

HANDGUNS IN THE HOME: AN UNNECESSARY RISK

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(1) Every thirteen seconds, someone in the United States buys a handgun. Every thirteen seconds, someone jeopardizes his life, as well as the lives of his family, friends, and neighbors. A recent Surgeon General's report rated handgun deaths second only to automobile accidents as a cause of fatal injury. Our escalating murder rate, both a cause and an effect of handgun availability, is the highest in the world.¹ In 1980 alone, the United States counted 10,000 handgun deaths--the British had forty.² There are over sixty million privately-owned handguns, some 2.5 million being sold in 1982.³ "In America on Monday, if it was an average day, over fifty Americans were killed with handguns, fifty," mourns an ad placed in various newspapers on April 15, 1981. The statistics are not pleasant. But we are only reminded of them whenever some maniac brandishing a shiny Saturday Night Special takes a potshot at an unsuspecting celebrity. Granted, since the frontier days, handguns have been somewhat of an American tradition. However, this tradition is victimizing modern society. Many Americans, in an attempt to keep crime out of the home, buy handguns and unsuspectingly set both themselves and their loved ones up for acts of violence and aggression. Because handguns are needlessly controlling life as well as death, we must seriously question this arming of American homes. Handguns are an unnecessary risk, for they are ineffective protectors, threaten household security, act as a stimulus for aggressive behavior, promote domestic violence, adversely affect our children, and lead to psychological dependence.

(2) Over three-fifths of all guns, including rifles and shotguns, are bought solely for protection.⁴ Handgun proponents claim that these weapons are useful for home defense, and they are partially correct. Although rifles and shotguns are effective defenses, handguns are practically useless. Handguns simply are not made to fire at specific targets as are rifles and shotguns. A recent Case Western Reserve University study indicates that a gun kept at home to guard against intruders is six times more likely to kill a friend, a spouse, or a child than it is a criminal.⁵ The stories are horrifying: one Long Island woman awoke one night, grabbed a gun, and shot at a silhouette in her bedroom, killing her husband who had returned early from a business trip.⁶ The National Coalition to Ban Handguns is quick to point out that shooting a pistol on a range with proper stance, preparation, and protective devices is drastically different from defending a house with a loaded gun found tucked under a pillow. In many cases, the victim's gun has actually placed him in additional jeopardy. William Plackemeyer, lieutenant in charge of gun licensing for the New York City Police Department, has concluded that "innumerable situations would not have ended in tragedy if the victim hadn't had a gun."⁷ Also, for any weapon to be useful in a confrontation the user needs to have the psychological ability to kill another human being. Desperate criminals will not hesitate to kill: ordinary citizens will. Plackemeyer explains, "If a police officer can be reluctant, then it's going to be much more of a problem for the average citizen."⁸ Although often overlooked, there are legal responsibilities of gun ownership. Gun owners do not have the right to fire unless in absolute self-defense. Therefore, citizens cannot shoot at any criminal or burglar without threat of punishment. Also, as Charles Zizza, police chief of Newark, New Jersey, clarifies, "If you pull a gun

on an armed intruder but he kills you, he may get off scot-free because he was only shooting in self-defense."⁹ Tragedy results when citizens police themselves, for this is not the Wild West and criminal matters cannot and should not be settled by quick-draw contests.

(3) Gun advocates predict that the arming of citizens will help decrease the crime rate. So far the crime rate, like the murder rate, has continued to ascend. Evidence indicates that the gun theft rate is rising because of guns in the home. Half of all guns used in crimes are stolen and 70% of these stolen guns are handguns.¹¹ A 1979 Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms Study reported 210,000 handguns stolen from private premises; the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA-1974) suggested that for every gun theft reported there were four not reported. Because households are a major gun source for criminals, citizens with guns in their homes are inviting theft. One police officer noticed that "they'll pass up the television and the stereo and go straight for the gun."¹² Thieves can hock T.V.'s and stereos at a discount, but they can re-sell guns at a profit. If not sold, guns are used for more serious crimes as the cycle continues. Many gun proponents proudly display THIS HOUSE IS PROTECTED BY AN ARMED CITIZEN decals on their front doors. Most police officers discourage these macho welcome mats because they, in effect, say "Come and rob my guns."¹³ Handguns place unwary homes in unnecessary peril.

