Gun Control in the UK—Still a Matter for Debate

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The constitutional right of US citizens to “keep and bear arms” was introduced, after many alterations of the wording, in the late 18th century context of “a well regulated militia...necessary for the security of a free state.” In other words, if the wretched British decided to try to reassert themselves it would be a good idea to be able to call upon an already armed volunteer force for the defense of the realm. That context often gets lost in the US debate on gun control just as we in the UK tend to forget that carrying weapons was commonplace here up to about a century ago. For example, in the 1880s, when Conan Doyle was writing his famous detective stories, Watson would stuff a revolver in his overcoat as frequently as Holmes would inject himself with 7% cocaine. Presumably readers found nothing odd in either activity. In 1909 police pursuing armed robbers in London borrowed pistols from passers-by.¹ Firearms licensing came in only in 1920, but since 1997, possession of a handgun has been illegal.

US readers may be surprised to learn that gun control is still a matter for debate on this side of the Atlantic. The Gun Control Network notes that the gun homicide rate in England and Wales is 40 times smaller than the rate in the USA.² Since it is so much easier to buy a firearm in the USA than it currently is in the UK, the conclusion might seem obvious. It is not that simple. There has been an increase in gun crime in Britain. That can in part be explained away by the use of airguns and imitation weapons, issues covered by the Violent Crime Reduction Bill that has yet to reach the statute book. However, any increase, whatever its origin, can be seized upon as evidence for the need to back-track on the UK’s current very restrictive firearms legislation—and that has happened. Australia, like the UK, tightened up the law in the late 1990s, and in both countries the stimulus for the legislation was a gun massacre, and in both countries the argument that gun crime has subsequently increased can be heard.^{1,3,4}

There is even a constitutional aspect of the British debate, not about militias, well-regulated or otherwise, but about self-defense. In 1999 Tony Martin used a shotgun during a burglary at his isolated farm and killed one person and injured the other. His life sentence for murder was reduced on appeal to 5 years for manslaughter, but the case⁵ prompted much discussion about what is meant by the legally accepted right to use “reasonable force” in defense of self, family, or property.

A more topical peg for the continuing discussion is the UK’s successful bid to host the 2012 Olympic Games. The possession and use of pistols was banned in the UK in the aftermath of the massacre in Dunblane, Scotland, in 1996 when 16 schoolchildren and a teacher were killed. Critics say that the post-Dunblane gun controls were an over-reaction. Be that as it may, pistol shooting as a sport became

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an incidental victim to this legislation. We may not in the UK have the equivalent of the US National Rifle Association, but the British Shooting Sports Council and the Sportsman's Association of Great Britain and Northern Ireland are articulate in drawing attention not just to the problems of British participants in shooting events but also to the question of hosting any such events in 6 years' time.

Since the UK used to have a *laissez-faire* approach to gun possession yet did not historically have much gun crime, it seems simplistic to argue for an exact correlation between gun ownership and firearms-related violence. All the same, time-trend analysis should be able to help if carried out in before/after fashion to judge whether a particular piece of firearms law or policy has been effective. Sadly, it looks as if such an evidence-based approach is not going to help. Robert Hahn and colleagues⁶ recent thorough, systematic review proved inconclusive for all of nine different types of firearms law. However, a recent analysis from two public health specialists at the University of Sydney concludes that Australia's legislation (which included the buying back of weapons) has been successful.⁷

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