

Can Psychiatry Contribute to Gun Control?

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Preamble

Gun control legislation is essentially a law enforcement matter and a political device to reduce violent crime; only secondarily a psychiatric concern. It is a volatile issue among citizens and legislators alike. The position of forensic psychiatry toward violent crime has been largely peripheral, since only a minute number of homicides where insanity is pled (about 1 percent) involves psychiatrists. Nevertheless, gun control and its psychologic implications dip into the very fabric of the social psyche. Because forensic psychiatry is an important part of social psychiatry, intrusion into this area need occasion no more fear of criticism than we are now experiencing from some sectors of the public and legal profession.

The Problem

The trend during the past few decades has been to explain crime, especially violent crime, as an essentially social-cultural phenomenon rather than individually motivated misbehavior. Eminent criminologists like Wolfgang¹ emphasize subcultures where "violence is either tolerated or . . . specifically encouraged" to explain the recent rise of violent crime. In the volume in which his article appeared, *Violence and the Violent Individual* (1981), a general conclusion stated,² "Violence is not an unidimensional concept. . . . Purely psychologic theories are unlikely to provide . . . (more than) . . . the most parsimonious explanation for the occurrence of violence."

There has, in truth, been disappointment with a half century analysis of the roots of crime in terms of mental mechanisms and sophisticated ego psychology. It was hoped that knowledge gained from individual delinquents and adult offenders could be translated into techniques for prevention of antisocial acts. The blunt fact must be faced that psychologic workers who have scrutinized and treated individual criminals have not influenced crime incidence to any degree, either through psychotherapy, institutional programs, or preventive plans. For many, cultural and subcultural patterns, the *Zeitgeist* of the times seem to explain more persuasively the rising tide of violent crime in the United States and elsewhere. Nevertheless, the

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criminal actor, though responding to the variables of social and cultural stresses, is motivated to act antisocially out of his/her individual emotions and impulses. Hence, the insights obtained from 50 years of psychiatric study of criminals cannot be jettisoned in trying to understand this pressing problem. It seems reasonable, therefore, to give psychologic findings a broader application by trying to fuse social behavioral forms to individual motivations. In this attempt the major social form encountered in violent crime is aggressivity.

Aggression, a Key Modality

Since aggression is a vital aspect of crime, whether as naked force as in homicide, robbery, rape, or assault or passively expressed in burglary or the various forms of larceny, the problem is to relate aggression in violent crime to sociocultural patterns in a given environment. Analysis of the crime of murder in the United States will serve this purpose. Admittedly our homicide rate is higher than in other western countries. The reason lies either in the individual criminal or in the sociocultural ambience or both. To attain some perspective on a national index of criminal aggression, the ratio of homicides to the total population over a period of 80 years was charted.

The plotted figures³ showed an overall increase from 1.2 homicides per 100,000 population in 1900 to 11.3 homicides per 100,000 population in 1980, with a sustained rise during the 1930s and 1970s. Interpretation of marked variations over the years is difficult, partly because of statistical reporting problems among police and the public that might well modify conclusions drawn from these data (Fig. 1). However, the assumption is tenable that the trend toward expressed personal aggression, exclusive of wartime, is upward during these eight decades of American life; this, in spite of severe fluctuations in national affluence and economic depression, political conservatism and liberalism, public euphoria and frustrations, "hot war" and cold war, victory and defeat, national tragedy, and feelings of well-being.

If it be granted there is a gradual upward trend of individual homicides over three-quarters of a century in American life, can the explanation be found in social-cultural influences or in an increase in individual aggression with its corollary, the increase in available weapons, notably firearms? The first hypothesis, that of social-cultural influence will be examined to ascertain its effect on the individual offender.

The Social Meaning of Increased Violence

Immediately, several obvious cultural facets come to mind: the democratization of violence as a personal right, especially among the young;