(4) "Guns don't kill people, people kill people" insists the National Rifle Association (NRA), possibly the largest, most influential lobby in Washington D.C. Admittedly, no statement is closer to the truth--the final act of aggression is the simple pulling of the trigger. However, psychological experiments done over the last fifteen years have indicated that "the finger pulls the trigger, but the trigger may also

be pulling the finger." The emotional argument of the NRA is being shot down by raw scientific data. Leonard Berkowitz, professor of psychology at the University of Wisconsin, first discovered this "weapons effect" in 1967. He hypothesized that the presence of a gun would stimulate aggressive behavior. The original research design placed subjects individually in rooms with electric shock machines and made them judge lists of new ideas by delivering shocks to their partners who originated the idea. For some students there was nothing else in the room; for others, there were badminton rackets and shuttlecocks (neutral stimuli); and for the last group, there was a 12-gauge shotgun and a snub-nosed .38 revolver. As predicted, students in the rooms with the guns shocked their partners longer and harder. Berkowitz concluded that "the mere sight of a weapon can be a conditioned stimulus that evokes ideas and motor responses associated with aggression." Later studies at the University of Utah applied the weapons effect theory to child aggression. Charles Turner and Diane Goldsmith observed the behavior of four and five-year-olds in play sessions for several weeks. On some days the children played with neutral toys, such as airplanes, and on other days they played with toy guns. When the children played with guns, there was a higher rate of anti-social behavior (pushing, hitting, name-calling) than on the neutral toy days. The children had probably associated the guns with aggression and had acted violently as society had taught them. Berkowitz feels that we often act mindlessly and impulsively in the presence of guns and suggests that the only way to control the weapons effect is to decrease the availability of guns.¹⁴ If the presence of guns does indeed create aggression, we may not have as much control over our actions as the classic NRA argument might suggest.

(5) Handguns are a major cause of domestic violence and death. More than half of the murders resulting from quarrels between husbands and wives or between people that know each other are gun-related.¹⁵ This senseless slaughter is often a combination of intense rage, alcohol, passion, and an easily accessible gun. There are neither good guys nor bad guys, only victims. These impulsive murders happen mainly because of the presence of a gun. Guns relieve anxiety quickly and neatly and do not require skill, strength, or stamina.¹⁶ They are perhaps too easy and efficient. Husbands kill wives and brothers shoot sisters nationwide in heat-of-the-moment murders. Too many unthoughtful "I could kill you's" have led to the formation of the Victim's Family Committee, a Chicago support group for the families of handgun victims. Director Carolyn Bredder concludes that "[many] times the weapon that was meant to protect the family was used to destroy the family."¹⁷ Something is wrong when family arguments daily turn into lethal shootouts in one of the most "civilized," progressive nations in the world.

(6) Handguns in the home have psychological as well as life-threatening effects on children. Too often, people buy guns to protect their defenseless children without considering the many dangers. Many social scientists suggest that guns make children feel powerless. Instead of viewing the gun's presence as providing security, the gun is seen as frightening. As Rosalyn Weinman Schram, sociologist and consultant on matters of work and family, states, "They're getting the message that their parents really can't take care of them, that they're intimidated by crime and not very much in control." Dr. Martin Cohen, a New York City clinical psychologist, feels that guns actually increase children's anxiety levels.¹⁸ Children, perhaps more than adults, associate guns directly

with violent behavior--a probable result of a rising number of assassination attempts as well as excessive television violence.¹⁹ Also, children may view the local police force, which has traditionally provided a sense of comfort and security, as farcical at a time when more and more "protective" guns are brought into the home. Guns may also make our children more violent, as seen in the Berkowitz study. We stare in shock at photos of four-year-old children lifting machine guns in war-torn foreign countries. But we fail to understand that children learn mainly by imitating their parents. Guns, even if never used, are readily accepted by children because they are accepted, if not worshiped, by their parents. Guns in the home will increase aggressive behavior and promote an acceptance of violence and guns in future generations.

