

Evaluating Britain's handgun ban

by Colin Greenwood

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The ban on the private possession of handguns in Great Britain came into effect in two stages. A Conservative Government banned all large-calibre handguns from July 1, 1997, with a period up to the end of September, in which all such guns had to be handed to the police. Following a general election in May 1997, the Labour Government extended the ban to all small-calibre (.22 rimfire) handguns, which had to be handed in before the end of February 1998. More than 162,000 handguns and 700 tonnes of ammunition was handed in. More than £80 million was paid in compensation and the cost of the confiscation scheme to police and government cost tens of millions more.

Both governments promised that Britain would thereafter be a safer place. A few handguns remained for people such as slaughtermen, those who could prove a special need for a pistol for the humane despatch of quarry animals and a few people who had pistols of special historical interest, but in general, handguns could not legally be possessed. The hand-in was complete for all practical purposes because of the system of individual authorisation.

Ten years has passed and it is right to ask if Britain really is now a safer place and whether the ban has prevented criminals from obtaining and using pistols. Using the data in Table 1, were I a politician, I would simply say that in 1997, pistols were used in 2648 crimes and in 2006/07 (the Home Office has changed the statistical recording figure from calendar to financial year), they were involved in 4175 crimes. Thus, the ban on pistols in the hands of law-abiding citizens has resulted in a doubling of their use by criminals.

So perhaps we can conclude that crime with firearms has doubled and crime with pistols has doubled. In particular, we can conclude that robberies with a pistol have doubled, though homicides have not. Homicide is a difficult class of crime to analyse because of the preponderance of domestic killings. Robbery, however, is a crime committed by more professional criminals who almost invariably have a significant number of previous convictions.

We could fill page after page with statistics and do little more than confuse the true picture. Let me suggest that if something as Draconian as the handgun ban was to have any effect at all, it would show in the six years following the ban taking effect. If we look at a period of six years before the ban and six years after, as in Table 2, and consider the use of pistols alongside other weapons favoured by criminals, we might see the real effect the ban.

If we average out the total homicide figures for the six years before 1997 and the six years after (ignoring the Dr Shipman cases), we see that homicide has increased from an average of 706 to 825 and despite yearly fluctuations, the figure is steadily upwards. This is also so with homicide involving firearms, where the six-year average has grown from 61 to 72 and again with a steady upward trend. The use of shotguns, however, has fallen from an average of 20 down to 11 and sawn-off shotguns from 9 down to 5, but the use of pistols has increased from an average of 29 to 42. But in none of these cases does 1997 mark a watershed. Trends that began long before 1997 have continued entirely unchanged.

In Table 3, increases in the total robbery figure are much more marked and much more consistent and the firearms robbery figures tell us more about the impact of the handgun ban. Contrary to many claims, the use of firearms in robbery did not increase after the 1997 Act; it fell slightly from a six-year average of 4700 to

Evaluating Britain's handgun ban

4100. The use of shotguns fell more sharply, but the use of pistols also fell, though by only a small amount. Looking at the figures in Table 3 will show, however, that these trends were well under way before the 1997 Act and there is no way that the changes can be attributed to that law. The only possible conclusion is that the handgun ban was a complete and pathetic irrelevance to protecting the British public from armed criminals. It has not changed a pattern of increases in crime that existed before the ban.

It might be interesting to note just one source of supply to criminals disclosed by an excellent police operation in London. Baikal gas pistols are made in Russia and are effectively a standard 9mm short self-loading pistol modified to discharge CS powder. Quantities of these were taken to Lithuania where they were very professionally converted into self-loading pistols of high quality. A silencer was fitted and they were packed with a couple of boxes of ammunition before being sent on to Britain, where they were sold at Â£UK2000 a time to drug dealers and other criminals. Several hundred have been seized by the police, but the total number on the streets runs into thousands. Not surprisingly, the handgun ban has no effect on that trade.

Criminals are, by definition, those who do not obey the law. The absence of legally-held pistols has not stopped them from having whatever class of gun they prefer, including significant numbers of sub-machine-guns. The Dunblane shootings, which prompted the handgun ban, occurred in the run-up to a general election and that was the single most important factor. The politicians concerned did not care then and do not care now that the whole thing was a pathetic farce.

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Table 1: Firearms crime in 1997 and 2006/07

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total firearms crime</i>	<i>Crime with pistols</i>					
		<i>Total*</i>	<i>Homicide</i>	<i>Wounding serious</i>	<i>Wounding slight</i>	<i>Robbery</i>	<i>Burglary</i>
1997	4904	2648	39	249	234	1854	161
2006/07	9650	4175	27	283	843	2684	126

*The Total crime with pistols includes a small number of offences not in the following categories.

Table 2: Homicides from 1991 to 2003

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total homicide</i>	<i>Total firearms</i>	<i>Shotgun</i>	<i>Sawn-off shotgun</i>	<i>Pistol</i>
1991	725	55	25	7	19
1992	681	56	20	5	28
1993	675	74	29	10	35
1994	727	66	22	14	25
1995	753	70	18	10	39
1996	679	49	9	8	30
1997	753	59	12	4	39
1998**	731	49	4	7	32
1999	761	62	6	13	42
2000	850	73	12	2	47
2001	858	97	20	1	59
2002	1045xx	81	20	3	40
2003	858	68	7	4	35

*The Total firearms column includes a number of "other firearms" that do not appear in the following columns.

** From 1998, the figures are for the financial year to April 1 of the following year.

xx The total figure for 2002/03 includes 172 homicides attributed to Dr Shipman.

Table 3: Robberies including firearms 1991 to 2000

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total robbery</i>	<i>Firearms robbery*</i>	<i>Shotgun</i>	<i>Sawn-off shotgun</i>	<i>Pistol</i>
1991	45,323	5296	381	650	2988
1992	52,894	5827	406	602	3544
1993	57,845	5918	437	593	3605
1994	60,007	4104	274	373	2390
1995	68,074	3963	235	281	2478
1996	74,035	3617	224	232	2316
1997	63,072	3029	121	178	1854
1998**	66,172	2973	138	193	1814
1999	84,277	3922	138	217	2561
2000	95,154	4081	98	199	2700
2001	121,375	5323	143	201	3841
2002	108,045	4776	101	174	3332
2003	101,195	4117	98	148	2799

* The Total firearms column includes a number of "other firearms" that do not appear in the following columns.

** From 1998, the figures are for the financial year to April 1 of the following year.

Colin Greenwood

From an early age, Colin Greenwood has been involved with the private use of firearms. He has shot competitively with smallbore and fullbore rifles, pistols of all calibres and shotguns, and is also a keen handloader and a collector of firearms and cartridges, specialising in British rook rifles. His book, *The Classic British Rook Rifle*, is to be published by Safari Press.

In 1969, Colin was awarded a research fellowship at Cambridge University, Institute of Criminology, to study the development of firearms legislation and its effects on the use of firearms in crime, accidents and suicide. The results of this research were reported in a book, *Firearms Control* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1972). He has continued to research this field and has written extensively on the subject.

Colin previously served in the Coldstream Guards in London and North Africa, and completed 25 years service in the West Yorkshire Police, where he retired with the rank of Superintendent. Colin is also the author of three books on police firearms training.

Colin currently works as a freelancer firearms consultant specialising in forensic firearms examination and as a research consultant to major shooting organisations. He is frequently involved in working groups with the Home Office, police, Health and Safety Executive and others. He has acted as specialist advisor to one UK Parliamentary Select Committee and has given written and oral evidence to other such committees and enquiries.