

Wednesday, August 23, 2000

Gun Licensing Leads to Increased Crime, Lost Lives

By JOHN R. LOTT JR.

Who could possibly oppose licensing handgun owners? Requiring training for potential gun owners both in a classroom and at a firing range before they are allowed to buy a gun seems obvious. Licensing, especially when eventually coupled with registration, will supposedly also help identify criminals and prevent them from getting guns.

Yet, as usual with guns, the debate over licensing mentions just the possible benefits while ignoring the real costs to people's safety. If the California Senate passes licensing this week, it will not only cost Californians hundreds of millions of dollars annually, but, more important, it will increase violent crime.

In theory, if a gun is left at the scene of the crime, licensing and registration will allow a gun to be traced back to its owner. But, amazingly, despite police spending tens of thousands of man hours administering these laws in Hawaii (the one state with both rules), as well as in big urban areas with similar laws, such as Chicago and Washington, D.C., there is not even a single case where the laws have been instrumental in identifying someone who has committed a crime.

The reason is simple. First, criminals very rarely leave their guns at the scene of the crime. Would-be criminals also virtually never get licenses or register their weapons.

So what of the oft-stated claim that licensing will somehow allow even more comprehensive background checks and thus keep criminals from getting guns in the first place?

Unfortunately for gun control advocates, there is not a single academic study concluding that background checks reduce violent crime.

The Journal of the American Medical Assn. this month published an article showing that the Brady law produced no reduction in homicides or suicides. Other, more comprehensive research actually found that the waiting period in the Brady law slightly increased rape rates.

The Clinton administration keeps issuing press releases boasting that violent crime rates have fallen since 1994, when the Brady law was adopted. Yet violent crime started falling in 1991. The Brady law did not apply to 18 states, but after 1994 their violent crime fell as quickly as other states.

While still asserting that the law "must have some effect," U.S. Atty. Gen. Janet Reno was reduced this month to saying, "It might just take longer to measure [it]."

The reason why the Brady law does not affect criminals is simple. It is the law-abiding citizens, not the criminals, who obey the laws. For example, the waiting-period provision in the law prevented law-abiding women who were stalked or threatened from quickly obtaining a gun for self-defense.

There are still other problems with the law that the state Legislature is considering. When added to the current state waiting period, the processing time for a license will delay access to a gun by a month. While even short waiting periods increase rape rates, waiting periods longer than 10 days make it difficult for law-abiding citizens to obtain guns to protect themselves and increase all categories of violent crime.

The hundreds of dollars it will take to pay for the license and the up-to-eight-hour training course, as well as the many arcane reasons for losing a license, will reduce gun ownership by law-abiding people.

Since no other state has such restrictive rules for simply owning a gun, it is difficult to know how much gun ownership will decline, but similar rules for obtaining concealed handgun permits reduce

the number of permits issued by 60%. The reduction in permits increased violent crime.

It is already illegal for criminals to go around carrying guns. Making it difficult for law-abiding citizens to even own guns in their own homes is not going to make them safer from the criminals.

Part of the proposed "training" appears better classified as indoctrination, making gun owners memorize grossly exaggerated fears of the risks of owning a gun.

It will also be the the poor who bear the brunt of these costs and who will be priced out of gun ownership. They are also most vulnerable to crime and benefit the most from being able to protect themselves.

With all the new gun laws already scheduled to go into effect after the November elections, why don't legislators simply require that California homeowners to put out a sign stating: "This home is a gun-free zone"? Legislators could lead by example and start with their own homes.

John R. Lott Jr. Is a Senior Research Scholar at the Yale University Law School. the Second Edition of His Book "More Guns, Less Crime" (University of Chicago Press) Was Released in July

Copyright 2000 Los Angeles Times

