

INFER TRUST

EDUCATION PACK

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We hope this pack will help to answer some of the most frequently asked questions about gun control in the UK.

It will also tell you about other material and sources of useful data.

For more information you can visit the Gun Control Network web site at <http://www.gun-control-network.org> where you'll find Current Issues, Facts and Research and links to other sites.

1. THE GUN CONTROL DEBATE

Guns are dangerous objects. They have the potential to:-

- Damage property
- Frighten people
- Injure and kill animals and birds
- Injure and kill humans

That's why most people are scared of them - but the potential power of guns to frighten, damage, injure and kill is exactly what makes them attractive to some other people.

Most guns are designed specifically for killing, to be used by the military and police. In the wrong hands they are the tools of crime and terror.

Civil societies control dangerous objects in the interests of everyone's safety. Guns should not be an exception, yet the issue of gun control is controversial.

The problem is how to balance the right of ordinary people to be safe from gun violence, and the wishes of gun enthusiasts to own and use guns.

In most developed countries gun 'rights' are restricted. To get a licence people usually have to prove they need to own guns (for sport, hunting, vermin control and, more rarely, for self defence). They also have to prove they're emotionally and mentally fit to use them.

In the United States some people say it's their 'right' to own guns because it's included in the Second Amendment to their Constitution. But not everyone believes that, and there are always debates about it. The issue has recently come to the fore again because Attorney General John Ashcroft has advised interpreting the Second Amendment in favour of gun owners.

The gun control debate is about how much everyone's safety is compromised by the people who have guns. Gun enthusiasts say screening procedures are there to make sure that all legal gun owners are trustworthy and competent people and OK to own even the most dangerous weapons without causing risk to the public. But medical and psychiatric experts say screening procedures can't predict the future behaviour or state of mind of a person who applies for a gun licence.

The experts are right – licensed gun holders kill and injure many innocent victims.

Michael Ryan went through the screening procedure and was given a licence. He used his legally held guns to injure 15 people and kill 16 others in the Hungerford Massacre in 1987.

Thomas Hamilton went through the screening procedure and was given a licence. He used his legally held guns to injure 11 children and three teachers, and kill 16 children, and their teacher, in a primary school in Dunblane in 1996.

In Tasmania, Martin Bryant was able to own a number of guns because there was no law to control them. In April 1996 he killed 35 people at Port Arthur.

Robert Steinhäuser was responsible for killing 15 people in a school in Germany in April 2002. He'd also joined a gun club and been through the screening procedure and was thought to be a suitable person to have a gun licence.

Data from several countries show that the level of gun violence is linked to the level of gun ownership, (see **International Aspects**) so more guns mean more risk, for gun owners themselves as well as other people.

American gun enthusiasts see things differently. They say more gun ownership means LESS crime. But there's very little objective support for this view, and most academic research says the opposite is true.

The aims of gun control advocates differ from country to country, but they're all worried about everyone's safety, and all concerned about the welfare of the whole population.

The gun lobby say they like guns and shooting, and if they want to have dangerous weapons we should let them. They say they have a 'right' to own guns if they want to. They don't look at how dangerous it is, or how it affects other people.

To find out more about the main arguments for and against gun control see:

Simon Chapman (1998) *Over Our Dead Bodies*. Pluto Press, Annandale. This book is about the Australian gun control campaign that followed the Port Arthur massacre in Tasmania.

Peter Squires (2000) *Gun Culture or Gun Control? Firearms, Violence and Society*. Routledge, London and New York. This book is about the gun control debate in the UK.

Josh Sugarmann (2001) *Every Handgun is Aimed at You. The Case for Banning Handguns*. The New Press, New York. Written by an American advocate for tighter gun control.

Tom Streissguth (2001) *Gun Control. The Pros and Cons*. Enslow Publishers Ltd, Berkeley Heights. A book in the Issues in Focus Series, concerned with the American situation.

2. THE CAMPAIGN TO BAN HANDGUNS, 1996-1997

In Great Britain all handguns were banned from private ownership in 1997. The ban happened because of a campaign which began after the Dunblane Massacre when 11 children and three teachers were injured, and 16 other children and their teacher were killed in a primary school in Dunblane in 1996.

Here is a summary of the campaign. More details can be found in the references.

This is what was happening about guns before the Dunblane massacre

1970

The Home Office asked Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary to review firearms controls. The *McKay Report* was prepared in 1972, but was never published.

1972

The Conservative government prepared a green paper, suggesting eleven restrictions on gun ownership and use. But gun users objected and the Government dropped its plans. Licensed gun owners went on using lots of weapons including semi-automatic rifles and high-powered handguns.

