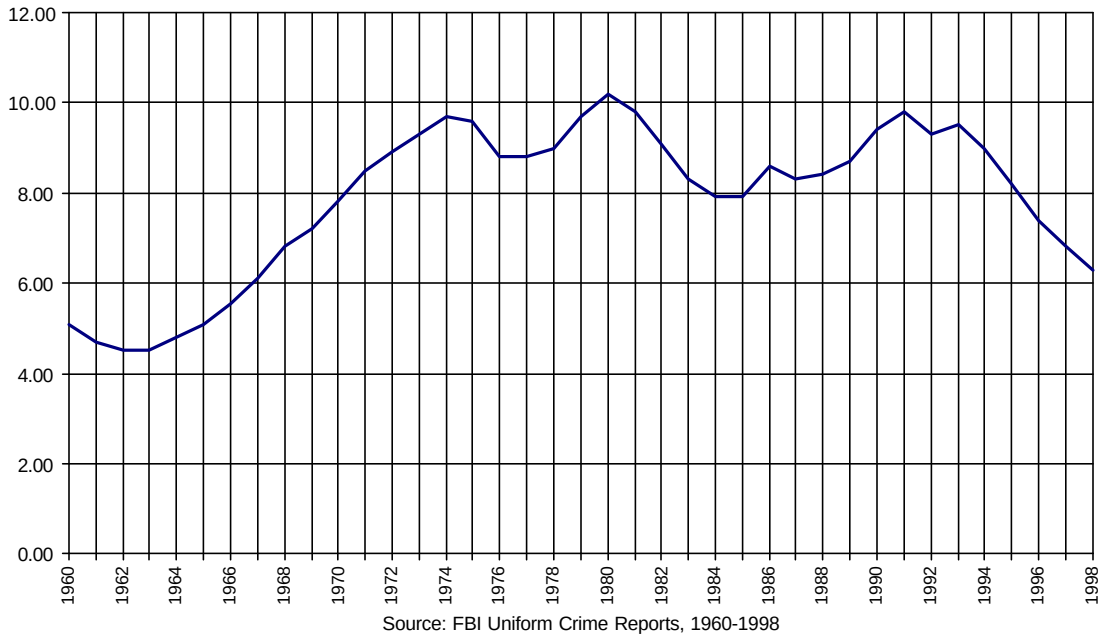
Is Gun Control Reducing Murder Rates?

This may be a surprise, but murder rates have been falling since 1991. Though we still have a way to go before we reach the rates we had in the early 1960s, murder rates did fall 36% from 1991 to 1998.[1]

U.S. Murder Rate/100,000 Inhabitants, 1960-1998



Source: FBI Uniform Crime Reports, 1960-1998

Unsurprisingly, President Clinton and his allies claim that the gun control laws passed since he took office are at least partly responsible for the drop in murder rates. (Also, unsurprisingly, they point to the drop since 1991, rather than 1993, when President Clinton took office.) But is the drop in murder rates since 1991 because of new gun control laws, or for some other reason?

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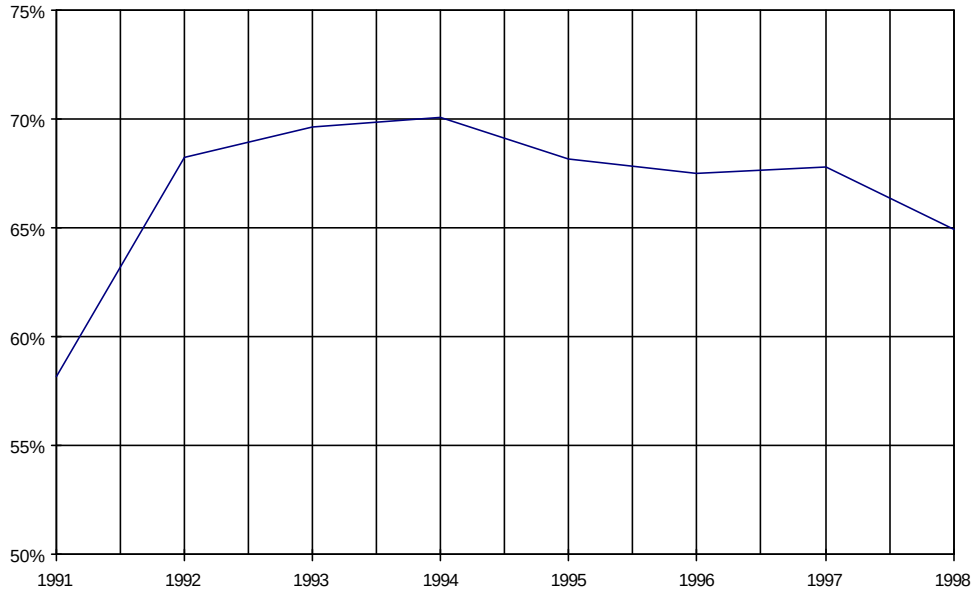
[1] Unless otherwise identified, all data in this article is derived from the FBI's annual series *Crime in the United States*, 1960 through 1998.

Congress passed the Brady Law in 1993 and the federal assault weapons ban 1994. If these were actual causes of this decline, we would expect murders with guns to have fallen faster than murders with other weapons. If gun control made a difference, gun murders should have dropped more quickly than non-gun murders. The Brady Law and the federal assault weapons law, after all, did not regulate or control knives, clubs, poisons, feet, or fists.

But what if stricter punishment, an aging population, or an improvement in general morality are making the difference? In that case, you would expect both gun murders and non-gun murders to fall by about the same amount. If guns were used in 68% of murders in 1991, you would expect them to still be used 68% of the time in 1998.

