

## **Antigunners Admit Brady Failed**

For a very long time, the dispute over gun control laws has come down to dueling statistics. Economists like Professor John Lott currently at Yale have examined the effects of various gun control measures on crime, and concluded that less restrictive licensing of concealed handgun permits reduces crime rates. Criminologists like Professor Gary Kleck of Florida State University have examined a variety of gun control measures, and generally have concluded that most gun control laws aren't terribly effective.

On the other side of the issue, Professor Jens Ludwig at Georgetown University and Professor Philip J. Cook at Duke University have generally been sympathetic to restrictive gun control measures. Indeed, I am not aware of any previous work that I have seen by them that is even neutral on gun control laws.

Unfortunately, when you get into the area of statistical analysis, figuring out which side of the dispute is correct is very difficult. Those of you who took statistics somewhere in high school or college are familiar with bivariate correlation analysis, where you compare two variables to see if there is a correlation. As an example, as the age of a population changes, so does the murder rate – with late teenagers and young adults very disproportionately involved in murder.

Bivariate correlation analysis is pretty simple to do, and for some types of problems, it works just fine – like trying to figure out if different brands of ammunition are more accurate than others. But when you get to the really hard social problems associated with crime and gun control, using two variables is a pretty crude way to figure out what causes what. Certainly, if A causes B strongly, bivariate analysis may be enough. As an example,

there is no question that the number of men in a population is strongly correlated with the rape rate, and bivariate analysis will show that quite quickly.

Bivariate analysis may also be sufficient to suggest that A does *not* cause B. As an example, see my article in the August 21, 2000, *Shotgun News* about murder rates and the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act. The evidence I used for my article was a quick and dirty form of bivariate analysis, good enough to strongly suggest that the Brady Law did nothing at all.

For really hard social problems, criminologists often use a technique called multivariate correlation analysis, in which a vast number of different pieces of information that might influence crime rates are fed into a computer. Unlike bivariate correlation analysis, multivariate correlation analysis can help identify some truly subtle relationships – where a 3% increase in A may cause a 1% increase in B.

But here's the rub: multivariate correlation is a devilishly complex technique. Even scientists who know the strengths and weaknesses of it often make legitimate mistakes, and only another scientist intimately familiar with the technique will be able to identify the error. When social scientists disagree over what technique to use because they have come to radically different conclusions, the best that the rest of us can do is shake our heads, and go with what our instincts – or our preconceived ideas – tell us.

So it is very gratifying to tell you that two social scientists with a *long* history of being supportive of gun control have used this terribly sophisticated and obscure technique to examine what the Brady Law did to homicide and suicide rates. They concluded that the Brady Law did nothing at all. Ludwig and Cook compared rates of homicide and suicide among all adults before and after the Brady Law took effect. Because 18 states already had

laws as strict as or stricter than the Brady Law, Ludwig and Cook were able to class these as the “control” group. The other 32 states were the “experimental” group. To see if other factors might have influenced the homicide and suicide rates, Ludwig and Cook plugged in consumption of alcohol, percentage of the population living below the poverty line, black percentage of the population, urbanized population, and age of the population.

Their conclusion? “Changes in rates of homicide and suicide for treatment and control states were not significantly different....” The *only* category in which they found a statistically significant change caused by the Brady Law was a reduction in “firearms suicides among persons aged 55 years or older....” But while firearms suicides fell significantly among this group, the overall suicide rate did not fall by a statistically significant amount, because non-firearm suicides rose at the same time.<sup>1</sup>

Ludwig and Cook do suggest that perhaps one of the reasons for the failure of the Brady Law to actually make a difference is that, “The secondary market in guns, which is currently almost entirely unregulated, is thus an enormous loophole that limits the effectiveness of primary-market regulations.” (Of course, if you live in California, New York, or a number of other states, you already know that the secondary market in handguns is already highly regulated.) And wasn’t this one of the criticisms of the Brady Bill in 1993? That it did no good to regulate new gun sales if private gun sales were unregulated? Yet the advocates insisted that even one little step would be an improvement.

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<sup>1</sup> Jens Ludwig and Philip J. Cook, “Homicide and Suicide Rates Associated With Implementation of the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act,” *Journal of the American Medical Association* 284:5 [August 2, 2000] 585-591. You can find it on the web at <http://jama.ama-assn.org/issues/v284n5/full/joc91749.html>.

President Clinton and his allies continue to insist that the Brady Law saved lives. Go find a copy of the Ludwig and Cook article, either on the web, or in your local university library. Photocopy it. The next time someone tells you, “But the Brady Law reduced murder rates,” pull out your copy and hand it over. Then tell them, “Ludwig and Cook are on *your* side, and even *they* didn’t find any reduction in homicide or suicide rates.”

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