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# The Great American Gun Battle: Navigating the Morass

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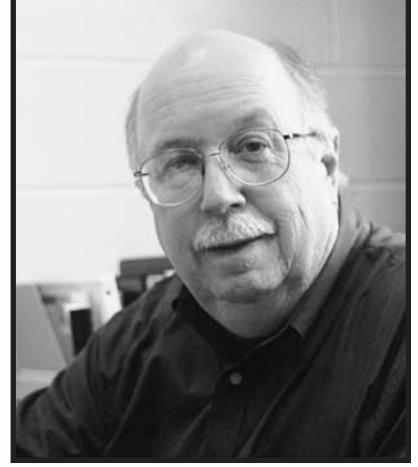
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# The Great American Gun Battle

Navigating the Morass

by Walter F. Carroll



Photograph by David Wilson

The images on the movie screen are terrifying, especially because they are real. The security camera footage from Michael Moore's Oscar-winning documentary film, 'Bowling for Columbine,' shows students and teachers at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado scrambling to escape from Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris. On April 20, 1999, the two young men used four firearms to shoot 35 people, killing 13 of them, before taking their own lives. For Moore, the Columbine tragedy raises questions about violence in the United States and the role of guns in that violence. By generating controversy and debate over the issues, the film may revitalize the debate over guns in American society, the 'Great American Gun Battle.'

The debate over guns actually encompasses several specific controversies, all of them fiercely contested and all with important social, political, and policy ramifications. Opposing sides in the debate disagree vociferously over the Second Amendment to the Constitution, the United States as a gun culture, the costs of gun violence, and—centrally—whether the availability of guns causes high levels of violence.

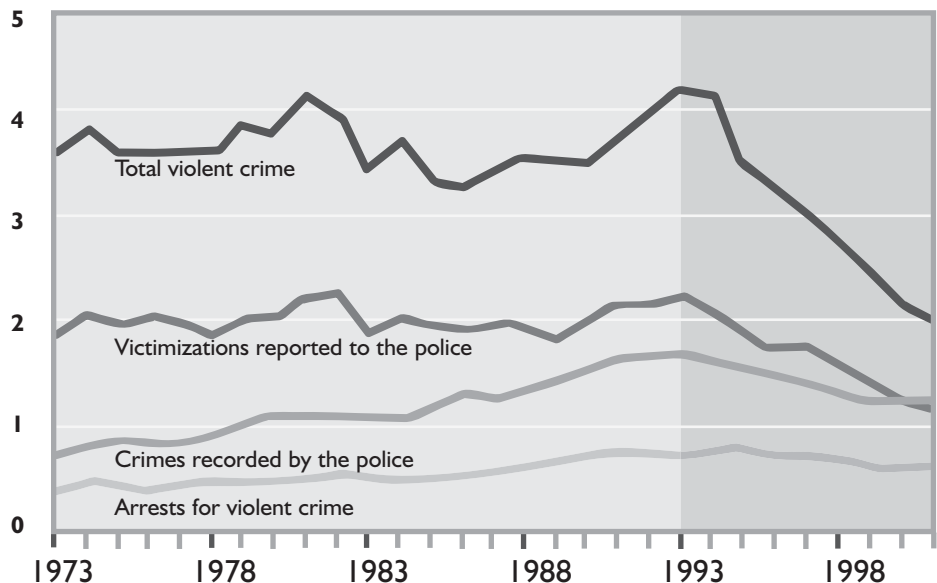
Gun rights advocates argue that the Second Amendment establishes a constitutionally protected right for individuals

to own and bear arms. They maintain that the availability and use of guns saves lives and money; deters criminal attacks; and does not, in itself, contribute to higher levels of violence in the United States. They correctly point out that, in spite of tragedies like Columbine, schools have become safer in recent years and crime rates have declined during the 1990s. Since 1993, the violent crimes and homicides in the U.S. have dropped significantly, as Figure 1 indicates. They argue that, 'guns don't kill people, people do.'