Here's the surprise–even with all the federal gun control laws passed since President Clinton's election, the percentage of murders committed with guns is actually higher now (64.9%) than it was in 1991 (58.2%).

Firearms Percentage of Murder, 1991-1998



Source: FBI Uniform Crime Reports, 1991-1998

Year	Firearms %	Handgun Murder %	Rifle Murder %	Shotgun Murder %	Other Gun Murder %	Gun Type Not Stated Murder %
1978	60.9%	43.4%	5.6%	8.1%	0.0%	3.8%
1979	60.8%	44.1%	5.0%	8.0%	0.2%	3.5%
1980	59.3%	43.4%	4.9%	7.1%	0.2%	3.6%
1981	55.6%	40.8%	4.3%	6.8%	0.4%	3.3%
1982	55.8%	40.3%	4.8%	6.6%	0.2%	3.9%
1983	56.5%	42.4%	4.3%	6.4%	0.1%	3.2%
1984	52.6%	38.9%	4.1%	6.2%	0.1%	3.2%
1985	54.3%	39.8%	4.3%	6.3%	0.1%	3.8%
1986	55.2%	41.0%	3.8%	6.3%	0.1%	4.0%
1987	52.6%	38.8%	3.8%	5.4%	0.1%	4.3%
1988	53.6%	40.0%	3.7%	5.4%	0.1%	4.4%
1989	55.1%	41.9%	4.0%	5.5%	0.2%	3.5%
1990	55.6%	43.1%	3.2%	5.3%	0.1%	3.9%
1991	58.2%	46.5%	3.0%	4.6%	0.1%	3.9%
1992	68.2%	55.4%	3.1%	4.9%	0.2%	4.6%
1993	69.6%	57.0%	3.3%	4.6%	0.2%	4.6%
1994	70.0%	57.8%	3.3%	4.3%	0.1%	4.5%
1995	68.2%	55.8%	3.2%	4.6%	0.1%	4.4%
1996	67.5%	54.6%	3.3%	4.0%	0.1%	5.4%
1997	67.8%	53.3%	4.0%	4.1%	0.2%	6.1%
1998	64.9%	52.3%	3.8%	4.4%	0.1%	4.3%

Now it is certainly true that the percentage of murders committed with guns peaked in 1994, and has fallen a bit since then. The Brady Law can perhaps take credit for a small improvement in murder rates—especially since all of the reduction in the percentage of murders committed with guns was a reduction in the percentage of *handgun* murders.

But look at where the biggest drops occurred—in 1995 through 1998, not in 1994, the first full year that that the Brady Law was in effect. It is a little strange, if the Brady Law is the cause of this improvement in handgun murder rates, that the biggest benefit came more than a year after the law started to be applied. The Brady Law did not apply to any transactions except sales through licensed dealers; it did not affect private party sales, nor did it affect ownership of guns already out there. The stated goal of the Brady Law was to reduce criminal access to new handguns. If it actually did this, then you would expect the largest benefits to show up immediately, as criminals failed to obtain handguns.

Perhaps the most important point is that *most* of the improvement in murder rates since 1991 has not been from a reduction in gun murders, but from a reduction in non-gun murders. The gun murder rate fell 28.3% from 1991 to 1998; the non-gun murder rate fell 46.1% during that same time.

Year	Murder Rate	Non-Gun Murder Rate	Handgun Murder Rate	Rifle Murder Rate	Shotgun Murder Rate	Other Gun Murder Rate	Gun Type Not Stated Murder Rate
1978	9.00	3.52	3.91	0.50	0.73	0.00	0.34
1979	9.70	3.80	4.28	0.49	0.78	0.02	0.34
1980	10.20	4.16	4.43	0.50	0.72	0.02	0.37
1981	9.80	4.35	4.00	0.42	0.67	0.04	0.33
1982	9.10	4.02	3.67	0.44	0.60	0.02	0.35
1983	8.30	3.61	3.52	0.36	0.53	0.01	0.26
1984	7.90	3.75	3.08	0.32	0.49	0.01	0.26
1985	7.90	3.61	3.14	0.34	0.49	0.01	0.30
1986	8.60	3.85	3.53	0.33	0.54	0.01	0.34
1987	8.30	3.94	3.22	0.32	0.45	0.01	0.36
1988	8.40	3.89	3.36	0.31	0.45	0.01	0.37
1989	8.70	3.91	3.65	0.35	0.47	0.01	0.30

1990	9.40	4.17	4.05	0.30	0.50	0.01	0.37
1991	9.80	4.10	4.56	0.30	0.45	0.01	0.38
1992	9.30	2.95	5.15	0.29	0.46	0.02	0.43
1993	9.50	2.88	5.41	0.31	0.43	0.02	0.44
1994	9.00	2.70	5.21	0.30	0.39	0.01	0.40
1995	8.20	2.61	4.57	0.27	0.38	0.01	0.36
1996	7.40	2.40	4.04	0.24	0.30	0.01	0.40
1997	6.80	2.19	3.62	0.27	0.28	0.02	0.42
1998	6.30	2.21	3.29	0.24	0.28	0.01	0.27

Now think a little more carefully: laws that were not gun control-specific, but that reduced all violent crime, should affect not only non-gun murders, but also gun murders. Whatever reduced the non-gun murder rate by 46.1%, should have reduced the gun murder rate by 46.1% as well–plus whatever benefit gun control laws provided. Yet the gun murder rate fell less rapidly than the non-gun murder rate.

Did the Brady Law reduce murder rates? It is certainly *possible*. Anyone that argues that the Brady Law played a part in this needs to explain why gun murder rates fell more slowly than non-gun murder rates. It certainly makes me wonder if the Brady Law did anything at all.

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