1987

On 19th August sixteen people were killed and fifteen injured by Michael Ryan in and around the Berkshire town of *Hungerford*. Ryan finally shot himself. His guns were all legally owned. Half of the murder victims were shot with a handgun, the others were killed with a semi-automatic rifle. There was no public inquiry.

After the Hungerford massacre a lot of people wanted gun laws tightened. The Conservative Home Secretary Douglas Hurd introduced the *Firearms (Amendment) Bill 1988*. Semi-automatic rifles were banned but handguns remained legal weapons.

To get a handgun licence applicants had to show 'good reason' for owning a handgun. Usually this meant saying they wanted to do target shooting. In Great Britain handgun ownership wasn't allowed for self-defence and private security (the situation is different in Northern Ireland).

The 1988 Firearms (Amendment) Act said there should be a Committee to advise the Home Secretary on firearms issues. The Firearms Consultative Committee was set up. Almost all the members were men with personal interests in shooting and/or the firearms trade. This meant that their advice tended to protect their own interests. The views of victims of gun crime were generally ignored. There were no doctors or professionals on the Committee who had to deal with the consequences of gun shot wounds.

This is what happened about guns after the Dunblane massacre

March 1996

On 13 March sixteen 5 and 6 year old children and their teacher were shot dead at *Dunblane Primary School* in Central Scotland. Three more teachers and eleven other children were wounded. Thomas Hamilton shot them all. He was a licensed gun owner who took his four lawfully held large calibre handguns from his home to the School. After his three-minute shooting spree he killed himself with his revolver.

The massacre had a huge impact on the British public. They were shocked to find that gun enthusiasts were allowed to keep so many dangerous weapons and so much ammunition in their homes. They wanted the law changing. Some newspapers began asking for gun laws to be tightened. They said handguns were especially dangerous because they were rapid-firing and could be easily hidden.

Scottish Secretary Michael Forsyth, (who was also the MP for Dunblane) announced there would be a public inquiry into the massacre chaired by the senior judge Lord Cullen. The Government said they wouldn't do anything about guns until Lord Cullen had done his report. Victims' families weren't allowed to speak out until the report was published.

April 1996

Two major petitions calling for a ban on private ownership of handguns were launched. One started by the *Sunday Mail* (a Scottish newspaper). The other, the *Snowdrop Petition*, was started by a group, mostly mothers with young children from the Dunblane/Stirling area. They wanted something done to stop another massacre.

The Sunday Mail petition got 428,279 signatures in 5 weeks. It was handed to Home Secretary Michael Howard on 26 April by a group of Dunblane families who met senior politicians including the Prime Minister (John Major) and Tony Blair (Labour Opposition leader). The families told the politicians the Dunblane massacre wouldn't have happened if handguns had been banned after the Hungerford massacre nine years earlier.

May 1996

The *Cullen Inquiry* started in Stirling.

The *Parliamentary Home Affairs Committee* began its own investigation into "Handgun Ownership". The Committee heard evidence on behalf of gun enthusiasts, the police and the Home Office, but no gun control advocates were asked to speak.

July 1996

The Cullen Inquiry finished, and the Dunblane families were able to give interviews for the first time. They spoke out for a handgun ban. The Snowdrop Petition, signed by more than 705,000 people, was handed into Parliament.

Two weeks later *Gun Control Network* (GCN) was launched at a Westminster press conference. GCN was founded by a small group of people including parents of victims of the Hungerford and Dunblane massacres, academics and lawyers.

As well as campaigning for a handgun ban it was set up as a permanent organisation to work for gun control in the future, because its founders knew gun enthusiasts would keep on trying to stop any changes in the law which restricted the use of guns.

During the campaign, members of GCN, the Snowdrop campaigners and the Dunblane families worked together. They went on radio and TV, often on discussion programmes where members of the gun lobby said the gun laws were OK as they were, and didn't need changing.

Aug 1996

The Home Affairs Select Committee published its report on "Handgun Ownership". The majority of members (all Conservatives) said there was no need to stop people having any particular sort of gun, and the law didn't need any big changes. The minority (all Labour) wanted a handgun ban and tighter controls over other weapons including air guns.

Oct 1996

All the main opposition parties, Labour, Liberal Democrats, Scottish Nationalists and Plaid Cymru agreed to support a total ban on handguns. The Conservative government was waiting for the publication of the Cullen Report before revealing its position.

