

The Failure of British Gun Control

For a very long time, gun control advocates have pointed to Britain as an example of how peaceful and civilized a place America could be—if only we had strict gun control laws like Britain. The logical error is pretty obvious: Britain’s low crime rates aren’t because of gun control laws. Indeed, Britain’s crime rates were even lower before World War I when any law-abiding and sane adult could buy a handgun, and get a permit to carry it concealed.¹

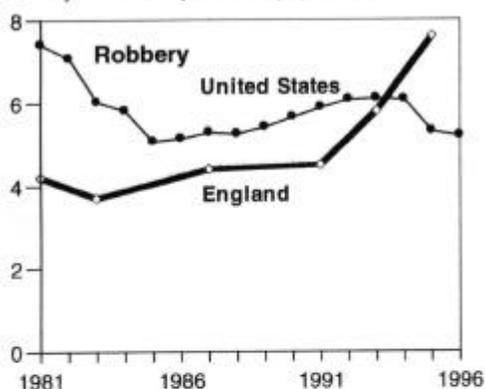
The gun control advocate’s argument was logically flawed, but at least one part of the argument was correct: Britain *had* very little violent crime. But paradise doesn’t last forever. In the period 1981-96, as American crime rates fell, British crime rates rose. Britain now has higher rates of robbery, assault, burglary, and motor vehicle theft than the United States.² (The report this article uses covers England & Wales only, because Scotland has a somewhat different legal system, and so the statistics are not exactly comparable. Northern Ireland, of course, has its own unique situation. If it were possible to add Scotland and Northern Ireland into the figures, however, rest assured that the crime statistics would even be worse.) By 1995, England & Wales had 1.4 times the robbery rate of the U.S.; more than twice the assault rate of the U.S.; and nearly double the U.S. burglary rate.

¹ Colin Greenwood, *Firearms Control: A Study of Armed Crime and Firearms Control in England and Wales* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 7-26; Robert Carr and Gordon Campbell, *The Control of Firearms in Great Britain: A Consultative Document* (London: Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1973); “Still unsafe on the streets”, *The Economist*, March 21, 1987; “The absence of acceptable authority”, *The New Statesman*, November 14, 1986.

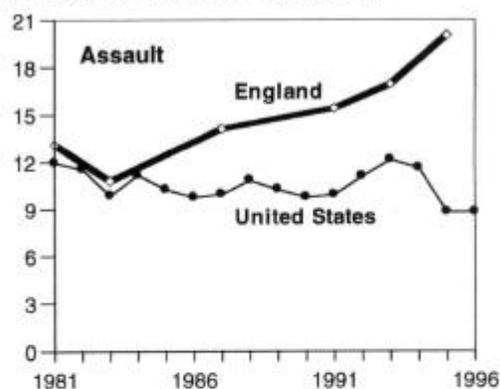
² Patrick A. Langan and David P. Farrington, *Crime and Justice in the United States and England and Wales, 1981-96* (Washington: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1998), iii.

In 1995 victim surveys, crime rates for robbery, assault, burglary, and motor vehicle theft are higher in England (including Wales) than in the United States.

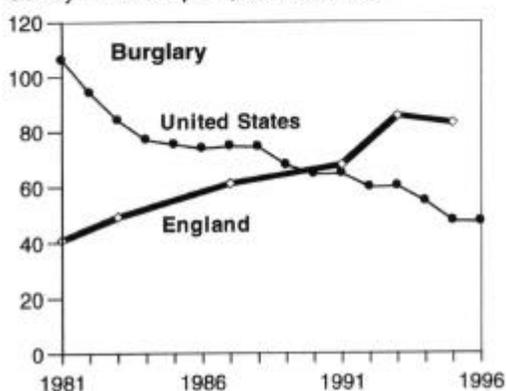
Survey crime rate per 1,000 population



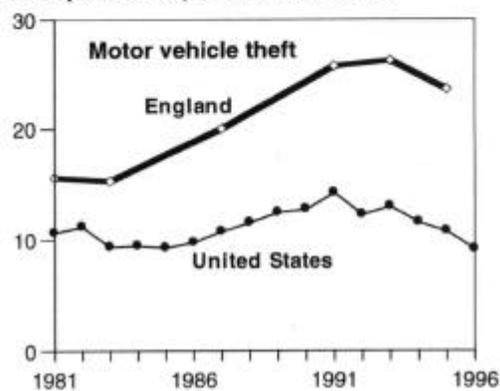
Survey crime rate per 1,000 population



Survey crime rate per 1,000 households



Survey crime rate per 1,000 households



While rape and murder rates for England & Wales are still far lower than the equivalent rates in the U.S., the gap has narrowed considerably between 1981 and 1996.³ Gun control advocates, when confronted with this data, often respond by pointing out that, “just imagine how much worse it would be if Britons had guns! Why, they would have as bad a murder and rape problem as we do!”

