

Can Gun Control Decrease the Level of Crimes among Teenagers?

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The problem of teen crime remains prevalent in most western societies. Specific challenges of personal development, which individuals experience at this age, contribute to a higher risk of antisocial behavior. Tragic and notorious events, including the Columbine massacre and the Santa Fe High School shooting, committed by teenagers, encouraged citizens to link perceived increases in teen crime to the availability of firearms. Policymakers view more efficient gun control rules as one of the potential solutions. However, gun control policies are unlikely to reduce teenage crime rates dramatically, even though such policies could help to tackle violent crimes.

Before assessing the potential impact of stricter gun control on youth crime levels, it is crucial, among others, to understand the prevalence of firearm-related offenses in this demographic group. Statistical data gathered by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2017) reveal that underage persons faced more than 856,000 arrests in 2016. However, only 19,420 arrests involved firearm-related violations, while the number of murder-related arrests, for example, is estimated at 850. Interestingly, the total number of gun-related arrests decreased by 55% between 2007 and 2016 even though the government enacted few gun control initiatives during that period. These findings suggest that gun crimes account for a relatively low percentage of crimes committed by teens. Indeed, firearms-related offenses constitute less than 2.5% of all teen crimes that result in arrests. Consequently, one has no reasons to assume that the availability of guns or gun control can have serious implications for teen crime in general.

Similarly, it would be unreasonable to believe that even sophisticated and well-designed gun control measures would result in substantial decreases in teen crime rates. If the statistics

provided are accurate, even perfect gun control laws could not reduce the number of crimes committed by more than two or three percent. Nevertheless, effective gun control policies could be instrumental in reducing the number of violent teen crimes, especially homicides and aggravated assaults. Xuan and Hemenway (2015, 1024) point out that 83% of all instances of homicides and injuries resulting in teenage deaths involved the use of a firearm. Reflecting on the problem of high teen homicide rates, which began declining in the 1990s, Fingerhut and Christoffel (2002, 28) attribute the progress to a variety of factors, including the reduced availability of firearms. Notably, the researchers assert that an effective policies and more conscious firearm storage practices reduce the likelihood that teenagers will be able to take and use a firearm when they face a confrontation or plan to commit a crime. In essence, instead of developing more sophisticated gun control laws, the policy might need to focus on improving the environment in which teenagers live.

Statistical analysis partially confirms this hypothesis. The study by Xuan and Hemenway (2015, p. 1028) reports a negative correlation between the quality of gun control laws and the odds of teenagers carrying firearms in a given state. This evidence implies that gun control might indeed prevent certain crimes provided a person requires (or at least benefits from) access to firearms to commit such violations. Nevertheless, Xuan and Hemenway (2015, 1030) emphasize that the nature of adult gun ownership serves as a mediator in this correlation. For that reason, a failure to modify safety practices of adult gun owners often reduces the efficiency of gun control initiatives. Namely, most gun control laws that specifically target teen suicides are seldom effective, since juveniles typically use firearms purchased and stored by their family members, friends, or other residents of the household (Xuan and Hemenway 2015, 1025). These findings suggest that teenagers who intend to carry out murder or some other gun crime might be able to

bypass gun control procedures by using a similar path.

Indeed, even one individual who purchases weapons following all gun control regulations, in theory, can give other individuals who do not qualify for possessing firearms direct access to such weapons. Lawful owners do not necessarily have to assist teenagers in this process. One notorious aspect of many school shootings is that culprits often did not have to buy weapons, since they easily could find firearms at their parents' homes. It should not be surprising that teenagers often know where their relatives are keeping their firearms and how one could take them without drawing much attention. Consequently, teenagers who face emotional, mental, or other problems have many opportunities to access weapons.

Unfortunately, the existing legislation often fails to address this threat. A bright example is Florida where local gun control laws forbid anyone from keeping any sort of registry of gun owners. An attempt to collect such information (even by private individuals) is a crime. The protection of gun owners' privacy is so strong in Florida that doctors even have no right to ask their patients whether they own guns and discuss gun-related issues. The same prohibition applies to discussions of safety matters with patients who have minor children (Bowman 2016, 1457-1459). While Floridian gun control legislation obliges gun owners to ensure the safe storage of weapons, no one can effectively monitor the compliance with this norm without the registry of gun owners. Such a situation creates a considerable risk that some gun owners might fail to secure safe storage, giving teenagers an opportunity to access weapons and use them for illegal activities. This circumstance has serious implications for public safety. It demonstrates that even strict gun controls laws will not prevent teenagers from obtaining weapons unless policymakers manage to introduce more balanced monitoring and enforcement procedures.

In such conditions, the availability of social and health services becomes an essential

component of any strategy that seeks to tackle teenage crime. Instead of creating barriers for teenagers who consider committing a crime, these solutions shape the environment, in which at-risk youth live, reducing their motivation to seek violence in the first place. Young, Greer, and Church (2017, 25) provide examples of European countries that offer therapy to offenders and vulnerable youth who have mental health issues to prevent anti-social behavior. Other popular solutions include training and employment-related programs that show teenagers alternative paths to personal fulfillment and socialization. In theory, such initiatives should prevent crime even if teenagers might access firearms.

In conclusion, while new gun control laws can reduce the rate of violent (especially firearm-related) crime among teenagers, it is unlikely to change the situation dramatically since most teen crimes do not involve firearms, not to mention the weaknesses of gun control regulations. Scholarly evidence implies that teenagers who have an intention to commit a crime can obtain weapons despite strict gun control policies. Nevertheless, policymakers can improve the outcomes by creating balanced gun control policies for the entire population and providing at-risk youth with essential social services.

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