Gun Control

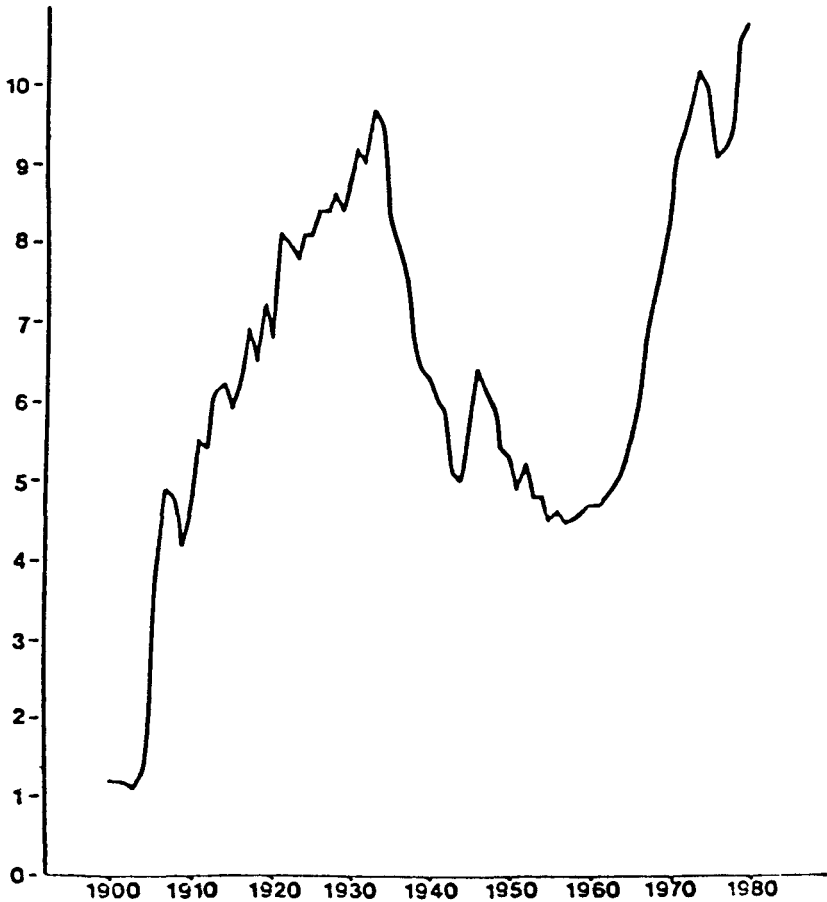


Figure 1. Incidence of homicide in the United States from 1900 to 1980: rate per 100,000 population, age adjusted (homicides in the military excluded). Reprinted with permission of the National Center for Health Statistics, Division of Vital Statistics.

greater social permissiveness; relative absence of control of social behavior by religious exhortation and precepts; the effect of, and reaction to, the female liberation movement; increased literacy; greater sophistication in entertainment forms; and a spirit favoring exposure of emotions, passions, fears, and anxieties in response to psychotherapeutic and psychiatric teaching.

These factors are difficult to gauge, but one area, the entertainment media, which almost continuously bathes our psyches, provides material for study. (In this discussion, television, the cinema, and novelistic literature are included in that order.) Whether television producers follow or form public tastes, the fact is indisputable that the media have become an American social institution unifying our attitudes toward concerns vital to the individual and the group. Consider, for example, the entertainment media's emphasis on destructiveness. Portrayal of catastrophes seem to justify aggression through destructiveness: simulated earthquakes that atomize

buildings; spectacular vehicle crashes; shattering aerial accidents; ray guns that dissolve the strongest substances; large scale combat scenes; raging fires and floods mimicking natural catastrophies; and man-eating monsters of the deep, etc. Although presented for amusement, such disastrous occurrences serve as the analogue of individual aggression.

On examining individual violence in the entertainment media more closely, one notes the meaning and value of violent death to have been altered. Killing is trivialized. A homicide in a cinema is not a final act of death; the actor just murdered appears alive in another play, often within the next few hours. The viewer intuitively understands the killing to serve the story line rather than expressing genuine, unchanging animus toward the deceased. In this sense homicide loses its purpose of extinction.

The monotonous repetition of murder themes treated theatrically suggests the infantile repetition compulsion to remove in fantasy the tyrant parent or parent-surrogate who is never actually, finally, disposed of. Freud⁴ advanced this notion in 1919 when he described "the principle of a *repetition-compulsion* in the unconscious mind, based on instinctual activity and probably inherent in the very nature of the instincts . . . still very clearly expressed in the tendencies of small children . . .".

Interestingly, this mechanism has been observed in multiple murderers. In such cases, one killing, whether for revenge or other motives, does not suffice. The compulsion to commit two, three, or a dozen or more homicides rests on a persistent drive, very probably of unconscious origin, a replica of the infantile repetition compulsion. This author has studied a murderer who, under the influence of drugs, stabbed his victim 102 times, far beyond the need to accomplish his design to kill. It has been observed in murderers of youths by homosexuals who rarely repeat their aggression beyond the need for sexual satisfaction. It is not the intention here to imply that murder stories in the entertainment media cause the appearance of the repetition compulsion, but to point out the concordance of the social institution of dramatic presentations with an individual's inner drives.

In short, aggression and violence are democratized in our culture.

Support for this notion is seen in the prevalent attitude among youth that individual aggression is a right. It can be observed especially among juvenile and adolescent offenders where gang fights among incarcerated prisoners rises to a peak in a cyclic manner. The moral force of lawful punishment has little effect. An anti-authority attitude has buried the ancient notion of penitence—long since discarded—or rehabilitation within penal institutions. Just as the sexual revolution has endorsed sexual activity from adolescence as a "right" in current society, so assertion of violence became a human right, thus removing the moral sting from punishment. It is regarded by the convicted offender as an arbitrary judicial action rather

than a measure of society's reprobative spirit. Violence becomes less a crime than an experience, less a social excess than an approved human quality.