Gun control advocates argue that the Second Amendment protects a collective right to bear arms in a governmentally organized militia, not an individual right to personal ownership. They stress that the Second Amendment—however interpreted—does not preclude gun regulation. They suggest that the availability of guns—especially handguns—contributes to

## FOUR MEASURES OF SERIOUS VIOLENT CRIME

Offenses in millions

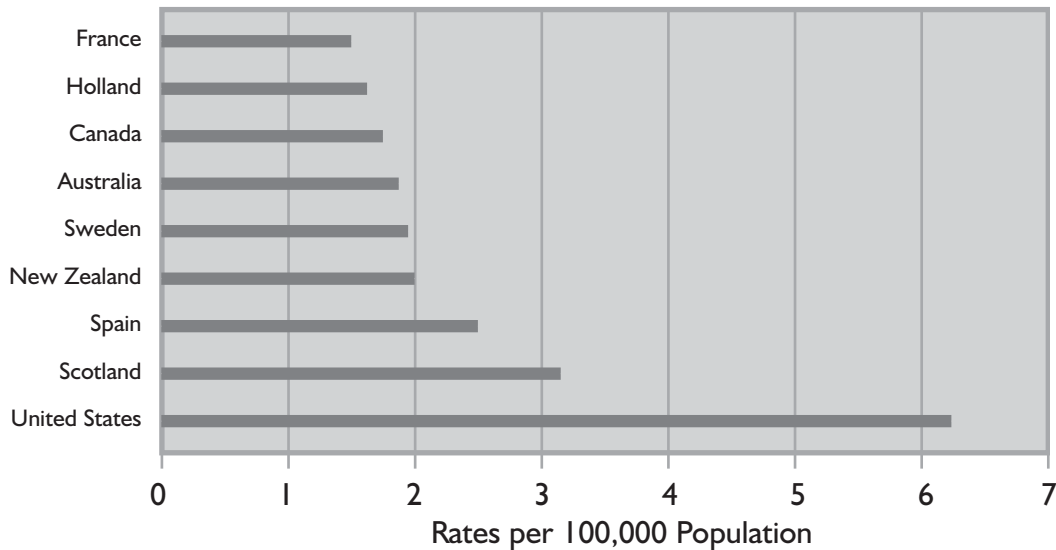


**Figure 1.**  
Four Measure of Serious Violent Crime, 1973-2001

Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics Web Page. 2002. "Four Measures of Serious Violent Crime." October 28. <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/glance/cv2.htm>.

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## HOMICIDE RATES, SELECTED COUNTRIES, AVERAGE PER YEAR: 1997–1999



**Figure 2.**  
**Homicide Rates, Selected Countries, Average Per Year: 1997–1999**

Source: Barclay, Gordon, Tavares, Cynthia, and Arsalaan Siddique. 2001. "International Comparisons of Criminal Justice Statistics 1999." *Home Office Statistical Bulletin*. June. <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs/hosb601.pdf>

high levels of lethal violence in the United States. Arguing that gun violence is an epidemic, many view handgun control as a public health issue aimed at reducing risk, rather than a political issue. While acknowledging the declining crime rates of the 1990s, they point out that rates of lethal violence, especially homicide, in the U.S. are still much higher than in other industrialized societies, as Figure 2 makes clear. They argue that 'guns don't kill people, but they make it a lot easier.'

Both sides in the 'Great American Gun Battle' draw on social science research. Gun rights advocates draw heavily on research by Gary Kleck, Professor in the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Florida State University, and John Lott, an economist and Resident Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. Gun control advocates rely more on research by Philip Cook, the ITT/Sanford Professor of Public Policy at Duke University and Franklin Zimring, the William F. Simon Professor of Law at the University of California at Berkeley. These scholars, their collaborators, and many others have produced important and solid research on guns and gun violence. As a sociologist, I hope that empirical research can resolve or clarify the debate over guns, but resolution or clarification will not come easily. The intractability of the debate is due to much more than research problems.

Sociologist Gregg Lee Carter, one of America's leading scholars of the gun control movement, characterizes the

debate over guns as a tangle of research and advocacy, suggesting that research and debate on gun control is a 'morass' or 'quagmire,' waiting to snare the unwary. In addition to difficulties arising from the shortcomings of data sources and the complexities that bedevil any research, the controversies in the gun debate involve strong emotional beliefs and basic values. The cultural gap between the sides in the debate often seems unbridgeable. Political scientist Robert Spitzer suggests that social regulation policies that aim to regulate individual behavior often generate outrage and controversy. Gun control is one such policy. Advocates of different approaches often seize on research that supports their prejudices and explain away or ignore findings with which they disagree.

Last year, I stepped into the morass of the Great American Gun Battle. Carter invited me to work on *Guns in American Society: An Encyclopedia of History, Politics, Culture, and the Law*, which provides information on all facets of guns to 'researchers, teachers, students, public officials, law-enforcement personnel, journalists, and members of the general public.' Publishers put out numerous such encyclopedias to provide basic information and resources on important topics. I joined the Editorial Board of the encyclopedia and, in the process of writing numerous entries, immersed myself in the research on guns, gun control, and gun violence.

