GUIDELINES FOR CONTRIBUTORS  
(with sample entries from the first edition)

*Guns in American Society:  
An Encyclopedia of History, Politics, Culture, and the Law  
(Revised Edition)*

**Entry Length, Organization, and Submission**

Please aim for 800 words, though entries from the first edition went as low 150 and as high as 4,000 words. Tight, dispassionate, factual, and fluid writing is the aim.  

The organization of your entry should be:  

<Title>  
Entry  
<Your Name>  
*See also* [don’t feel compelled to make this complete, as I will fill in the gaps]  
*For Further Reading* [the references you site in the body of your entry, plus a highly selective suggested reading or readings]

**File Name and File Submission**

Please submit each entry in an individual Microsoft Word file to: gcarter@bryant. edu — using the following file-naming guidelines.  

Use your last name, followed by the title of your entry, with an underscore between each word (no spaces). For example, Gregg Lee Carter’s entry on *Youth and Guns* would be saved as:  

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Spell out on first use in a chapter or entry; include the acronym in parentheses immediately after the first mention: Department of Transportation (DOT), chief executive officer (CEO). In bibliographic entries and in-text citations, the full name of the organization, author, or entity must be spelled out.

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Spell out whole numbers one through ninety-nine, but use figures for larger numbers, percentages (6 percent—note that “percent” is spelled out as one word), page numbers, and exact measurements (5 feet).
If similar numbers both large and small occur in a single paragraph or section, use figures for all of them. (The group consisted of 29 women and 103 men). (See Chicago, chapter 9, for details.)
Some examples:
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12 percent, 0. 4 percent
23 acres, 2 kilograms
25 million people, $3. 5 million
4,000 (comma with ordinary number) but p. 1259 (no comma)
pp. 455–458 (NOT 455–8 or 455–58)

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STOCKTON, CALIFORNIA, MASSACRE

The 1989 Stockton, California, Massacre, also known as the Stockton Schoolyard Massacre, mobilized public and political support for gun control in California. In an early case of a school shooting, Patrick Purdy used a semiautomatic assault rifle to fire upon an elementary school in Stockton, California, killing five students and wounding twenty-nine others and a teacher. Shortly after the shooting, California adopted the first assault-weapons ban in the United States.

During the 1980s, the number of military-style rifles imported to the United States increased dramatically. Relatively inexpensive AK-47s, Soviet-made assault rifles, were among the most popular weapons. As sales increased, gun control advocates and the media focused upon the alleged popularity of the AK-47 among gang members and the potential for mass shootings.

The Stockton, California, Massacre appeared to fulfill these fears. On January 17, 1989, just before noon, Purdy went to Cleveland Elementary School and opened fire on the playground. Purdy fired 105 rounds from an AK-47, targeting mostly children of immigrants from southeast Asia. One Vietnamese and four Cambodian students were killed—four girls and one boy, ranging from six to nine years of age. An additional twenty-nine students and a teacher were wounded. Purdy killed himself with a pistol shot to his head only minutes after launching his attack.

As described in detail by journalist Osha Gray Davidson in the opening chapter of his 1993 book Under Fire, Purdy was a 24-year-old drifter with a history of criminal activity. Purdy increasingly exhibited signs of mental illness, sociopathic behavior, and violence toward others. Yet, he largely slipped through the criminal justice and mental health systems and was able to purchase weapons in several states.

Purdy came from an unstable family background and may have had an inherited predisposition toward mental illness and substance abuse. He attended Cleveland Elementary through second grade, moving about an hour north to the state capitol of Sacramento when his allegedly alcoholic mother and abusive stepfather separated. His mother kicked him out as he became a teenager, further exacerbating his loner tendencies and substance abuse. Purdy lived in foster homes and then with his natural father, Patrick Benjamin Purdy, whose military discharge papers indicate that he could have been psychotic.

After his father’s death when Purdy was 16, he drifted from one area to another, engaging in petty theft and sporadically coming into contact with mental health and social workers. In 1986, Purdy visited a mental health center while experiencing hallucinations, including voices telling him to kill people. Purdy served a short jail term in 1987 after he and his half-brother, while high on drugs and alcohol, shot off weapons in a national forest near Lake Tahoe.

Mental health reports in early 1988 indicated that his mental health had deteriorated and that he could resort to violence against others. Apparently, his anger against his mother and society grew over time, eventually focusing on refugees who had settled in large numbers in the region around Stockton and the San Joaquin Valley. Purdy wrote racist terms on the flak vest he wore for the shootings and his last words were a racial slur against the owners of the motel that he lived in.

Since Purdy had only misdemeanor convictions, not felonies, and did not follow up with mental health treatment, it was legal for him to purchase firearms. He bought a semiautomatic pistol shortly after his release from jail; an AK-47 in August 1988, in Oregon; a large-capacity magazine for the rifle in December in Rhode Island; and another semiautomatic in late December. Purdy complied with California’s then fifteen-day waiting period for handgun
As with many other school-shooting suspects, Purdy signaled his intentions in advance. He vaguely mentioned to his half-brother that he had something planned. Given his brother’s own drug problems and speculations with Purdy about shooting a police officer, it is not surprising that the comment was not reported.

The Stockton Schoolyard Massacre served as a focusing event to increase support for gun control measures. Major media sources have continued to cite the event as an early example of a school shooting and as a key turning point in public opinion about assault-style weapons. A congressmember from California introduced the first federal assault-weapons proposal shortly after the shooting, although a federal law was not passed until five years later. In California, several members of the California legislature and Gov. George Deukmejian changed their views on gun control in the wake of the shooting. An assault-weapons ban, the first statewide ban in the United States, was adopted only a few months later—the Roberti-Roos Assault Weapons Control Act of 1989. The legislature also imposed a longer waiting period on purchases of rifles, supplementing the existing law on pistol purchases.

Gun-rights advocates have argued for a different interpretation of the Stockton Schoolyard Massacre. While assault-style weapons can be fired quickly and easily fitted with magazines holding more ammunition, they apparently are not more inherently dangerous than other firearms. The five children who were killed all were shot in vital organs; the other victims sustained less life-threatening injuries. In addition, it can be argued that the shooting was at least partially due to loopholes in the criminal justice system and requirements for purchasing weapons rather than the accessibility of assault weapons.