Granted this widespread attitude, how is it reflected in the individual murderer? A measure of this reflection can be found in attitudes toward the handgun.

The Psychologic Meaning of Weapons

Since criminal violence utilizes firearms predominately, the meaning of guns for the social body as well as the potential or actual offender is of paramount importance. To come to the point immediately, the handgun has a special psychologic meaning in terms of the body image. This has long been common knowledge, as visualized in the advertising slogan of one gun manufacturer that his revolver conveys a sense of "heft . . . it feels a handful." This feeling of satisfaction can be translated into the concept of somatic integrity or body image in which the gun becomes an extension of the hand. A vivid example of this enlarged body schema, egosyntonic to all men, is seen in the frank statement of an American soldier fighting in Vietnam as retold by Santoli:⁵ " . . . that sense of power you have . . . an eerie feeling . . . when you're loading your rifle and saying, "Wow, I can drill this guy." The "eerie feeling" represents an enlargement of body space with its concomitant power to impose authority at a distance, a magical wish never absent in the human, especially male, fantasy. The ease with which guns are obtainable in the United States (It is estimated that 52 million handguns, in addition to rifles and shotguns, were possessed by Americans in 1980.⁶) attests to the prevalence of this fantasy.

It is commonly said that the possession of a handgun is based on traditional American values of freedom to bear arms based on the Second Amendment to the Constitution. Interpretation of this section of the Bill of Rights has varied from the "right to bear arms" for the populace to the right of a militia to be armed. One interpretation states "this constitutional right cannot be transformed into a personal right to bear arms. . . ."⁷ The controversy around the *personal* right to wield a gun points directly to the strength of the psychologic linkage of hand-body-gun, usually beyond conscious perception.

A gun in hand forms a vivid new gestalt, an extension of the body image which now ascends to awareness, suffusing the potential violent offender with a sense of right and power. This altered body image gestalt establishes a new relation between the gun wielder's ego and his/her victim. His/her world is enlarged and with it an expansion of his/her social ego. Schilder,⁸ who studied the psychologic concomitants of changed body image in mental illness and neuroses, based on Henry Head's concept of the postural model

of the body, put the situation succinctly, "The ego gains its final structure . . . through social contacts. The nucleus of the ego is a social function." A changed body image occasioned by a handgun forms a social relationship that unfortunately may be lethal for the victim. This view, however, must be checked against actual public attitudes.

The Gun Control Controversy

The controversy with its attendant emotion concerning gun control legislation in the US is a measure of the depth of the feeling commonly attached to firearms. Since the indiscriminate assassinations of President Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr. and shootings of George Wallace, Gerald Ford, and President Reagan, the issue of gun control has been persistently urged before the Congress and in the public domain. Attention has focused not on rifles or shotguns but on handguns as the most frequent weapon used in homicides, accounting for 63 to 68 percent of killings by firearms.⁹ Bills introduced in Congress, like that of Representative Jonathon Bingham of New York, HR 40, the Handgun Control Act of 1981,¹⁰ have languished in committee due to overt opposition of lobbies and a sizable segment of the population. Congressman Bingham's bill made the "sale, purchase, or transfer" of handguns illegal excepting members of the "Armed Forces, law enforcement officials, antique collectors, and pistol clubs," thus allowing handguns for recreational purposes. In effect this bill aimed at registration of all handguns with the Secretary of the Treasury or his delegate under Section 1091, Title 18, United States Code. The question arises why any legislation designed to control the wanton use of handguns by a reasonable system aroused such opposition among law-abiding persons.

Sociologists analyzing public polls on gun attitudes have shown a persistence of progun control advocates over the antigun control group. Tom Smith of the National Opinion Research Center in Chicago, has analyzed "attitudes on Gun Control,"¹¹ indicating the level of progun control (meaning the registration of all handguns except those used by law enforcement agencies and the military) to "be stable over time." After a comprehensive analysis, Smith¹¹ concluded that "gun control (derives) from cultural heritage, not altered by contemporary events." Schuman and Presser¹² of the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan have studied the "discrepancy between public opinion, as measured by surveys, and public . . . inaction as indexed by legislation." Their statistical analysis questions the "adequacy of traditional poll measures of public opinions," finding that "(1) gun registration sentiments tends to vary . . . with questioning wording; (2) antigun registration . . . opinions are held with greater intensity than are