(7) Handguns make the home an easy target for accidental death. The U.S. Surgeon General's 1981 Select Panel for the Promotion of Child Health proclaimed an "epidemic of [handgun-related] deaths and injuries among children and youth." One child dies every day from accidental shootings and perhaps thirteen more are injured. In 1978 the U.S. had more killings with handguns by children ten years old and younger than Great Britain had by killers of all ages.²¹ The problem is basic: in order for a handgun to be useful, it must be kept loaded and handy always. The danger is obvious. When curious children, careless adults, and easy-to-use handguns mix, the result is horrifying accidental death. One three-year-old boy carried a gun into the kitchen, asked, "Mommy, is this where I pull" and shot his stupefied mother. Another fourteen-year-old boy shot his fourteen-year-old friend after watching film clippings of the Reagan assassination attempt. The boys had gone exploring, looking for the gun in the basement.²² Gun advocates argue that accidents happen only in careless homes. However, as long as guns are so readily available, children

can kill parents and friends, as well as themselves; safety classes and other precautions cannot prevent every accident. Ironically, the increasing number of guns bought to provide security and protection actually raises the chances of more accidents, homicides, and self-destruction. The U.S. is an influential, respected world leader, and yet handguns continue slaughtering Americans and victimizing their relatives. Judging from our lack of concern and action, we Americans must need death in order to understand the value of life.

(8) As Americans shift to an independence from the law, they depend more and more on guns for security. One Los Angeles woman explains, "When I'm home that gun is loaded and near me. If I go to the laundry room, I take it with me." Guns exaggerate real dangers and bring a false sense of comfort. Once these security blankets, with their potential for self-damage and destruction, are in the home, they are seldom discarded. Also, as one police officer states, "After a while the owners feel the need for them, even when there's no danger."²⁵ Because dependence on guns in the home leads to dependence on guns in the car, street, and office, we must strive to find an effective balance between society, morality, and the gun.²⁶

(9) We need to take action to protect ordinary citizens from other ordinary citizens.²⁷ As our arsenal builds, so does our acceptance of violence. Although a handgun ban is probably politically, economically, and socially not feasible, we can control handguns in other ways. Many of our local laws are adequate but not enforced. Perhaps we need stricter federal laws concerning gun registration, ammunition availability, and importation of foreign gun parts. We must stop the killing of innocent citizens before we can attack the problem of criminal justice. Guns lining the walls of American homes are an unnecessary risk. In the words of Anton

Chekhov, "If in the first act you hang a gun on the wall, by the third act you must use it." We Americans have the power and the responsibility to decide the outcome of our deeply rooted gun tradition.

Endnotes

¹ Lance Morrow, "It's Time to Ban Handguns," Time, 13 April 1981, p. 51.

² Adam Smith, "Fifty Million Handguns," Esquire, April 1981, p. 24.

³ Richard Trubo, "Children and Guns: A Tragedy Waiting to Happen," Good Housekeeping, July 1982, p. 86.

⁴ Greta Walker, "Guns in the Home," Ladies Home Journal, July 1982, p. 134.

⁵ "Children and Guns," p. 90.

⁶ "Guns in the Home," p. 136.

⁷ "Guns in the Home," p. 135.

⁸ "Guns in the Home," p. 135.

⁹ "Guns in the Home," p. 135.

¹⁰ "Fifty Million Handguns," p. 24.

¹¹ "Fifty Million Handguns," p. 24.

¹² "Guns in the Home," pp. 135-36.

¹³ "Fifty Million Handguns," p. 24.

¹⁴ Leonard Berkowitz, "How Guns Control Us," Psychology Today, June 1981, p. 11-12.

¹⁵ "How Guns Control Us," p. 11.

¹⁶ "It's Time to Ban Handguns," p. 51.

¹⁷ "Guns in the Home," p. 136.

- 18 "Guns in the Home," p. 136.
- 19 "How Guns Control Us," p. 12.
- 20 "Children and Guns," p. 88.
- 21 "Fifty Million Handguns," p. 24.
- 22 "Children and Guns," p. 88.
- 23 "Children and Guns," p. 86.
- 24 "Guns in the Home," p. 134.
- 25 "Guns in the Home," p. 137.
- 26 "How Guns Control Us," p. 12.
- 27 "How Guns Control Us," p. 11.

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