This project strengthened my understanding of the gun debate. It also convinced me that, despite the snares awaiting those who would navigate the quagmire, the debate is too important to avoid. Debate over guns and gun policy should rest on an understanding of the issues informed by the best research available. That is especially true of the core question in the debate: whether the availability or prevalence of guns in American society contributes to our high levels of lethal violence. I think the balance of empirical evidence supports such a link, but the question is not simple, and other social scientists disagree. Certainly, no one would suggest that gun availability alone causes higher rates of lethal violence, but it does seem to be one important contributing factor, among others.

Unfortunately, advocates on both sides of the gun debate, as well as some scholars, often provide misleading sound bites, rather than balanced summaries of the relevant research. They often oversimplify complex research and treat tentative findings as if they were conclusive. Such oversimplification and politicization often characterizes debate on the causal links between guns and violence, especially in discussions of recent research on laws allowing people to carry concealed weapons and on the uses of firearms for self-defense.

In their book, *Crime Is Not the Problem: Lethal Violence in America*, Franklin Zimring and Norval Hawkins (1997), argue that focusing on ‘crime and violence’ as a single problem muddies the debate. They suggest that lethal violence is our real problem, not violence in general or crime in general. Crime rates in the United States are similar to those in other industrialized societies, except for our much higher rates of lethal violence. (Again, see Figure 2). Zimring and Hawkins argue that gun availability contributes greatly to our rates of lethal violence.

In addition to higher rates of lethal violence, the United States differs from other industrialized societies in two other gun-related areas. First, we have many more guns than most such societies. Americans own over 250 million guns, of which at least 90 million are handguns, and the stock of firearms increases by over 3 million a year. Although handguns account for only about a third of guns in the U.S., criminals use them in about 75 percent of gun related violence. Second, we have weaker gun control laws than most similar societies. You may have heard that the U.S. has 20,000 gun control laws. Gun rights advocates use this figure to suggest that further regulation is unnecessary and that we need only enforce the laws we have. That figure is probably a myth. The actual number of gun laws in the United States is much smaller, and the vast majority of them are local statutes that are easy to circumvent. Given our surfeit of guns, the weakness of our gun laws, and our high rates of lethal violence, it is at least plausible that the three factors are connected. We could simplify this hypothesis as ‘more guns, more lethal violence,’ or ‘more guns, more crime.’

John Lott’s research has led many to question the connection between guns and lethal violence. The title of his 1998 book, *More Guns, Less Crime*, succinctly summarizes his conclusions. Lott and fellow economist David Mustard studied the impact of state laws that require police chiefs to issue permits to carry concealed guns to all but a few categories of people, such as felons and youth. Over 30 states have passed such ‘concealed carry’ or ‘shall issue’ laws. Their study suggested that these laws lead to lower crime rates and deter violent crime, as criminals realize that law-abiding citizens may be carrying concealed firearms.

This research has generated much controversy. To their credit, Lott and Mustard willingly provide their data to other scholars, including critics of their work. They have assiduously replied to their critics, although not always convincingly. Nonetheless, their willingness to engage with critics is a model for social scientific debate. Less praiseworthy is the extent to which Lott, especially, has testified in state legislatures, written op-ed pieces, and tirelessly proselytized in favor of more ‘concealed carry’ laws. It is dangerous to base sweeping public policy changes on such controversial and tentative findings.

The research is technical and complex, but advocates of concealed carry laws, including Lott, often ignore the complexities and the widespread criticisms of the work. Economist John J. Donohue recently suggested some major problems with Lott’s research. The states that adopted concealed carry laws differ markedly, and in important ways, from states that did not. Given the differences in the states, factors other than concealed carry laws may have led to crime reductions. Donohue also notes that Lott’s results are sensitive to the type of data used, the time-period studied, and the statistical techniques employed. Donohue is but the latest of numerous scholars to have criticized this research. His criticisms do not ‘refute’ Lott’s research, as some gun control advocates insist, but they ought to compel scholars to remain skeptical and legislators to remain cautious.

Closely related to research on the effects of concealed carry laws, research on the use of guns for self-defense also generates considerable debate. Researchers and law enforcement personnel have often assumed that a gun in the hands of a potential crime victim is more dangerous to him or her than to an attacker, who may turn the gun on the victim. Research on successful Defensive Gun Uses (DGUs) raises questions about that assumption. Gary Kleck, in particular, argues that the availability of guns does not necessarily lead to higher homicide and violent crime rates in the United States, but that it may help deter violent crime, in part through self-defense.