Marcia L. Godwin

See also
AK-47; Assault Weapons; Assault Weapons Ban of 1994; Roberti-Roos Assault Weapons Control Act of 1989; Schoolyard Shootings

For Further Reading:
Youth and Guns

The controversy over guns and their standing in American society becomes no more fervent than when it centers on youth. In the past decade, high-profile shooting sprees in which the shooters were teenage boys have become an annual event. The most shocking occurred in 1998 in Littleton, Colorado, where two Columbine High School students killed twelve fellow students, one teacher, and then themselves. Other shooting sprees have occurred in Santee, California; Springfield, Oregon; Pearl, Mississippi; West Paducah, Kentucky; Jonesboro, Arkansas; Edinboro, Pennsylvania; Raleigh, Virginia; and Conyers, Georgia. These acts of violence reveal that youth gun violence really means boy gun violence. They also spawn many questions, the most important of which include: How prevalent is youth gun violence? Is its incidence waxing or waning? What causes the violence?

The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth reveals that about one in every eleven boys between the ages of 12 and 16 currently carries a handgun at some point during any 12-month period. These boys live in urban as well as rural areas and are as likely to be white as they are to be African American. They are more likely than their non–gun-carrying counterparts to be involved with drugs and gangs (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1999). The most recent government data (1999) reveal that some 1,535 children between the ages of 0 and 19 were murdered by guns, representing two-thirds of all those killed in this age group. Most children who are murdered before the age of 13 are beaten to death by their parents or a close relative. Between the ages of 13 and 19, the period when three-fourths of all child homicides occur, murder is most often gang-related and overwhelmingly inflicted by gunshot (82 percent), with the victims overwhelmingly male (83 percent) and African American (58 percent, although this group constitutes only 15 percent of the youth population). The statistics on youthful murder offenders are similar: 1,711 youths committed a murder in 1999; 93 percent of them (1,591) were boys, and most of their murders were committed by guns (70 percent), especially handguns. The statistics on youth suicide are similar to those for murder: For every 2 murders, there is 1 suicide; these suicides are committed mostly in the teen years (95 percent), mostly by males (80 percent), and mostly by way of firearms (67 percent). U. S. youth homicide and suicide rates far exceed those for other economically developed nations: the U. S. youth homicide rate is 5 times the number of the typical Western European nation (2.57 per 100,000 children versus 0.51), while youth homicides involving firearms is 16 times greater. The pattern is the same for suicide: the U. S. rate is twice the rate of other developed countries (0.55 versus 0.27) and 11 times the rate for suicides involving firearms (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2000; Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1999).

Murder rates for children, both as victims and as perpetrators, rose rapidly between 1984 and 1993, but declined thereafter. Virtually all of the rise and all of the subsequent decline were gun related. More specifically, homicides by family members held constant (most cases involving young children being beaten to death), while homicides by acquaintances—the majority gang-related—increased substantially (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2001).
Most youth gun violence involves teenage boys from poor neighborhoods. This implies that the schoolyard violence that generates so much media attention is a rarity. And indeed it is: during the 1990s there were about 49 schoolyard-shooting deaths per year compared to more than 2,000 annually away from school.

Most of the boys involved in the high-profile schoolyard shootings grow up in areas where hunting and shooting are common and where many youths own their own hunting rifles and shotguns. The inner-city youths involved in gun violence also grow up in areas where guns are commonplace and where many youths carry guns for protection. Both kinds of youths are barraged by television shows and movies that depict gun violence as a routine way in which “real men” solve their problems. Department of Justice studies reveal that after “protection,” the second most common reason youths give for carrying firearms is that “your crowd respects you if you have a gun” (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2000b).

Recent psychological research provides us with a profile of the boys most likely to want to use a gun to solve their problems. Shapiro and his colleagues (1997) found that these boys are comfortable around guns; they feel excitement when they touch a gun; they believe that an insult merits an aggressive response; and, finally, their feelings of power and security increase when they carry guns or when they are with friends who are carrying guns.

To many observers, a key reason why too many American boys have become overly involved with guns is our lack of strict gun control. Most of the gun violence in the United States, both youth and nonyouth, involves handguns. Handguns are all but barred from personal possession in most economically developed nations. The issue of whether strict gun control would reduce violence is controversial because many of the nations having strict gun control laws also have less inequality and less heterogeneity—both of which are strong predictors of violent crime. A close examination of state-level gun laws in the United States, however, reveals
wide differences in the level of controls aimed at keeping guns out of the hands of youths. These laws include: whether it is illegal for a minor to own a handgun; whether it is illegal to sell a handgun to a minor; and whether adults are required to store their firearms out of the reach of children. It is noteworthy that such laws correlate with youth gun violence. For example, Massachusetts has laws against minors owning handguns, against selling handguns to minors, and requiring gun owners to prevent children from gaining access to their guns (e.g., by storing them in locked, steel cabinets); its rate of gun deaths due to homicide, suicide, and accidents for children 0–19 is 1.4 per 100,000 population. On the other hand, Louisiana has none of these gun control laws and its equivalent gun-death rate is 10.8 (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2000).

Several organizations, including the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence (formerly known as Handgun Control, Inc.) and the Children’s Defense Fund, rate the fifty states on the strictness of their gun laws. All such ratings correlate inversely with the rate of child gun deaths (e.g., Mountjoy, 2000).

The state-level gun control data speak to one solution for reducing youth gun violence—that is, the passing and enforcing of laws aimed at keeping firearms out of the hands of youths. Recent social science research shows two other promising solutions. Since not all youthful gun owners are equally dangerous, it makes sense to zero in on those who are. Boston began a program in 1996, Operation Ceasefire, to do just that. The program involves notifying gang members that carrying firearms will precipitate a swift and severe response—including federal prosecution and the disruption of drug activities. Within two years, homicides of teenage boys and young men under the age of 24 fell by two-thirds. Second, research in Norway in the early 1980s revealed that schools that directed their attention toward reducing bullying witnessed significant reductions in fighting and violent behavior. Based on this research, a federally sponsored program in South Carolina was begun in 1997 to reduce bullying behavior in a sample of middle schools. The program has shown early success in reducing antisocial and violent behavior (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2000a). The long-term impact has yet to be determined, but the Norwegian research would support optimism that the effects will be enduring.