On 16 October the *Cullen Report* was published. It recommended some changes about licensing and using handguns, but didn't recommend a ban. The Government went beyond the recommendations and said it would introduce a bill to outlaw the private ownership of high calibre handguns (those above .22). The bill would impose tighter restrictions on the use of .22s but they would remain legal weapons. The Dunblane families and others decided to carry on campaigning for a total ban because all handguns of all calibres could kill.

A parliamentary Early Day Motion got all-party support for a total ban, but the Government told all Conservative MPs they'd got to support a partial ban. Opposition MPs were allowed a free vote, and campaigners tried to persuade the Conservatives to do the same. Some pro-gun Conservative backbench MPs voted against any ban, and a smaller group voted for a total ban (see below).

Nov 1996

A lot of lobbying went on before the Second Reading of the Firearms (Amendment) Bill. Robert Hughes, a Conservative backbencher introduced an amendment proposing a total ban on handguns. Campaigners asked other Conservatives to vote for it but it was defeated. The campaign for a total ban continued.

Feb 1997

In spite of opposition from people in Parliament, especially the House of Lords, the Firearms (Amendment) Bill became law and a partial ban on handguns was introduced.

It gave owners a few months to hand in their guns and paid them compensation. But the campaign for a total ban continued, now with billboards and cinema advertisements.

April 1997

The Snowdrop Campaign was wound up and its work was taken over by Gun Control Network. The Labour Party manifesto for the forthcoming General Election pledged that, if elected, Labour would introduce a bill banning low calibre handguns. Candidates from the Labour, Liberal Democrat and Scottish Nationalist parties all indicated their support.

May 1997

A Labour government was elected and immediately introduced another Firearms (Amendment) Bill banning all remaining handguns (.22 calibre). It got overwhelming support in the House of Commons.

Nov 1997

Some people tried to amend the Bill and allow exemptions for international competitions and for disabled shooters. The amendments were defeated. The Bill became law. All handguns were now illegal.

1999

GCN members were invited to join the Firearms Consultative Committee. Since then the membership of the FCC has been broadened, but it is still dominated by men with shooting interests. When the Home Affairs Committee reviewed the issue of "Controls over Firearms" GCN was invited to provide evidence.

You can find out more about gun issues from these sources:

Mick North (2000) *Dunblane: Never Forget*. Mainstream Publishing, Edinburgh

Peter Squires (2000) *Gun Culture or Gun Control? Firearms, Violence and Society*. Routledge, London and New York.

FF Ridley & Grant Jordan (1998) *Protest politics: cause groups and campaigns*. Oxford University Press, Oxford. This book includes a chapter on the Snowdrop Campaign.

Home Affairs Select Committee Fifth Report (1996) *Possession of Handguns*. HMSO, London.

Lord Douglas Cullen (1996) *The Public Inquiry into the Shootings at Dunblane Primary School on 13 March 1996*. The Stationary Office, London.

The *Firearms (Amendment) Bill 1996* was discussed in the *House of Commons* on 28 October 1996 (Queen's Speech), 12, 18 and 19 November 1996, 4 December 1996, 18 February 1997 and in the *House of Lords* on 16 December 1996, 16 and 21 January 1997, 4, 11 and 20 February 1997.

The *Firearms (Amendment) Bill 1997* was discussed in the *House of Commons* on 11 and 16 June 1997, 27 July 1997, 3 November 1997 and in the *House of Lords*

Firearms Compensation was discussed in the House of Commons on 9 June 1997.

The Campaign to Ban Handguns

Also of relevance to the handgun debate is a statement on gun victim Thomas McIntyre made by *Dr John Reid* (Motherwell, North) on 15 January 1997.

For transcripts see *Hansard* at <http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm/cmhansrd.htm>

3. PARLIAMENT

The use and misuse of firearms is an important issue to politicians. This list tells you what they have been doing about firearms since the Firearms (Amendment) Acts in 1997. You can investigate some these yourself through the internet.

Select Committee Report

The Second Report from the *Home Affairs Committee* Session 1999-2000 HC95 - *Controls over Firearms*

- <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199900/cmselect/cmhaff/95/9502.htm#evidence> - Report and Proceedings
- <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm199900/cmselect/cmhaff/95/95ap01.htm> - Written Evidence
- <http://www.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm48/4864/4864.htm> - Government Response

Bills and Debates

Bill moved by Dr Nick Palmer (Broxtowe) (21st January 1998)

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to amend the Firearms Act 1968 to restrict the acquisition and possession of air weapons; and for connected purposes.

