

U.S. criminals are still killing, despite 10 years of gun control



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Ten years ago, the Brady Bill was passed by the U.S. Congress after an emotional debate. The law's main feature was to mandate a five-day waiting period before a person could purchase a handgun.

In Canada, where gun control, especially handgun control, had been part of the landscape for decades, the debate merited scant attention. Many Canadians own handguns, but

they've always taken it for granted that gun ownership is a privilege rather than a right, and may entail jumping over elaborate bureaucratic hurdles.

U.S. citizens had a different view until relatively recent times. Americans, whether they owned a gun, believed they had a right — indeed, a constitutional right — to bear arms. They understood this to mean they could go into a store to buy a gun at will, without being hampered by regulations.

What changed the minds of U.S. citizens in sufficient numbers to allow passage of the Brady Bill 10 years ago? In a word, crime.

The bill passed in 1993 only because during the preceding 25 years, many peaceful (or at least tolerably peaceful) American cities had become battle zones. In certain neighbourhoods, it became an everyday event for shoppers, passersby

and even children to be gunned down in residential streets, schoolyards and parks.

Needless to say, Americans who believed in their right to bear arms didn't condone gunplay in the streets. On the contrary, most were very strong on law and order. This continues to be true in the U.S., as well as in this country. Chances are, the more a person endorses a citizen's right to own a gun for lawful purposes, the tougher he or she is on criminals and crime.

The gun lobby's argument, in the catchy phrase of the National Rifle Association, has always been that guns don't kill, criminals do. NRA supporters maintain that putting hurdles in the way of law-abiding citizens to own and carry arms does nothing to reduce violence in the streets.

Accurate as this may be, things aren't so simple. It's true enough that guns don't kill, on-

ly criminals do, but it's also true that guns make criminals far more efficient killers. Keeping firearms from criminals, if it could be achieved, would undoubtedly reduce the worst effects of violent crime. This is especially true with respect to rapid-fire or concealable guns.

The problem is that gun control in any form practical in a free society — that is, in any form currently proposed or practised in Canada or the U.S. — doesn't keep guns away from criminals. It only keeps guns away from law-abiding citizens.

Guns in the hands of law-abiding citizens — even unsecured guns, owned by unskilled people — pose little danger to public safety. Less danger, to be precise, than unattended swimming pools or unlocked medicine cabinets, and far less than non-professionally operated motor vehicles.

From the point of view of pub-

lic safety, the worst combination is armed criminals confronting unarmed citizens.

Yet this is all our current gun-control laws can possibly achieve: armed criminals confronting unarmed citizens. The Brady Bill was no exception. It achieved nothing beyond adding some annoyance and red tape to the life of a law-abiding person who wished to purchase a gun.

The Brady Bill couldn't stop a criminal with a record from acquiring a firearm: He'd just buy an illegal handgun around the corner. Most criminals preferred to do so anyway, since they would have considered it foolish to commit crimes with guns registered to them.

The Brady Bill forced a person of criminal intent, but no record, to wait five days to commit his crime. Big deal. The impulsive or domestic criminal seldom went shopping for a handgun anyway, even before the Brady

Bill. He tended to use whatever was handy, from a meat cleaver to a 12-gauge shotgun.

What did the bill achieve? The numbers are inconclusive. After 1993, handgun homicides declined, according to the U.S. Bureau of Justice — but so did homicides by all other types of weapons. The decline began, in fact, before the Brady Bill came into force in February 1994.

Could we come up with a gun law that could actually reduce violent crime? Yes: a complete ban on the possession of all firearms, coupled with draconian penalties. Such laws existed in all totalitarian countries — and they worked. There was almost no gunplay in the streets. In those societies, most violent crime took place in the labour camps and torture chambers of the police.

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