Gregg Lee Carter

See also
Child Access Prevention (CAP) Laws; Children’s Defense Fund; Columbine High School Tragedy; Drugs, Crime, and Guns: United States; Gun-Free School Laws; Guns in the Home; National SAFE KIDS Campaign; National School Safety Center; Schoolyard Shootings

For Further Reading:
General Social Survey. 2000. “Do you happen to have in your home (or garage) any guns or revolvers?” If yes, “Is it a pistol, shotgun, rifle, or what?” Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/GSS/.
Atlanta: Centers for Disease Control.


Youth Crime Gun Interdiction Initiative

The Youth Crime Gun Interdiction Initiative (YCGII) is a Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (BATF) program intended to reduce juvenile and youth gun crime by decreasing the flow of arms through gun traffickers. Starting in 1996, selected cities began cooperating with the BATF’s National Tracing Center to trace all crime guns, defined as guns used or suspected of being used in a crime. The tracing data provide an overall picture of the illegal flow of crime guns to juveniles and assist local, state, and national agencies in better targeting particular programs for their jurisdictions. The data are also used by special BATF field agents and other law enforcement officials in their investigations of specific gun traffickers. In general, the program has been quite popular across party lines and has been well received by both national and local officials. Therefore, it has been repeatedly expanded to include more cities and more field agents. Critics have questioned whether all participating cities have effectively implemented the YCGII, and whether the BATF’s statistics provide an accurate view of either gun flows or the program’s success. However, supporters feel YCGII has provided important new insights on gun-trafficking patterns and has become an effective tool in limiting trafficking and thereby helping reduce youth gun crime.

Between 1985 and 1996, gun homicides committed by young people nearly tripled. These statistics and other anecdotal evidence convinced many officials that traditional law enforcement efforts to stop crime, restrict gun possession, and heavily punish violators were not proving effective. Looking for a new approach and arguing that little was known about how youths actually acquired illegal guns, the BATF collaborated with academics to create the Boston Gun Project to study gun-trafficking patterns. Boston was one of the few cities already tracing all guns recovered by the police, as opposed to the more common practice of tracing just those used in homicides or other specific crimes. Early results showed that many guns came from only a few dealers, that crime guns could often be traced to federally licensed dealers, and that relatively new guns were being used by Boston youths. These results challenged widely held assumptions that crime guns were often untraceable and were older weapons.

The dramatic Boston results gained national attention. On July 8, 1996, Clinton directed the BATF to begin the YCGII as a pilot program tracing all crime guns recovered in 17 selected major cities throughout the United States. The new program, nicknamed “Yogi,” grew quickly. By 1998, the BATF could report analysis of over 76,000 crime-gun traces. Between 1996 and 1998, the BATF carried out over 640 trafficking investigations, many prompted or aided by YCGII data. Since then, the program has continued to grow. It now covers 50 cities, has over 250 special agents, and has a budget approaching 10 percent of the BATF’s overall annual expenditures.

The YCGII traces are not a representative national sample. Only major cities participate in the YCGII and a few, such as New York and Chicago, account for a large percentage of all traces. Still, since major cities have a disproportionately high number of gun crimes, the YCGII does provide some insight into national patterns. The data confirms that access to guns by juveniles, those 17 and under, and by youths, those aged 18 to 24, remains a problem. Although the exact numbers vary by year and by region, an average of 10 percent of all guns traced come from juveniles and close to 33 percent come from youths. Juveniles and youths are not only involved in crimes of possession, but also in firearm theft, as straw purchasers who buy weapons for others, and as gun traffickers.

YCGII reports also show that close to three-quarters of all crime guns are handguns, the majority of which are semiautomatic pistols. These guns are particularly popular with juveniles and youths and accounted for close to 60 percent of all guns recovered from these groups in
The BATF has used this data to issue Top Ten lists of the guns most popular in particular areas, allowing local law enforcement to target specific weapons.

Crucially, the BATF has used the data from the YCGII and subsequent investigations to address the question of how young people get possession of crime guns. Of the cases investigated between 1996 and 1998, over half involved firearms trafficked through a straw purchaser. Twenty percent of the cases involved guns stolen from federally licensed dealers and 13 percent involved guns stolen from residences. Fourteen percent of the cases involved guns sold by unregulated private sellers—including those sold at gun shows. The large percentages directly or indirectly traceable to federally licensed dealers convinced many that better monitoring and regulation of such sellers could have a significant impact. Also, large percentages of guns used for crimes originated from dealers within the same state where the crime occurred, so targeted local law enforcement efforts appeared to be crucial in slowing the flow of firearms.

To better assess the way guns are trafficked, the BATF and their academic supporters also have developed measures of “time-to-crime,” or length of time between when the gun was first sold by a federally licensed dealer and when it was recovered by law enforcement. Short time-to-crime, under three years, is considered an indicator of trafficking, since it suggests the use of straw purchasers or other diversions. In 1999, for those guns whose time period could be calculated, nearly one-third had short times-to-crime and about one in seven had a time-to-crime of less than one year. These statistics showed that guns were moving quickly among owners and that many crime guns were very new.

In the YCGII’s first years, both government and outside observers questioned whether its main components were being fully implemented at the local level. The Department of Treasury’s own Office of the Inspector General reported that after three years, only two of the original seventeen cities’ field offices were actively performing three key parts of the program. Questions were also raised about how well the BATF was communicating with local law enforcement; some local officials even claimed they were not familiar with the program. Problems also arose because it was not certain whether trace requests were being submitted for every crime gun and many of the trace requests lacked such key information as the date the gun was seized or the age of the offender.

Harsher critics also raised concerns that the BATF was using questionable statistical techniques and selective reporting to give a skewed overall view of the trafficking issue and to make the YCGII appear more successful than it really was. For example, they pointed out that the BATF’s Top Ten list of guns only accounted for about one-fourth of all trace requests. Furthermore, when the data was broken down to the local level, the numbers involved were so small that they could have been due to statistical chance. Questions were also raised on the crucial issue of time-to-crime. The BATF originally only traced weapons purchased after 1990 and was unable to establish clear dates for all weapons. Because of these limitations, the BATF always reported time-to-crime statistics on guns with established times, not on all guns. This practice inflated the percentage of newer weapons.

