities are clear: In Mount Airy, Maryland, recently, a three-year-old boy picked up the family handgun, pointed it at his mother, pulled the trigger and shot her through the chest. What might a creative ad agency do with that?

**Source:** Anderson, David D. *Across the Board*, February, 1982.