

# Smoking guns

## Twenty years after Dunblane, Iain Overton on ease of access to firearms

Do more guns kill more people? This is the million-dollar question that lies at the heart of any modern gun debate.

It seems logical that this is the case. In a country such as Japan, where it is hard to own a gun, there are virtually no gun deaths. In the United States, where there are more than 300 million firearms, 8,855 people were shot and killed in 2012, and guns there account for about 70 per cent of all murders.

To show conclusively that more guns lead to more gun deaths is harder, however. A number of factors come into play when looking at cause and effect: levels of poverty, the rule of law, the number of criminal gangs operating, and more. It results in hard-to-explain situations such as Iceland, where there is a very high ratio of gun owners and yet virtually no gun crime.

Such difficulty in proving cause and effect lies at the heart of the American gun control debate. In the absence of proof that guns take, rather than save, lives, the National Rifle Association pushes back against gun control. Take away our guns, the mantra goes, and you take away our liberty.

Elsewhere, though, when it comes to gun control, what seems to be the sensible thing to do, not hard proof, has won the day.

Twenty years ago a tragedy of such sorrow unfolded in the Scottish town of Dunblane that it still has the power to shock today.

Thomas Hamilton, a 43-year-old former Scout leader, walked into a primary school with four legally held handguns and killed 17 people, wounding a further 15. Sixteen of the dead were children.

The ensuing debate was to focus on gun control laws, including public petitions calling for a ban on the private ownership of handguns. In response to this, two new Firearms Acts were passed. They effectively made private ownership of handguns illegal in Britain.

So the question is this: did the British response to Dunblane work?

Gun homicides in England and Wales had risen from 26 in 1969, to 66 in 1994. In the year of Dunblane, gun deaths peaked at 84 across the United Kingdom. Today, gun killings have dropped to almost a third of that. In England and Wales in 2012/13, the police recorded 30 gun killings, 12 fewer than the previous year, and the lowest figure since the National Crime Recording Standard was introduced in 2002.

Given that Britain's population is about 10 million greater than in the early 1960s, it seems Dunblane's gun controls worked.

It would be wrong, though, to say so conclusively. The UK does not have datasets over time recording how many people survive being shot. Lower mortality figures might just be modern medicine getting better at saving lives. And, of course, Derrick Bird's murder of 12



STEFAN ROUSSEAU/AF/GETTY

Flowers outside the Dunblane school where Thomas Hamilton killed 17

people in 2010 with a .22 rifle and shotgun shows that no gun control outside of a total ban is ever going to stop gun deaths.

However, it seems probable that Dunblane's gun control has worked. In 2012/13 there were just over 8,000 firearm offences in England and Wales. Knife crime was more than three times that. Of the gun offences, over half were with airguns or imitation weapons.

The biggest signifier of change, though, might be the role of handguns in crime since Dunblane. In England and Wales in 2012, only 28 per cent of all criminal use of guns involved handguns. They were actually fired in just 11 per cent of these cases – about 250 times.

Compare this with the US. In 2012, handguns accounted for about 90 per cent of all firearm homicides where the gun type was recorded.

Is this conclusive? No. We can only look at such figures and make our own judgments, and what these will be are deeply influenced by our cultural and societal roots.

The US, with its constitutional right to own a gun, is the only country in the world where they have loosened, not tightened gun laws after a massacre. Their likely response to Dunblane would have been to arm teachers or to provide children with bullet-proof blankets to hide under. Such a solution would have been met with ridicule in the UK. Instead, Britain opted for no handguns and, one prays, no more school massacres.

*Iain Overton is director of investigations, Action on Armed Violence and author of 'Gun Baby Gun: A Bloody Journey into the World of the Gun' (Canongate)*