This is an interesting argument, and at first glance, it’s not utterly illogical. But when you look at the statistics more carefully, you realize that this just doesn’t work. England & Wales had 1.3 murders per 100,000 population in 1996; the U.S. had 7.4

³ Langan and Farrington, i, iii.

murders per 100,000 population that same year.⁴ What would our murder rate have been in 1996 if, by some feat of magic (and magic would be required), you could have confiscated every privately owned gun in the U.S. at the stroke of midnight on January 1, 1996?

Having already performed one act of magic, now perform two more: magically prevent anyone in the U.S. from making a gun, or smuggling one across our borders, or stealing it from the government. Now, assume that not a single murder committed with a gun in the U.S. in 1996 would now have been committed with some other weapon, like a knife, hands, feet, poison, a baseball bat, or a bomb. The murders that remain are those that were committed with weapons other than guns—32.2% of U.S. murders in 1996.⁵ (I'm not even going to ask about murders that were *prevented* in 1996 because the victim had a gun—and we know that there were likely hundreds to thousands of murders that were prevented because the victim had a gun.)

Having removed all the gun murders, and made some very charitable assumptions about smuggling, illegal manufacture, and defensive gun use preventing murders, we would still have had 2.4 murders per 100,000 in 1996—almost twice the murder rate in England & Wales for *all* types of weapons (which of course includes a few gun murders, even in gun controlled Britain). If gun control advocates want to explain Britain's low murder rate by pointing to gun control, they better explain how gun control reduced the murder rate with knives, hands, feet, and poison. None of these items are in especially

⁴ Langan and Farrington, 5.

⁵ *Crime in the United States: 1996*, (Washington, DC: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997), Table 2.10.

short supply in Britain. Clearly, there are some cultural differences that explains why Britons don't murder each other as much as Americans do.

Of course, most readers of this column are already aware that gun control largely keeps guns out of the hands of the people that aren't a problem. What about the people that gun control should disarm? Recent newspaper coverage from Britain suggests that after completely banning semiauto rifles and shotguns in the 1980s after the Hungerford Massacre, as well as *all* handguns after the Dunblane Massacre, they still have a big problem with guns in the wrong hands.

The May 9, 1999 *Times of London* carried an amazing article that tells us not only a bit about the failure of gun control in Britain, but also about the influence of American popular culture on young Britons. "Last week a 16-year-old boy, a self-confessed gang leader from a housing estate [public housing project] in east London, proudly displayed his 9mm Smith & Wesson pistol." The article goes on to quote this young thug, "Everyone knows I am the main man and this is why... Guys are afraid of me and girls love me 'cos they know I am tooled up. Nobody messes with me, they know I'm too dangerous."

Another London gunman (gunboy?), a 14 year old, opened up his Nike bag to the reporter, showing him two .357 revolvers. "We always have these with us and whoever has them can use them... Last week two guys pulled a flick-knife on me but ran away when I pointed this at them. They'll be back with guns, I know." A 16 year old gunman in Manchester told the reporter that he could rent a gun for £80 (about \$130). "It it's ever been used [in a crime], it's cheaper. You don't want a used one, so you need to know who you're buying from." Guns, according to Manchester police, have become a fashion

statement among young criminals. Official statistics reveal children as young as 12 arrested in possession of loaded guns in public.⁶

Unfortunately, these guns aren't just being carried as "fashion statements." A research study done for a Parliamentary inquiry concluded that there were three million guns illegally held in Britain, many of them smuggled in from eastern Europe, and these "vast stockpiles of weapons have fuelled the recent spate of shootings in... London, Birmingham and Manchester. [I]n some areas, a third of young criminals, classed as those aged 15 to 25 with convictions, own or have access to guns ranging from Beretta sub-machineguns to Luger pistols...." According to the Home Office, the branch of the British government responsible for crime statistics, armed crime rose 10% from 1997 to 1998. Perhaps most astonishing is the admission from the Home Office that the ban on handguns "was never intended to combat firearms-related crime, but was a direct response to Dunblane, which involved legally held handguns."⁷

Clayton E. Cramer is an historian. Encourage your local public library to order a copy of his fifth book, *Concealed Weapon Laws of the Early Republic: Dueling, Southern Violence, and Moral Reform* (Praeger Press, 1999). His web page is at <http://www.ggnra.org/cramer>.

⁶ Edin Hamzic, "Children of 14 carry guns for 'status'," *Sunday Times*, May 9, 1999.

⁷ John Ungoed-Thomas, "Killings rise as 3m illegal guns flood Britain," *Sunday Times*, January 16, 2000.