House of Commons debate on *Air Gun Safety* (23rd June 1999)

Bill moved by David Atkinson (Bournemouth East) (30th October 2001)

That leave be given to bring a Bill to restrict the availability and use of ball bearing guns and similar replica weapons

For transcripts see *Hansard*.

<http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/cm/cmhansrd.htm>

4. CRIME FIGURES

Gun crime statistics are published annually by the Home Office for England and Wales, and by the Scottish Executive for Scotland.

All statistics are open to differing interpretations. By quoting some data, the gun lobby has suggested that recent figures for England and Wales show the handgun ban led to an increase in violent crime. This was widely reported in some newspapers, but the figures don't support it.

Because of tight gun control the British gun crime figures are low in comparison to many other countries, but low numbers are always subject to fluctuations that aren't always statistically significant.

When we look at changes in reported handgun crime we have to think about the growing use of legal imitation guns in crime. Best estimates say imitation guns and guns which were once legal when deactivated, (altered so they don't work anymore) but which have since been reactivated, (altered so they do work) are involved in around 40% of reported handgun crime, and the percentage is going up.

Imitation weapons and deactivated weapons weren't affected by the handgun ban.

Handgun use is linked to the growth of illegal drug trading, gang activity and 'organised' crime, all of which must be tackled by tougher law enforcement.

Taken overall the latest figures for gun crime are much more encouraging than some newspaper headlines suggest.

There is no evidence that the handgun ban has led directly or indirectly to an increase in crime.

Details of the recent crime figures for *England and Wales* are on the enclosed sheet *UK Statistics Show a Rise in Violent Crime* issued by GCN in September 2001. The most recent Home Office data (1999/2000) show:

- A total of 16,946 offences were committed with firearms
- An air weapon was the most commonly used firearm (in 10,103 instances)
- A handgun was used in 42 homicides and in a total of 3685 crimes

See Chapter 3 of Criminal Statistics England and Wales at <http://www.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm50/5001/5001.htm>

The latest figures for *Scotland* from the *Scottish Executive* (2000) show:

- A total of 938 recorded offences in which a firearm was alleged to have been used, the lowest such figure since 1979
- An air weapon was the most commonly used firearm.
- The number of offences involving the alleged use of a pistol/revolver decreased from 161 in 1999 to 93 in 2000, the lowest number since 1995

Data from the Scottish Executive Statistical Bulletin Criminal Justice Series CrJ/2001/5 (Sept 2001) <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/stats/bulletins/00110-00.asp>
Earlier reports can be accessed via <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/stats>

The most recent annual *British Crime Survey* 2001 shows overall crime fell by 12% between 1999 and 2000, violent crime by 19%. The full British Crime Survey 2001 is at <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs/hosb1801.pdf>

OTHER FIREARMS STATISTICS

Firearms statistics for England and Wales 1999-2000 are at <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs/hosb1101.pdf>

5. CURRENT ISSUES

Replica weapons

Over the last few years the criminal use of imitation and replica guns in crime has increased. Research strongly suggests that the gun manufacturers are behind the growing replica market - many replicas are copies of real guns, made under licences issued by the major gun manufacturers.

Some of the guns are so called 'soft air guns', they shoot plastic bullets, others called BB guns shoot ball bearings. Though they look exactly like the handguns which have been banned, replica guns haven't been banned, and there are almost no restrictions on buying or using them.

Gun control advocates and the police are worried about:

- The insecurity and fear caused when there are a lot of lookalike guns in communities
- Replicas encouraging very young people to become interested in guns
- The pressure put on police to send armed response units to all sighting of guns, even though the guns used may well turn out to be replicas.
- The risk to users, because the police must assume the gun is real, even though it may not be. People holding replica guns have been shot and killed by Police.
- The use of replica guns in crime. It is impossible for most people to tell the difference between a replica and a real gun. People confronted with a replica gun are very frightened, they think they are really going to be shot.

For further details see

- Ian Taylor and Rob Hornsby (2000) *Replica firearms: a new frontier in the gun market*. INFER Trust Report no.1.
- Gun Control Network leaflet (enclosed).

Air weapons

Most reported gun crimes are committed with air weapons yet there aren't many restrictions on buying and using them. Some of the present laws are ignored. In particular, lots of air gun offences are carried out by unsupervised youths, even though it's illegal for anyone under 14 to use an air gun unless supervised by an adult (over 21).