Since the program was expanded over time to include new cities and was only gradually implemented, a comparison of numbers across years cannot be used to prove whether or not the program is effective. BATF officials point to the large and growing number of trace requests as a sign of a coordinated strategy. They also note that during fiscal year 2000, YCGII investigations led to legal action against 535 defendants and that thousands of guns have been confiscated as part of YCGII investigations. Whether those investigations and seizures would have occurred even without the YCGII program is debatable, as is any role the YCGII may have played in recent reductions in youth gun crimes.
See also
Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms; Gun Control; Gun Shows; National Tracing Center; Youth Gun Control Legislation, The Juvenile Justice Bill of 1999; Youth and Guns

For Further Reading:
Wright, James D. (1947– )

Author of three major books on the sociology of firearms, James D. Wright has played a significant role in bringing serious techniques of social science to bear on the firearm controversy.

During the Ford administration, Attorney General Edward Levi called for banning handguns in cities that had crime rates above a certain level. Gun-rights activist Neal Knox responded by filing a Freedom of Information Act request with the Department of Justice, asking what research the department had that supported handgun bans. The department had none. At about the same time, Philip Cook and Mark Moore submitted research-grant proposals to the Justice Department suggesting that the main reason why more stringent gun control laws had not been enacted was that advocates had failed to make a serious scholarly case for them.

Like the Ford administration, the Carter administration supported gun control. Accordingly, President Jimmy Carter’s Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) offered research grants for teams of scholars to study the firearm issue. (The LEAA was later abolished and the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) took over as administrator of most federal criminal justice research grants.) The grants yielded several reports: “Weapons Policies: A Survey of Police Department Practices Concerning Weapons and Related Issues,” by Eleanor Weber-Burdin, Peter Rossi, James D. Wright, and Kathleen Daly; “Effects of Weapons Use on Felony Case Disposition: An Analysis of Evidence from the Los Angeles PROMIS System,” by Rossi, Weber-Burdin, and Huey-tsyh Chen; an “Annotated Bibliography,” by Wright, Chen, Joseph Pereira, Daly, and Rossi; and an “Executive Summary,” by Wright and Rossi. But the report that reshaped the American firearm debate was “Weapons, Crime, and Violence in America: A Literature Review and Research Agenda,” which was eventually revised and published as the book Under the Gun: Weapons, Crime, and Violence in America, by Wright, Rossi, and Daly. Until the publication of Gary Kleck’s Point Blank in 1991, Under the Gun was the most complete source of social science research about firearm policy.

Who were the Wright and Rossi who were to become such familiar names for people who cared about gun policy? James D. Wright was a professor of sociology at the University of Massachusetts. He had previously coauthored an antigun paper titled “The Ownership of the Means of Destruction: Weapons in the United States,” analyzing National Opinion Research Center data about gun ownership (Wright and Marston, 1975). He had also written a major newspaper opinion piece in favor of strict gun control. Wright was already well established as an important sociology scholar and was serving as director of the Social and Demographic Research Institute at the University of Massachusetts. Wright’s colleague, Peter Rossi, would later become president of the American Sociology Association.

When Wright, Rossi, and Daly produced their report for the NIJ in 1982, they delivered a document quite different from the one they had expected to write. Carefully reviewing all existing research to date, the three scholars found no persuasive evidence that America’s gun control laws had reduced criminal violence. For example, the federal Gun Control Act of 1968, which banned most interstate gun sales, had no discernible impact on the criminal acquisition of guns from other states. Washington, D. C.’s 1977 ban on acquiring new handguns was not linked to any reduction in gun crime in the District of Columbia. Even Detroit’s law providing mandatory sentences for felonies committed with a gun was found to have no effect on gun-crime patterns, in part because judges would often reduce the
sentence for the underlying offense in order to balance out the mandatory two-year extra sentence for use of a gun.

The authors discussed the data showing that gun owners—rather than being a violent, aberrant group of nuts—were at least as psychologically stable and morally sound as the rest of the population. Polls claiming to show that a large majority of the population favored “more gun control” were critiqued as the product of biased questions and of the fact that most people had no idea how strict gun laws already were. As Wright, Rossi, and Daly frankly admitted, they had started out their research as gun control advocates and had been forced to change their minds by their review of the evidence.

In 1981, the NIJ awarded Wright and Rossi (this time, without Daly) a new grant to investigate the gun habits of America’s felons. Studying felony prisoners in eleven prisons in ten state correctional systems in 1981, Wright and Rossi found that gun control laws had no discernable effect on criminals obtaining guns. Only 12 percent of criminals, and only 7 percent of “handgun predators,” had acquired their last crime handgun at a gun store. Of those, about a quarter had stolen the gun from a store; a large number of the rest, Wright and Rossi suggested, had probably procured the gun through a legal surrogate buyer, such as a girlfriend with a clean record.

Fifty-six percent of the prisoners said that a criminal would not attack a potential victim who was known to be armed. Seventy-four percent agreed with the statement that “one reason burglars avoid houses where people are at home is that they fear being shot during the crime.” Thirty-nine percent of the felons had personally decided not to commit a crime because they thought the victim might have a gun and 8 percent said the experience had occurred “many times.” Criminals in states with higher civilian gun-ownership rates worried the most about armed victims.

Notwithstanding popular assertions that criminals preferred small, inexpensive handguns (so-called Saturday night specials), the felony prisoners preferred larger, more powerful handguns—equal to the guns that they expected the police would have. Although the criminals
rarely bought guns in gun stores, the overwhelming majority stated that obtaining a gun after their release from prison would be a simple project, which might take a few hours to a few weeks.

The report for the NIJ was eventually published as the book *Armed and Considered Dangerous: A Survey of Felons and Their Firearms*. Both *Under the Gun* and *Armed and Considered Dangerous* became a major element of the gun control debate. Scholars who were skeptical of gun control, such as Don B. Kates, worked hard to disseminate this research. Eventually, the Wright/Rossi/Daly material trickled down to many gun-rights activists as they either bought the books themselves or read about them in articles by Kates and others. The Wright/Rossi/Daly research became a frequent subject of letters to the editor from gun-rights advocates.

