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Add Gun Control to Litany of Misbegotten Government Plans

By John R. Lott Jr. and Eli Lehrer

Despite promises to the contrary by gun-control advocates, many nations have found that increasing restrictions on guns—and even banning them outright—actually increases the number of violent crimes committed.

The gun-control movement is in trouble internationally. From Britain to Australia to Canada, promises of lower crime rates from gun control have turned into the reality of historic increases in crime.

While the normal knee-jerk solution is to press for even more controls, once guns are banned the explanation that the laws failed simply because they did not go far enough becomes almost humorous.

All these experiments were adopted under what gun-control advocates would argue were ideal conditions. All three countries adopted laws that applied to the entire country. Australia and Britain are surrounded by water, and thus do not have the easy smuggling problem that Canada claims to exist with regard to the United States.

Take the United Kingdom: with new data showing violent crime soaring, Britain's home secretary announced legislation this month that would impose an outright ban on many toy guns.

Britain has already banned just about every type of weapon that a criminal might want to use. Handguns were made illegal in 1997, and nearly every other firearm (even BB guns) is now subject to a complex regulatory regime.

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Twice As Dangerous

The laws did not do what was claimed. The government just reported that gun crime in England and Wales nearly doubled in the four years from 1998–99 to 2002–03. The serious violent crime rate soared by 64 percent, and overall violent crime by 118 percent.

The violent crime rate in England and Wales now stands at twice the rate of that in the United States.

Understandably, the government wants to “do something,” but it is hard to believe that the new proposals will succeed where past efforts have failed.

With the exception of the United States, other English-speaking countries have followed Britain's lead in limiting gun ownership. Like the British, they have nothing to show for it.

Australia saw its violent crime rates soar after its 1996 Port Arthur gun-control measures banned most firearms. Violent crime rates averaged 32 percent higher in the six years after the law was passed (from 1997 to 2002) than they did the year before the law went into effect. Armed robbery rates increased 74 percent. Australia's violent crime rate is also now double America's.

Canada has not gone anywhere near as far as Australia and England, but even that country's limited restrictions have caused problems. Despite a

gun registration system that has cost five hundred times more than promised (the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation claims the overrun is one thousand times greater), the overall crime rate is more than half again higher than in the United States and has risen as the American crime rate has fallen.

Meanwhile, violent crime in the United States has fallen much faster than in Canada, and murders in Canada have gone up slightly, while falling in the United States.

The Canadian government recently admitted it could not identify a single violent crime that had been solved through registration. Public confidence in the government's ability to fight crime has also eroded, with one recent survey showing only 17 percent of voters support the registration program.

Guns do not tell the whole story: gangs, police and prisons also play a major role. Drug gangs cannot simply call up the police when another gang encroaches on their turf, so they end up establishing their own armies and committing a great many murders. (Gang fights account for about 60 percent of all murders in urban areas in the United States.)

The United States has long had a sophisticated and violent gang subculture that the nation's decentralized system of 16,500 police agencies had a difficult time handling. England's more centralized forty-five-agency

police did a better job fighting gangs, but, over time, the gangs have become more violent, sophisticated, and apt at acquiring guns. This has led to rising gun crime.

Police and prisons probably also account for some of the difference in crime, though it does not explain why the difference has grown so suddenly. The United States also has more police per capita than the United Kingdom, particularly in its big cities: New York and London are roughly the same size, but New York has about 40,000 police officers to London's 29,000.

Failed Schemes

The United States also locks up many more criminals: nearly 500 out of 1 million Americans are serving time behind bars as compared to about 150 per 1 million in the other English-speaking countries. America, quite simply, keeps more bad guys behind bars where they cannot commit crimes.

Repealing gun control laws might not solve the crime problems in the United Kingdom and Australia overnight, but the exploding crime rates (including gun crime) in countries that have banned all guns shows that we can add gun control to the list of government planning efforts that do not live up to their billing. Its failures have become too overwhelming to ignore.