The Home Affairs Committee took evidence on the use of air guns in 1999, and recommended to the Government that they should be licensed. The present Government haven't done this, partly because of worries about the cost of licensing air guns and hours of work it would involve. But many people, including gun control advocates and animal welfare groups, believe the cost of air rifle crime makes the expense and work involved in controlling them very worthwhile

Deactivated weapons

At the moment the law lets people keep deactivated guns. Firearm collecting is often given as the reason. Although deactivation is supposed to make certain that the gun can't ever work again, some have been reactivated then used in crimes. Reactivated and replica weapons are used in a lot of handgun crime.

In a recent report on *Illegal Firearms* by the Centre for Defence Studies at Kings College London, the authors say

“...there are at present two types of handguns that are popular with criminals – both of these involve the conversions of items that can be obtained legally”.

The Report, was commissioned by the Countryside Alliance's Campaign for Shooting, and has been used by the gun lobby to support its claim that the handgun ban has not worked. But the fact that reactivated weapons (which have been made from legal deactivated guns) are used in so many crimes, supports a case for banning deactivated weapons.

See Centre for Defence Studies (2001) *Illegal Firearms in the United Kingdom*. Working Paper 4. Kings College, University of London.

Minimum age for shooting

Under present law children of any age can use weapons and shoot if they are supervised. Some shooting organisations encourage children to handle guns by talking about shooting as fun. But some people believe getting interested in guns at too an early age can lead to an unhealthy attachment to guns. They think such dangerous weapons are not safe for children. In 1999 The Home Affairs Committee recommended that the Government should bring in a minimum age for using real guns. The Government didn't do anything about this.

Field sports

Field sports (game shooting, deer stalking) and clay pigeon shooting have not been affected by the recent legislation, and there aren't any proposals to ban any of these shooting activities.

Some concerns about the firearms used in field sports have been raised by gun control advocates and by the Home Affairs Select Committee.¹

These include:

- The way shotguns are licensed means that a shooter with one licence can have a lot of shotguns. This encourages owners to have more guns.
- The use of multishot rifles and shotguns – guns that fire more than one shot without reloading are significantly more dangerous.

¹For details of the evidence given to Home Affairs Committee, the Committee's Report and the Government's response see the links under **Parliament**.

6. INTERNATIONAL ASPECTS

Data on firearms and violence

Data on firearms and violence is being collected from countries all over the world. The data allow comparisons to be made between countries and the relationship between gun violence and gun ownership to be analysed.

These comparisons indicate that there is more gun violence in countries such as the United States where there is more gun ownership, and less in countries like Japan where firearm ownership is very tightly restricted.

The most comprehensive set of data has been collated by The *HELP Network* (The Handgun Epidemic Lowering Plan Network) in collaboration with *SAFER-Net* (Small Arms/Firearms Education & Research Network). Fifty countries and cities are currently covered.

The report is not yet generally available, but Gun Control Network would be pleased to provide specific information from the report on request.

The SAFER-Net web site at www.ryerson.ca/SAFER-Net is currently under construction and includes some of the international data.

The HELP web address is <http://www.helpnetwork.org>

Campaign to restrict the global trade in small arms

As many as 500,000 people are killed each year with small arms, a category that largely equates with guns. About 200,000 are victims of murder, suicide and “accidents”, often in countries that are, at least nominally, at “peace”. Another 300,000, most of whom are civilians, die in conflicts.

The staggering human and economic devastation caused by the use and spread of firearms has led to action by a number of agencies, including the United Nations.

In July 2001 the UN held a conference to discuss the Illicit Trade in Small Arms. For campaigners the outcome was disappointing, as it did not lead to a binding agreement among states to restrict arms trading. The agreed pact simply *urges* states to establish new laws aimed at regulating arms brokers and ensuring “control over the export and transit of small arms and light weapons” and limits itself to *appealing* to states to destroy surplus stocks of small arms and to criminalize the illegal production, possession, stockpiling and trade in small arms. Plans to prevent states selling guns to rebel groups were blocked by the United States. For a report see <http://www.un.org/events/ref40.htm>

Many non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have urged more radical and immediate measures. Gun control groups believe that the issue of domestic gun control impacts on the arms trade, as guns will frequently flow from countries with weak gun laws to become part of the illicit trade. In 1999 a large group of NGOs,

International Aspects

including international aid agencies, development organisations, peace groups and gun control organisations linked up to form the *International Action Network on Small Arms* (IANSA). IANSA is coordinating many of the efforts to restrict the arms trade. To get more information on the campaign visit the IANSA website and those of other organisations involved.

IANSA, <http://www.iansa.org>; International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War, www.ippnw.org; Saferworld, <http://www.saferworld.co.uk>; Oxfam Cut Conflict <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/campaign/cutconflict/index.html>



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