progun registration opinions; and (3) opposition to gun registration is located among those with greater political knowledge and influence." The most recent Gallup poll, June 1981, indicated that 54 percent of a national sample opposed a law forbidding "possession of handguns except by authorized persons," while 41 percent supported such legislation, 5 percent having no opinion. On the other hand, an analysis by Erskine¹³ of public gun control sentiment, through public opinion polls covering 34 years (1938 to 1972), found procontrol feeling to range from 66 to 84 percent. More significantly, of those who owned guns, from 56 to 65 percent declared for control measures. Her analysis faced the paradox directly: "It is especially difficult to understand how the rifle lobby has been able to inhibit legislation when a majority of gunowners . . . have for years been telling public opinion interviewers they believe guns should be registered." Both Smith¹¹ and Erskine¹³ remark that the "decade of violence" has not altered the majority opinion about gun control beyond the "75% solution:" the 75 percent solution being a term coined by Smith¹¹ to indicate the true feelings of our population toward handgun control.

The answer to the question posed by Erskine¹³ must be phrased in psychologic terms. Despite the rational conclusion that handguns should be controlled through registrations, legislators appear to respond to inner feelings among the populace that *outweigh* rational decisions. Undoubtedly there are valid political and legal problems in federal gun control legislation. There is also the realistic attitude that the public should be able to arm itself in self-defense when danger is imminent. However, beneath these actual reasons to decide against gun control lies an obsessive fear that the public will be shorn of the symbolic power of a gun. The fantasy of magic power at a distance remains in the adult psyche as a defense against the unconscious prototype of the helpless infant in a Brobdingnagian world. The very human right of self-defense, sanctioned in law and social policy, has its *anlage* in such deeply buried individual anxieties.

Meaning of Guns to the Criminal

The National Rifle Association, a powerful organization vigorously opposed to gun control, states in their promotion material, "If guns are outlawed, only outlaws will have guns." The inference is clear that guns are readily available without legal restriction or registration through criminal channels. It is common knowledge among law enforcement officials (and I have confirmed this through examination of felons convicted of homicide, robbery, and extortion) that the "street" trade in firearms is extensive. To balance the picture of social attitudes toward handguns among law-abiding citizens, the psychologic meaning of guns to *criminals* requires scrutiny. Is

there a psychologic meaning to this need for handguns among outlaws, beyond the obvious use in aggressive crime? For one thing, ready access to guns places a stamp of antisociality that immediately binds the user to a body that can evoke temporary obedience and mastery in a confrontation. If one looks behind this transient sense of mastery, a degree of desperation is perceptible within the gun-wielding criminal. Although hidden by an effrontery, it is an unspoken feeling of ineffectiveness without the possession of a gun. The apparent calloused disregard for potential victims hides deep anxieties concerning the criminal's own safety.

What has to be teased out in the individual killer is writ large in the group of so-called psychopathic (sociopathic) criminals. The psychiatric literature recognizes members of this group as calloused, conscienceless, antisocial, egocentric characters. That these individuals present a "fixed" personality pattern is manifest in their behavior, but a view beneath the surface shows a different picture. The antisocial bent represents a conviction of being different from law-abiding persons belonging to a loose confederation of outcasts, self-induced pariahs of society for whatever cause. Indeed society, through its psychologic spokesmen, has furthered this pariahship by the very diagnostic terms flung at the violent criminal, "psychopathic inferior, enemy of society, inadequate personality," etc. Study of violent convicted offenders permits a view of the vague insight such individuals entertain of themselves. One triple murderer, a man in his late twenties, remarked that he had a premonition that "I won't live old"; another convicted of a homosexual murder said, "I was destined to the gas chamber." Even more blatant is the term "loser," sometimes emblazoned in a tattoo, sometimes expressed openly. In essence, the self-imposed defeatist attitude represents a life script that brands this loosely knit, like-minded group, as avowedly against society and hence justified in committing violence. Experience with offenders of this type demonstrates a basic, albeit unconscious, masochism lying behind their apparent fearlessness. The gun wielder must cover his fear: he must also atone for the life script in which he is enmeshed by accepting eventual legal punishment with its privations and humiliations of prison. As Reik¹⁴ put it, the *social masochist* accepts a "subordinate attitude towards life."

Discussion

Assuming that 65 percent of all homicides are due to the use of handguns, can control thereof curb the rising violent aggression in our population? What can be said is that the handgun has attained a psychologic value in our country amounting to a cultural form. The violent offender needs the gun to improve his self-image. The law-abiding person needs a gun with

Gun Control

which to fantasize an extended body image. The first named acts with his weapon, the second does so vicariously. In a sense, both groups are locked into a homeostasis, a complementary balance.

This is why at this time, society, through its legislative arm, is unable to enact gun control. What is required is an appreciation of the psychological tie between itself and its offenders. This tie, as forensic psychiatry sees it, is irrational. In reality, we need nothing but ourselves to improve our body image. Perhaps an acceptance of this situation will help achieve the "75% solution" which has yet evaded us.

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