Wright moved to Tulane University, where he became the Charles and Leo Favrot Professor of Human Relations in the Department of Sociology. He continued to serve as editor of a series of books and monographs on “Social Institutions and Social Change,” published by Aldine de Gruyter. Wright also kept up a prolific pace in writing his own articles and books. Among his books, for which he always works with a coauthor, are *Drugs as a Social Problem; Beside the Golden Door: Policy, Politics, and the Homeless; Address Unknown: The Homeless in America; The Dissent of the Governed: Alienation and Democracy in America; The State of the Masses; and Social Science and Natural Hazards*. His overall approach is aptly expressed by the title of his book *The Greatest of Evils: Urban Poverty and the American Underclass*, which sees the hopelessness of the urban underclass as the central problem in American society, the root of diverse social maladies.

Along with Tulane University’s Joseph Sheley, Wright returned to the gun issue with a series of articles that culminated with the 1995 publication of the book *In the Line of Fire: Youths, Guns, and Violence in Urban America*. The book remains the most comprehensive study of the firearm attitudes and practices of at-risk youths in the United States—based on surveys of 835 juvenile male inmates at 6 correctional facilities, and 758 male students at 10 inner-city high schools.

Sheley and Wright found that so-called assault weapons were, despite popular imagery, not greatly important to juvenile gun crime. The more an individual engaged in delinquent behavior (e.g., selling drugs, participating in organized gangs), the greater the risk of gun injury. Of the inmates, 70 percent had been "scared off, shot at, wounded, or captured" by an armed victim at least once. But Wright and Sheley’s broader point was that guns, drugs, and gangs were all merely symptoms. A Wright and Sheley article in *Peace Review* expressed their ultimate point more boldly than their book did:

> Until we rectify the conditions that breed hostility, estrangement, futility and hopelessness, whatever else we do will come to little or nothing. . . . Widespread joblessness and few opportunities for upward mobility are the heart of the problem. Stricter gun control laws, more aggressive enforcement of existing laws, a crack-down on drug traffic, police task forces aimed at juvenile gangs . . . and other similar measures are inconsequential compared to the true need: the economic, social, and moral resurrection of the inner city. Just how this might be accomplished and at what cost can be debated; the urgent need to do so cannot (Wright and Sheley, 1992, p. 34).

David B. Kopel

See also

Cook, Philip J.; Gun Control Act of 1968; Kates, Don B., Jr.; Knox, Neal

For Further Reading:

Sheley, Joseph F., and James D. Wright. 1995. *In the Line of Fire: Youth, Guns, and*


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Waiting Periods

Waiting periods require those desiring to purchase a gun to delay obtaining the weapon for a specified period of time. The purpose of waiting periods is twofold: to provide authorities with the opportunity to conduct a background check of the prospective purchaser to make sure the person is not ineligible to own a gun, by virtue of a criminal background, mental incompetence, age, or other restricted category; and to provide a cooling-off period in case the individual seeks to buy the gun on impulse, prompted by rage, depression, or any other suspect mental condition that might subside by the end of the waiting period. Waiting periods are normally applied only to handgun, not long gun, purchases.

The idea of waiting periods for prospective gun buyers dates back at least to the 1930s, when a forty-eight-hour waiting period was applied in the District of Columbia; the drafting of that rule was assisted by the National Rifle Association (NRA), which continued to support the idea until the 1970s, when it reversed its position. A concerted effort to enact a national waiting period for the purchase of a handgun in order to conduct background checks and provide a cooling-off period began in 1986. Those efforts succeeded in 1993 with the passage of the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act, which imposed a five-business-day waiting period for handgun purchases, during which time local law enforcement authorities were to conduct the necessary background checks. According to the law, handgun purchases were to be rejected if the applicant had been convicted of a crime that carries a sentence of at least a year (not including misdemeanors); if there was a violence-based restraining order against the applicant; or if the person had been convicted of domestic abuse, arrested for using or selling drugs, was a fugitive from justice, was certified as mentally unstable or was in a mental institution, or was an illegal alien or had renounced U. S. citizenship. Opponents of the law, including the NRA, filed suit against the Brady Bill, challenging its constitutionality—not as a violation of the Second Amendment’s right to bear arms, but as a violation of states’ rights under the Tenth Amendment. In 1997, a sharply divided U. S. Supreme Court struck down the law’s provision requiring local police to conduct background checks in the case of Printz v. United States (521 U. S. 898). The ruling did not affect the waiting-period restriction or challenge the propriety of restricting handgun sales. Despite the ruling, handgun background checks generally continued on a voluntary basis.

In 1998, the five-day waiting period lapsed, as per the terms of the law, and was replaced by the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s National Instant Criminal Background Check System. This system is designed to allow an immediate background check to occur, although the system has been hampered by gaps in information and other technical problems. The check must be completed within three days, but 95 percent of the background checks are completed within two hours, according to a U. S. Justice Department report. From 1994 to 2000, almost 600,000 handgun purchases have been blocked as the result of background checks. This represents a rejection rate of about 2.5 percent of all handgun purchases. State checks resulted in a slightly higher rejection rate, probably owing to better and more complete state data. Even though waiting periods are no longer required by the national government, nineteen states have their own, ranging from a few days to several months. They include Alabama, California, Connecticut, Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Washington, and Wisconsin. Gun control proponents have argued for a restoration of a national three-day waiting period, in part because of the perceived value of a cooling-off period before handgun purchases.

One area of gun sales continues to be omitted from nationally mandated background checks. In most places, secondary-market gun sales by unlicensed individuals can occur without
background checks or state waiting periods. Referred to generally as the gun-show loophole, these sales at gun shows, flea markets, and other unregulated venues account for as much as 40 percent of gun sales. As of 2000, eleven states required background checks for all handgun purchases, even those from unlicensed sellers. Those states with waiting-period requirements would also retain them for these checks. The tenth and eleventh states to close the gun-show loophole were Colorado and Oregon, where voters in the 2000 election approved statewide referenda requiring background checks for all gun-show purchases.

Robert J. Spitzer

See also
Background Checks; Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act; Licensing; National Rifle Association; Printz v. United States; Safety Courses

For Further Reading:
United States v. Warin (1976)

Francis J. Warin had designed and built a submachine gun with the hope that he could market it to the military as an improvement on weapons currently in use. He was convicted under the National Firearms Act of 1934 as amended by the Gun Control Act of 1968 for knowingly and willfully possessing a firearm that was not properly registered. Warin appealed on a number of grounds, including a claim that the law under which he had been prosecuted violated the Second Amendment. The United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit rejected all of his pleas in United States v. Warin (530 F. 2d 103; 1976).