The debate over DGUs is especially acrimonious. It focuses on the incidence of DGUs. Estimates range from 100,000 to 2.5 million a year. The National Crime Victimization Survey, a standard source of crime data, yields the lower estimate. At the high end, Gary Kleck's research with his colleague Marc Gertz yielded the 2.5 million estimate, generally considered the highest credible one. The polemical nature of the DGU debate rests in part on its usefulness for advocates, such as Charlton Heston, actor and past-president of the National Rifle Association (NRA). In speeches and interviews, Heston regularly refers to 2.5 million DGUs a year in an attempt to weaken arguments for gun control.

Most scholars point out the need for caution in estimating DGUs from large surveys. Harvard University public health researcher David Hemenway notes that large sample surveys may generate inaccurate estimates of DGUs. In a sample of 5,000 adults, about 25 will have used a gun in self-defense while 4,975 will not. The 25 may answer truthfully that they used a gun, or they may say that they did not, yielding at most 25 lies, or false negatives. The 4,975 may acknowledge that they did not use a gun for self-defense or they may lie, leading to the possibility of 4,975 lies, or false positives. The possibility of false positives heavily outweighing the false negatives may generate overestimates of DGUs.

Beyond the question of how many DGUs occur, there are other important issues. Philip Cook points out that, whatever the number of DGUs, it is not clear that they add to public safety. What goes on in DGU situations? Could the use of guns for self-defense lead to shootings of innocent bystanders? Is it conceivable that a person carrying a concealed gun might misread a situation and shoot someone who intends them no harm? These questions bring up another controversy involving John Lott.

In *More Guns, Less Crime*, Lott states that in 98 percent of successful DGUs the armed citizen has only to 'brandish' his or her weapon, rather than fire it. If true, this would assuage some concerns about concealed carry laws and DGUs leading to indiscriminate gunplay. However, various scholars asked for the source of this—very high—percentage. Lott has given varying and unsatisfactory answers. At this point in the concealed weapons and DGU debates, healthy skepticism seems prudent. Research so fraught with controversy and uncertainty provides a poor basis for social policy. Better data and more carefully designed research will enhance our understanding of gun violence and provide a more solid foundation for gun policy.

One source of better data on lethal gun violence will be the National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS), under development by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in collaboration with Harvard School of Public Health researchers. The

NVDRS is a comprehensive system to collect data about violent deaths. It will collect data on various aspects of each violent death, including the type of weapon used, the source of the weapon, the relationship between attacker and victim, and where the incident occurred. Perhaps surprisingly, we currently lack such a system. This data should contribute to both gun violence research and policy.

Recent research by William Wells, of Southern Illinois University-Carbondale, demonstrates how using innovative data can lead to better designed research. Most DGU researchers rely on sample surveys, with their problem of false positives. Wells was studying a group of convicted offenders being processed in a diagnostic facility, when he realized that the data would allow him to study DGUs, which were not his primary topic, in a more nuanced way than survey research allowed. Letting the offenders tell their own stories, Wells used those stories to construct a detailed picture of the situations in which they used guns for self defense. His findings suggest that in designing better research on DGUs, scholars should consider the sequencing of events in self-defense situations, the possibility that some self-defense situations may be unnecessary, and that there may be an overlap between attackers and victims in these situations.

More data and better research can help resolve the debate over guns, the 'Great American Gun Battle.' However, the Great American Gun Battle can refer not only to the debate, but also to the actual gun battles in our society, the lethal violence guns can produce. The American Gun Battle as debate has momentous consequences for public policy and for the actual gun battles. It also leads to questions about the type of society in which we wish to live. Do we want a society in which gun ownership and use remain widespread or do we rethink our attitudes and values in relation to firearms? Do guns contribute to higher levels of lethal violence, or do concealed weapons and the use of guns for self-defense create a safer society? Is an armed society a polite society, as some gun rights advocate suggest?

I hope that better data and research will enrich the gun debate and help scholars, advocates, politicians, and the public to think through and answer the key questions about guns, gun violence, and gun control. Such research may help us to make progress toward resolving the Great American Gun Battle in both of its senses.

—Walter F. Carroll is Professor of Sociology and Chair of the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Criminal Justice. Parts of this article have been adapted from his entries in *Guns in American Society: An Encyclopedia of History, Politics, Culture, and the Law*, edited by Gregg Lee Carter (ABC/Clío, 2002).