

Four Facts You Know About Gun Control That Aren't So

by Clayton E. Cramer*

The humorist Will Rogers once claimed, "It isn't what we know that gets us in trouble. It's what we know that isn't so." Most of what you know about gun control comes from watching television and reading newspapers—notoriously unreliable sources of information. Before you vote on November 7, please take three minutes to read this. There are a lot of things that you know about gun control that simply aren't true.

"Thirteen children are killed a day by gunfire."

You hear variations of this all the time on television and radio; sometimes fourteen children, sometimes twelve children. It is a statement that isn't exactly a lie, but doesn't mean quite what you think it means, either. It includes 19 year olds—who aren't "children." It includes criminals shot and killed by other criminals, by the police, or by crime victims. It includes suicides, murders, and a small number of accidents.

The Centers for Disease Control keeps figures through age 14, and for age 15 through 19.¹ The honest figure is, "Less than two children (through age 14) are killed a day by gunfire." These are still tragedies, but compared to the other 112 deaths a day in the U.S. of small children (more than seven a day from car accidents alone), guns are a minor problem.

"Trigger locks would prevent a lot of those deaths."

Trigger locks *might* prevent some accidents where small children find a handgun. But those accidents are actually quite rare. In 1997, in the entire U.S., 21 children aged 0 through 14 were killed in handgun accidents. In at least some of these accidents, an irresponsible adult fired the gun. No trigger lock will solve that problem.

Trigger locks won't do much good to reduce handgun suicides by small children, because these are also quite rare. There were 32 handgun suicides in the U.S. in 1997 by children aged 0-14. Handgun suicides are more common among those aged 15-19, but still less common than you would think: 179 in 1997. Unfortunately, teenagers have many ways to kill themselves; 667 teens (aged 15-19) killed themselves by some other method in 1997. Trigger locks might change *how* a teenager kills himself, but not *if*. The real solution is for parents and teachers to pay more attention to troubled teenagers. No law can fix that problem.

Trigger locks won't reduce murders. In a few minutes, any teenager can remove a trigger lock with a electric drill. Trigger locks won't keep criminals from getting guns; within minutes of a burglar leaving your house, the trigger lock will be removed. Trigger locks are mostly a waste of time; the same energy spent educating the public on safe storage would be more effective.

"Every gun should be registered."

Some in Congress want *all* guns registered. But there's something that they aren't telling you: the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Haynes v. U.S.* (1968) that convicted felons have a Constitutional right to *not* register a gun, because to register a gun would be self-incrimination. Only people that aren't criminals can be punished for not registering.² If the criminals aren't required to register, but you and I are, why bother?

California has registered every handgun legally sold in California since 1991.³ If you move there, you are required to register your handgun within 60 days.⁴ New York State has registered every handgun since 1911 as

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¹ All data here is from the Centers for Disease Control Mortality web page, <http://wonder.cdc.gov>.

² *Haynes v. U.S.*, 390 U.S. 85, 100, 88 S. Ct. 722, 732 (1968).

³ Cal. Penal Code § 12076.

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part of its handgun licensing procedure (commonly known as the Sullivan Law). Most states have had either mandatory or voluntary gun registration systems since the 1950s. So, why don't you ever see any coverage of crimes solved through registration records? Because it so seldom happens. One study of gun registration found that the 44 states with gun registration solved less than a dozen violent crimes using those records over a ten year period.⁵ Why? Most serious violent crimes are committed by people with long criminal histories. Felons don't buy their guns legally, so their guns aren't registered. When a gun is left at the scene of a crime, it's usually because the criminal is dead, or headed to a hospital, or jail.

Gun registration doesn't stop criminal acts with guns. But it does waste a lot of police time. That's why New Zealand abandoned mandatory registration of shotguns and rifles in the early 1980s—it was taking so much time that the police weren't able to do their jobs.⁶ And that's one reason that five provinces and two territories sued the Canadian government this year to stop mandatory registration of all guns—the local police budgets were being consumed in gun registration.

“A gun in your house makes you less safe.”

There is a highly publicized study that claims that a gun in the house is 43 times more likely to be used to kill someone that lives there than to kill an intruder.⁷ This isn't completely false, but it is very misleading. The vast majority of those “43 times” deaths are suicides—tragedies, but not what most people think of when they hear this. If someone in your house has a drug or alcohol problem, severe depression, or a short temper, having a gun may not be wise. But for most other people, a gun in the house isn't particularly dangerous.

This “43 times” claim misleads in another way as well. When decent people use a gun for self-defense—and there are between 108,000 and 2,450,000 such uses a year⁸—they almost never kill the criminal. The threat of a gun makes the criminal submit to arrest, or remember an urgent appointment elsewhere. The correct measure of whether a gun in your home makes you safer isn't the number of criminals that decent people kill. The correct measure is how many criminals decide that breaking into an occupied home is too dangerous.

A candidate that supports restrictive gun control isn't necessarily smarter or more compassionate than a candidate who opposes it. Quite the opposite! Gun control is an attempt to solve complex social problems without spending the money required, or understanding the underlying problems. Look at the facts before you vote; don't let emotional and inaccurate claims about gun control sway for whom you vote.

⁴ Cal. Penal Code § 12072 (f)(2).

⁵ Alan S. Krug, *Firearms Registration: Costs vs. Benefits* (Riverside, Conn.: National Shooting Sports Foundation, Inc. 1970).

⁶ New Zealand Police Department, “Background to the Introduction of Firearms User Licensing Instead of Rifle and Shotgun Registration Under the Arms Act 1983” (Wellington, New Zealand: n.p., 1983).

⁷ Arthur L. Kellerman and Donald T. Reay, “Protection or Peril? An Analysis of Firearm-Related Deaths in the Home,” *New England Journal of Medicine*, 314:24 (1986) 1557-60.

⁸ Philip J. Cook and Jens Ludwig, *Guns in America: National Survey on Private Ownership and Use of Firearms* (Washington: National Institute of Justice, 1997), 8-9.