The court ruled that the Second Amendment guaranteed a collective, not an individual, right and that Warin did not come under the umbrella of it protections since he was not a member of a military organization. Congressional incursions on the Second Amendment, the court also declared, were permissible since all Bill of Rights provisions have exceptions that are designed to promote public order. The judge who wrote the opinion harked back to the 1328 Statute of Northampton to locate a source for this viewpoint, and noted that similar statements had been made in many court opinions thereafter (citing United States v. Tot, 131 F2d 261, 3d Cir.; 1942). He expanded on this point in the following terms: There can be no question that an organized society which fails to regulate the importation, manufacture and transfer of the highly sophisticated lethal weapons in existence today does so at a peril. The requirement that no one may possess a submachine gun which is not registered to him in the National Firearms Registration and Transfer Record is a reasonable regulation . . . (1976: 108).

Warin sought unsuccessfully to overcome this argument by insisting that he was part of a “sedentary military,” apparently a made-up phrase and one that obviously irritated the appellate judge. By it, Warin meant to indicate that he could at some time become a militia member, since he met the eligibility requirements. The court found this argument unpersuasive: “the fact that Warin, in common with all citizens of Ohio, is subject to enrollment in the militia of the state,” it said, “confers upon him no right to possess the submachine gun in question” (1976: 106). The judge also remained unmoved by Warin’s claim that the kind of weapon he possessed was a prototype of one used by the militia and therefore protected under Second Amendment rights. Warin also made no headway with his claim that the tax and licensing requirements regarding weapons were unconstitutional. The court decreed that such levies were not out of line with the dictates of the Second Amendment. Nor did it agree with Warin that possession of an unregistered submachine gun could not be punished because of the Ninth Amendment to the Constitution, which specifies in a general way restrictions on federal power.

Gilbert Geis

See also
Gun Control Act of 1968; National Firearms Act of 1934; Ninth Amendment; United States v. Tot

For Further Reading:
Victimization from Gun Violence

Firearm-related injuries are a major public health problem in the United States for several reasons. First, firearm-related injuries pose a large health burden and result in a significant number of deaths, nonfatal injuries, and disabilities each year. Since 1981 alone, more Americans have died from nonmilitary use of firearms than have died in World War I, World War II, and the Vietnam conflict combined (Department of Defense, 2000). Second, firearm-related injuries are highly lethal: for every 5 firearm-related injuries, 2 result in death (Gotsch et al., 2001). Third, the economic costs of firearm-related injuries are substantial. The medical costs alone are estimated to be $2 billion per year, but the total lifetime cost of firearm injuries is estimated to be as high as $100 billion per year (Cook and Ludwig, 2000).

The Extent of the Problem

In 1998, the latest year for which complete data are available, 30,708 people died from firearm-related injuries for an overall age-adjusted rate of 11.3 per 100,000 population. Approximately 57 percent of these deaths were due to suicide, 39 percent to homicide, and 3 percent to unintentional circumstances (see accompanying table). Almost 3 of every 5 suicides in the United States are committed with a firearm. More people use firearms to commit suicide than all other methods combined. The same is true for homicides. Firearms are also involved in a number of unintentional firearm injuries each year—with approximately 1 of every 17 being fatal (Gotsch et al., 2001). These injuries often occur during common firearm-related activities such as cleaning, loading or unloading guns, hunting, target shooting, or while handling or carrying firearms (Sinauer et al., 1996).

Firearm-related injuries are among the most lethal of health events. The case-fatality ratio (i.e., the proportion of cases resulting in death) for firearm-related injuries, however, varies by cause. In 1998, the case-fatality ratio was approximately 80 percent for firearm-related suicides, 21 percent for firearm-related assaults, and 6 percent for unintentional firearm-related injuries (Gotsch et al., 2001).

Nonfatal firearm injuries are also an important public health problem in the United States. In 1998, there were estimated to be 64,484 nonfatal firearm-related injuries that were treated in emergency departments (23.9 per 100,000), including 46,365 firearm-related assaults (17.2 per 100,000), 4,421 firearm-related suicide attempts (1.6 per 100,000), and 13,698 unintentional firearm-related injuries (5.1 per 100,000) (Gotsch et al., 2001).

Overall, firearm-related injuries are the second leading cause of injury death among persons 15 to 34 years of age in the United States and the leading cause of injury death among African Americans 15 to 24 years of age.

Trends

Firearm-related death rates have changed significantly over the last forty years. From 1962 to 1993, firearm-related death rates increased 63 percent, rising from 9.6 to 15.6 per 100,000 population (Ikeda et al., 1997a). Firearm-related homicides and suicides both increased, while firearm fatality rates for unintentional injuries, legal intervention (shootings by police officers in the line of duty), and undetermined intention decreased (Ikeda et al., 1997b). By 1998, firearm-related deaths had decreased 27 percent to 11.3 per 100,000 population. While all causes of firearm-related mortality decreased from 1993 to 1998, the largest decline was for unintentional firearm-deaths (from .65 to .34, or 48 percent) followed by firearm homicides (from 7.9 to 5.0, or 37 percent).

The overall trends, though, mask important changes among certain population groups. For
instance, among youths 15–19 years of age, firearm homicide rates increased 156 percent from 1987 to 1993 (from 7.0 to 17.9) and dropped 45 percent from 1994 to 1998 (from 17.8 to 9.7; Dahlberg and Potter, 2001). During this same period, nonfirearm homicides remained stable, as they have for several decades, suggesting that firearm homicides have driven much of the increase and decrease in overall homicide deaths among young people (see figure).

Trends for nonfatal firearm injuries have also declined over time. For instance, rates of firearm-related suicide attempts treated in emergency departments dropped by 48 percent between 1993 and 1998, while those for firearm-related assaults declined 49 percent and unintentional firearm-related injuries 37 percent (Gotsch et al., 2001).

![Graph showing firearm, nonfirearm, and total homicide rates](image)


**FATAL FIREARM INJURIES**

Firearm-related suicide rates increase with age and are highest among persons aged 75 years.

*U.S. Firearm (FA) Death Rates by Cause, Sex, Age Group, and Race/Ethnicity, 1998*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total</th>
<th>FA Homicide</th>
<th>FA Suicide</th>
<th>Unintentional FA</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>Rate</td>
<td>Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total3</td>
<td>30,708</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>12,102</td>
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### Sex3

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<th></th>
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<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>26,189 19.6</td>
<td>4,519 3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10,069 8.4</td>
<td>2,033 1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15,104 10.4</td>
<td>2,320 1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>762 0.6</td>
<td>104 0.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Age Group

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
<th>Count</th>
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<th>% of Total</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0–14 years</td>
<td>612</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>317</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15–24 years</td>
<td>7,420</td>
<td>19.9</td>
<td>4,559</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td>2,510</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–34 years</td>
<td>6,309</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>3,329</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>2,789</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>0.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>35–44 years</td>
<td>5,690</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>2,161</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>3,329</td>
<td>7.5</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45–54 years</td>
<td>3,781</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>1,005</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>2,652</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>77</td>
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<td>55–64 years</td>
<td>2,356</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1,873</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>0.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>65–74 years</td>
<td>2,081</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1,831</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>0.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>75+ years</td>
<td>2,433</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>2,282</td>
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### Race/ethnicity3

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<th>Count</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>% of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>19,365</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>3,479</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>15,081</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>593</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black, non-Hispanic</td>
<td>7,391</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>6,060</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>1,098</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>3,085</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>2,133</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>840</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>0.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Am Indian/AK native</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>7.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>442</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>—4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


1Firearm deaths of undetermined intent (n=316) are included.
2Legal intervention deaths are included.
and older, while firearm-related homicide rates are highest among adolescents and young adults and tend to decrease with age (see table). Among youths aged 15–24, the rate of firearm-related homicide was 12.2 per 100,000 in 1998 compared to 4.1 per 100,000 among those over 24 years of age.

Unintentional firearm-related death rates are also highest among adolescents and young adults. Approximately 6 percent of all victims of unintentional firearm-related deaths are less than 10 years of age and about one-third are between 15 and 24 years of age.

Males are more likely to use a firearm when committing suicide and are also more likely to die from a firearm homicide than females. In 1998, firearms were used in 62 percent of male suicides and 38 percent of female suicides. They were also used in about 72 percent of male homicides and 48 percent of female homicides. The ratio of the male firearm suicide rate to the female firearm suicide rate was 6.5 in 1998, while the ratio of male to female firearm homicide rate was 5:4. The majority of victims of unintentional firearm-related injuries are also males—the male to female rate ratio being 7:6.

Non-Hispanic whites (6.7 per 100,000) and American Indians and Alaska natives (7.4 per 100,000) have the highest firearm-related suicide rates in the United States (see table). Whites, however, account for the majority of firearm-related suicides. In 1998, for example, 79 percent of all firearm-related suicides were committed by white men, with the highest rates occurring among the elderly aged 70 years and older. Rates of firearm homicides, on the other hand, are highest among African Americans. The racial/ethnic differences in firearm homicide rates are especially pronounced among the younger age groups. For instance, in 1998, African American youths 15–24 had a firearm homicide rate (50.2 per 100,000) more than twice that of their Hispanic counterparts (20.5 per 100,000) and nearly 18 times the rate of their white, non-Hispanic counterparts (2.8 per 100,000).

**NONFATAL FIREARM INJURIES**

Males, young adults, and African Americans are more likely to be treated in an emergency department for a nonfatal firearm injury than females, older adults, or other racial or ethnic groups (Gotsch et al., 2001). For example, over the period 1993–1998, rates of firearm-related assaults treated in emergency departments in the United States were 8 times higher among males than females (34.3 vs. 4.3 per 100,000). Rates of firearm-related suicide attempts, on the other hand, were nearly 5 times higher (2.9 vs. 0.6 per 100,000), while rates for unintentional firearm-related injuries were approximately 9 times higher among males than females (9.4 vs. 1.1 per 100,000; Gotsch et al., 2001).

Young people between the ages of 15 and 24 have the highest rates of nonfatal firearm injuries treated in emergency departments of all age groups (Gotsch et al., 2001). Unlike firearm suicides, where persons of advanced age (>65 years) have the highest rates, rates of nonfatal firearm-related suicide attempts are highest among those 20–24 years of age (3.8 vs. 1.6 per 100,000; Gotsch et al., 2001). Young age and better health probably improve the odds of surviving a firearm suicide attempt and may account for some of this difference.

Similar to firearm homicides, rates of firearm-related assaults are highest among African Americans, especially among males. Over the period 1993–1998, the rate of nonfatal firearm-related assaults treated in emergency departments among black males was 154.4 per 100,000 compared with 65.5 per 100,000 among Hispanic males and 8.1 among white males (Gotsch et al., 2001). Self-inflicted firearm injuries, on the other hand, are higher among whites than other racial/ethnic groups.
HOW DOES THE UNITED STATES COMPARE WITH OTHER NATIONS?

The United States has one of the highest firearm death rates in the world (Krug et al., 1998). Firearm homicide rates, for instance, are about 19 times higher in the United States than in other high-income nations and firearm suicide rates about 5 times higher (Krug et al., 1998). Moreover, in the United States, firearms are the most common method used in both homicides and suicides. All causes of firearm mortality—homicide, suicide, and unintentional injuries—are also much higher among the younger age groups (less than 25 years old) in the United States than in other developed nations. Even among children less than 15 years of age, firearm death rates in the United States are 12 times higher than firearm death rates among all other developed nations combined (1.7 per 100,000 compared with 0.14 per 100,000; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1997).

CONCLUSION

Firearm injuries are an important public health problem in the United States—contributing substantially each year to premature death, illness, and disability. The human toll is only part of their devastating impact. The economic cost of treating firearm injuries results in billions of dollars each year to the health care system and billions more in absenteeism from work and lost productivity. Finding ways to prevent such injuries remains one of the most important goals and challenges of public health.

Linda L. Dahlberg and Avid Reza

See also

Accidents, Gun; Firearm Injury Statistical Systems; Gun Violence as a Public Health Problem; Motor Vehicle Laws as a Model for Gun Laws; Suicide, Guns and; Suicide, International Comparisons

For Further Reading:


Trigger Locks

Trigger locks are devices designed to prevent the accidental discharge of a firearm. Supporters of locks argue that they are a low cost, “common-sense” safety measure that will help prevent accidental shootings and injuries, especially of children. No national legislation requiring trigger locks has been approved, but supporters have had success in three other avenues. At the state level, they have encouraged the passage of child access prevention (CAP) laws, which make it a crime to store a weapon within access of a minor and, in some cases, make trigger locks mandatory. They have used the threat of lawsuits and other pressures to get some gun manufacturers to agree to add locks to their new weapons. Finally, they have led programs, some supported with government funding, to distribute free locks to gun owners. Opponents argue that locks should be available, but should not be mandatory. They feel that mandatory locks add to the costs, inconvenience, and regulation of gun ownership, while potentially saving only a very few lives. Furthermore, they argue that mandatory locks may actually increase the number of injuries and deaths either by giving gun owners a false sense of security and leading to overall less-careful storage and monitoring of their weapons, or by greatly restricting a victim’s ability to defend oneself against assault or home invasion.

On the market today, there are two main types of locking devices. The first, commonly called a trigger lock, fits over the gun and prevents access to the trigger. Locks of this type are either key locks or combination locks. The second kind of lock is a cable lock, which can disable most gun types and also lock the gun to a solid object. An important limit on both types is that they are designed for use only on unloaded firearms and carry warnings that use on a loaded gun may result in an accidental discharge. In the future, locks are increasingly likely to employ “smart gun” technology that makes the gun inoperable until the lock is released by a signal from a special ring or bracelet worn by the owner, or until the owner’s fingerprint is matched. The type of lock affects the price, but many locks are sold for around ten dollars and are widely available in gun stores and other outlets.

Exactly how many lives could be saved by the adoption of mandatory trigger locks is a matter of contentious debate. In a widely cited study, researchers from the Harborview Injury Prevention and Research Center reported that, between 1990 and 1994, unintentional gunshot deaths among children were 23 percent lower than expected in the twelve states that had adopted CAP laws. Using this figure, the researchers estimated that 39 lives had been saved in the CAP states, which could be extrapolated to 216 children nationally. Others, though, have questioned the specific role of trigger locks in these reductions and pointed to the danger of extrapolating statistics from a small sample, especially since much of the overall decline resulted from a sharp decline in one state. Other studies and anecdotal evidence seem to confirm that trigger locks have played some part in limiting gun accidents, but their exact role is hard to assess, particularly since firearm accidents in general have been dropping significantly since the 1960s. In recent years, roughly 200 American children have been killed annually and 1,000 injured by unintentional shootings.

Supporters argue that even if trigger locks save only one life, they are worth the cost. Gun control advocates, such as the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence and those involved in the Million Mom March, as well as certain government officials, have argued forcefully for the adoption of mandatory locks. In Congress, Sen. Herb Kohl (D-WI) and others have repeatedly sponsored amendments and separate bills supporting locks. In 1999, following Columbine and other youth shootings, the Senate voted overwhelmingly in support of an amendment requiring locks on all new guns sold by licensed dealers, but the underlying Juvenile Justice Bill was never approved by the House. Traditionally, locks have been supported more by Democrats, but
George W. Bush announced during the 2000 presidential campaign that he would support a national initiative to provide free locks and would sign legislation for mandatory locks if it reached his desk.

With national legislation moving slowly, trigger-lock supporters have shifted some of their focus. Since 1989, more than a dozen states and several major cities have passed CAP laws. Although varying in their exact language, the laws make it a crime to store a firearm within easy reach of a minor unless the weapon has a locking device or is stored in a locked container. Some of the laws also include specific requirements that dealers offer locks for sale at the time of purchase. Additionally, some states are now using consumer protection laws in an attempt to force the adoption of new safety measures.

Trigger-lock advocates have also attempted to put pressure on gun manufacturers. Using tobacco litigation as a model, numerous lawsuits have been filed against gun manufacturers arguing that they are liable for damages caused by their products and should have to reimburse the government for any Medicare or other money spent treating gun victims. Further pressure has been added by government announcements that police departments will only buy guns from companies that adopt new gun-safety rules. In 1997, eight major manufacturers, trying to limit their financial and public relations losses, agreed to begin installing locking devices on their weapons. In 2000, Smith & Wesson went even further by agreeing to a host of new provisions, including equipping all future guns with smart-gun technology. The effectiveness of the 1997 agreement was somewhat limited by the refusal of some manufacturers of cheap weapons to participate. The 2000 agreement has proven controversial, as many manufacturers have accused the government of meddling in their private business decisions with what they consider a form of extortion.

While waiting for new legislation or manufacturer agreements, some supporters of trigger locks have begun programs to distribute safety kits, commonly including cable locks, free of charge. Project HomeSafe, sponsored by the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF) and funded in part by a grant from the U. S. Department of Justice, has been launched in more than a dozen states. Through 2002, the project has distributed more than 3 million safety kits and has also led community efforts to educate children on safe gun practices. The project suffered a setback in 2001 when the Consumer Product Safety Commission and the NSSF announced a voluntary recall of 400,000 defective locks.

Opponents of mandatory trigger locks raise some of the same objections raised on other gun control initiatives. They argue that mandatory locks are a “one-size-fits-all” policy that entails costs and inconvenience for all gun owners, even those without children and those who already store their weapons safely. They argue that any government regulation and enforcement is an intrusion on Second Amendment rights. Also, they feel the issue is less about safety and more about a political debate that gun control advocates hope to ride to even greater future regulation.

Opponents also claim that mandatory locks may actually cause more injuries and deaths than they will ever prevent. They claim that locks can actually increase accidents because they may lead to a false sense of security and complacency among gun owners. They feel it is wiser to educate children on appropriate gun usage than to rely on a mechanical device. This argument has become particularly forceful as numerous locks have been recalled for safety reasons. Several types of locks have been opened with paper clips, wire cutters, or by smashing the locks. Some locks have also been found to shift enough to allow firing even while the lock is deployed. Additionally, arguing that under the stress of an attack or home invasion, few owners could find the right key for the lock or correctly enter the combination in the dark, remove the lock, and load the weapon in time to use it for defense, they believe that requiring guns to be locked and unloaded will decrease a citizen’s right to defend himself and increase crime and injuries.
See also
Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence; Center for Gun Policy and Research; Child Access Prevention (CAP) Laws; Gun Control; Million Mom March; Smart Guns; Smith & Wesson Settlement Agreement; Youth Gun Control Legislation, The Juvenile Justice Bill of 1999

For Further Reading: