

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

RESEARCHER PERCEPTIONS OF LAWFUL, CONCEALED CARRY OF HANDGUNS

Do economists and criminologists differ in their views of firearms' effects on crime and suicide?

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What, according to experts, is the relationship between gun ownership and crime? Two ways to address this question are a literature review and a survey of experts. In this report, we do the latter, surveying economists and criminologists who have published peer-reviewed empirical research on their perceptions of the relationship between gun ownership, crime, and suicide. This is the first survey to undertake such a comparison; a contemporaneous survey that examined the views of academics on guns surveyed researchers who had simply used the words “firearm” or “gun” in their published work; despite that, they surveyed less than a quarter of the economists we surveyed. We believe our survey better represents the views of academic experts.

The experts we examined can be divided into two groups: economists and criminologists. Both deal with crime, but from very different perspectives. Gary Becker got economists started on this issue with his seminal 1968 *Journal of Political Economy* article, “Crime and Punishment: An Economic Approach.” Economics is based on the “law of demand,” which holds that as something becomes more costly, people do less of it. Applied to crime, this concept indicates that crime will decrease as the probability of

arrest and conviction or the severity of punishment increases. In sharp contrast to criminologists, all empirical work by economists on crime includes law enforcement as a key factor. Criminologists do not have a similar unifying theory of human behavior.

There are other reasons to expect different responses from the two groups of crime researchers. For instance, economists are generally more skeptical of regulation, focusing on its unintended effects and pointing out that regulations designed to save lives may actually result in more deaths. Another difference is political affiliation; though academic economists and criminologists are both predominantly Democrats, Democratic economists outnumber their Republican counterparts by almost three to one, while in sociology (of which criminology is a subfield) there are about 37 Democratic faculty members for every Republican.

METHODOLOGY

We obtained our survey list of economists using the academic publication database JSTOR, selecting the Economics subset (632 sources), and doing a full-text search for “gun control” for all years limited to peer-reviewed books and articles (not book reviews or publications categorized as “miscellaneous”). We got 234 hits. We then obtained copies of those articles to determine if they contained empirical work on the issues of guns and crime, accidents, or suicides. Empirical studies that only dealt with voting behavior by politicians or the electorate, or were surveys themselves, were excluded.



Our questionnaire was very short, consisting of between six and 11 questions. On average, the survey took economists three minutes and one second to complete. We distributed it by email to a list of 53 researchers who had published peer-reviewed research on firearms in economics journals from January 1997 to July 2013. In three cases the email address was no longer valid and we were unable to find a current email. Of the valid email addresses, 43 were Americans, four were Canadians, two were Australians, and one was Swedish. For those who didn't respond to the initial email, a couple of follow-up emails were sent, and then one of us, Gary Mauser, made a telephone call to encourage participation. For three individuals, the survey information was taken over the telephone.

Everyone who took the survey answered all the questions. The survey of economists was conducted from August 25th to September 12th, 2014. Overall, 35 of the 50 researchers responded,

a 70% response rate. Of those, 32 (91%) were from the United States and Canada.

For criminologists, we assembled our sample using two databases (PROQUEST and EBSCO Host) of academics who had published at least one empirical study on firearms and violence in a peer-reviewed criminology journal (excluding forensics or injury publications)

between January 2000 and December 2013. A total of 80 articles were identified. We then emailed our survey to 80 criminologists, 68 of whom were Americans, nine Canadians, two Australians, and one from France. Overall, 39 of the 80 responded, a 49% response rate. Of those, 35 (90%) were from North America. With the exception of one respondent who apparently took several hours to complete the survey, the average respondent took two minutes and 45 seconds to complete the survey. The survey of criminologists was con-

TABLE 1
GUN AVAILABILITY, CRIME, AND SUICIDE: SURVEY OF GUN RESEARCHERS

Possible answers include "I don't know"

QUESTION		ECONOMISTS		CRIMINOLOGISTS		ALL
		NORTH AMERICANS	ALL	NORTH AMERICANS	ALL	
		n = 32	n = 35	n = 35	n = 39	
1) In the United States, are guns used in self-defense more often than they are used in the commission of crime?	Yes	66%	60%	40%	38%	48%
	No	6%	9%	31%	33%	22%
	Don't know	31%	31%	29%	28%	29%
2) Are gun-free zones, areas where civilians are banned from having guns, more likely to attract criminals than they are to deter them?	Yes	81%	74%	37%	38%	55%
	No	3%	11%	37%	36%	24%
	Don't know	16%	14%	26%	26%	20%
3) Would you say that, in the United States, having a gun in the home causes an increase in the risk of suicide?	Yes	22%	23%	49%	46%	35%
	No	63%	57%	40%	44%	50%
	Don't know	16%	20%	11%	10%	15%
4) Would you say that concealed handgun permit holders are much more law-abiding than the typical American?	Yes	88%	80%	49%	51%	65%
	No	6%	9%	20%	21%	15%
	Don't know	6%	11%	31%	28%	20%
5) How does allowing people to carry a permitted, concealed handgun affect the murder rate?	Decrease	72%	66%	29%	28%	46%
	No effect	13%	11%	43%	41%	27%
	Increase	0%	3%	9%	10%	7%
	Don't know	16%	20%	20%	21%	21%

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ducted from May 29th to June 14th, 2015.

Our survey contains more than 4.2 times as many economists and 22% more criminologists than the other survey of academics that we mentioned earlier in this article.

The survey itself was designed to elicit information on the researchers' intensity of views, using two versions of each question. First, a question was asked with the options: "Yes," "No," or "I don't know." If the researcher answered either "Yes" or "No" to all questions, he or she was asked a total of five questions about guns. Whenever a researcher answered "I don't know," the question was repeated a second time but the possible answers were limited to "Yes" or "No." The respondent could be asked a maximum of 10 questions about guns. The survey was conducted using Surveygizmo.com.

The results are reported in Tables 1 and 2. Unfortunately, for a few criminology respondents, an error in the coding allowed them to select "I don't know" when the survey was supposed to force a "Yes" or "No" answer.

We know the identity of the individuals who took the survey and how they answered the survey, but individuals were promised anonymity in return for their allowing us to use their survey results.

OVERVIEW OF RESULTS

Our survey found a great deal of uniformity in economists' views on the effects of legal gun accessibility. That goes for a wide range of gun issues, including crime and self-defense, the risk of gun-free zones, firearms and suicide, and concealed handgun laws.

Our limited responses from researchers outside of North America suggest nationality does matter. While economists from both the United States and Canada overwhelmingly believe that private gun ownership makes people safer, the few economists from Australia and Sweden tended to be more skeptical of that benefit.

For North American economists, 88% said that guns are more frequently "used in self-defense than they are used in the commission of crime"; 91% believe that gun-free zones are "more likely to attract criminals than they are to deter them"; 72% did not agree that "a gun in the home causes an increase in the risk

TABLE 2

GUN AVAILABILITY, CRIME, AND SUICIDE: SURVEY OF RESEARCHERS

Possible answers restricted to "Yes" and "No"

QUESTION		ECONOMISTS		CRIMINOLOGISTS*		ALL*
		NORTH AMERICANS	ALL	NORTH AMERICANS	ALL	
		<i>n</i> = 32	<i>n</i> = 35	<i>n</i> = 35	<i>n</i> = 39	<i>n</i> = 74
1) In the United States, are guns used in self-defense more often than they are used in the commission of crime?	Yes	88%	83%	46%	44%	62%
	No	12%	17%	49%	51%	35%
2) Are gun-free zones, areas where civilians are banned from having guns, more likely to attract criminals than they are to deter them?	Yes	91%	83%	49%	51%	66%
	No	9%	17%	49%	46%	32%
3) Would you say that, in the United States, having a gun in the home causes an increase in the risk of suicide?	Yes	28%	31%	51%	49%	40%
	No	72%	69%	49%	51%	60%
4) Would you say that concealed handgun permit holders are much more law-abiding than the typical American?	Yes	91%	83%	54%	56%	69%
	No	9%	17%	46%	44%	31%
5) How does allowing people to carry a permitted, concealed handgun affect the murder rate?	Decrease	81%	74%	31%	31%	51%
	No effect	19%	20%	49%	46%	34%
	Increase	0%	6%	14%	15%	11%

* Because of a computer error, one respondent responded that he/she did not know.

of suicide"; 91% said that "concealed handgun permit holders are much more law-abiding than the typical American"; and 81% said that permitted, concealed handguns lower the murder rate. If we consider all those who have published worldwide and include the researchers from Australia and Sweden, those percentages are reduced by between 3 and 8 percentage points, but the numbers are still quite high.

The survey results for criminologists were far more divided on the effects of legal firearms accessibility. For three of the five questions about guns that we asked, responses were about equally divided. There was also no apparent difference between criminologists in North America and the rest of the world according to our limited responses from non-North American criminologists. However, there were consistently large differences between economists and criminologists, with economists much more likely to believe that there is a net benefit from gun ownership.

Combining the responses from economists and criminologists together shows that the researchers, as a group, believe that guns are used more in self-defense than in crime; gun-free zones attract criminals; guns in the home do not increase the risk of suicide; concealed handgun permit holders are much more law-abiding than the typical American; and that permitted concealed handguns lower the murder rate. All those results were statistically significant.

COMPARISON BETWEEN ECONOMISTS AND CRIMINOLOGISTS

As groups, the surveyed economists and criminologists had starkly different views of the world. For example, the answers to Questions 1, 2, and 5 clearly show that criminologists were much more divided than economists on the notion that legal gun accessibility deters crime. While the economists overwhelmingly believed that guns are more likely to be used in self-defense than in the commission of a crime and that gun-free zones attract criminals, criminologists were only slightly more likely to agree than disagree with those positions. The difference between the agreeing and disagreeing criminologists is not statistically significant, as indicated in Table 3.

Regarding Question 5, the economists and criminologists were both much more likely to believe that permitted, concealed handguns reduce murders than increase them, and the difference is statistically significant for both groups, as indicated in Table 3. But even when “leaners”—respondents who initially answered “I don’t know”—were forced to answer “Increase,” “Decrease,” or “No effect,” economists who think that concealed handguns reduce murders outnumbered economists who think concealed hand-

guns increase murders by 12 to one. In contrast, criminologists who believe handguns decrease murder outnumbered criminologists who think concealed handguns increase murder by just two to one. Another difference involving concealed handguns is that about half of the criminologists believed that concealed handguns have no effect on murder, while just 20% of the economists did.

The differences between economists and criminologists continued for the other questions. The economists overwhelmingly believed that gun ownership doesn’t increase the risk of suicides, while the criminologists were roughly equally divided, with no statistically significant difference. The majority of both economists and criminologists said that concealed permit holders are “much more law-abiding than the typical American,” but the criminologists were much more divided on that issue.

Combining the economists’ and criminologists’ responses into a single group shows strong support for the claims that guns are used more in self-defense than in crime; gun-free zones attract criminals; guns in the home do not increase the risk of suicide; concealed handgun permit holders are much more law-abiding than the typical American; and permitted, concealed handguns lower the murder rate. Support for each of those views exceeded opposition by at least 20 percentage points. And 51 percent of

TABLE 3

DO ECONOMISTS AND CRIMINOLOGISTS HAVE CLEAR VIEWS ON THESE GUN ISSUES?

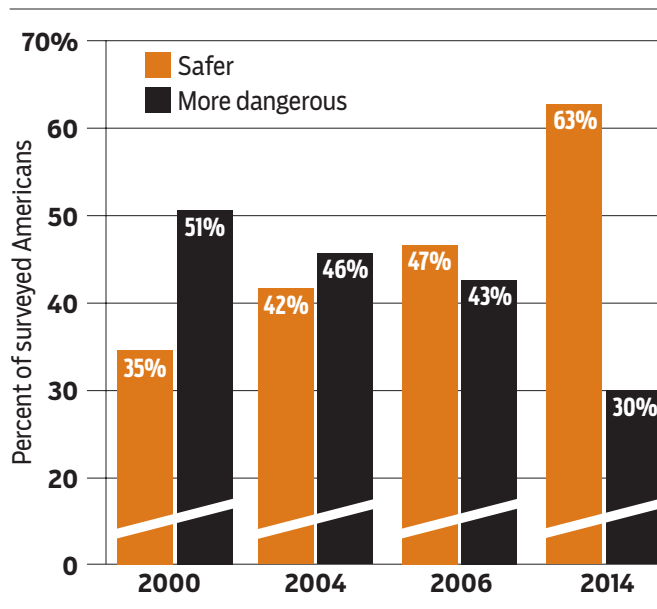
All respondents from around the world, with undecideds

QUESTION	IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN “YES” AND “NO” SIGNIFICANT AT THE 10% LEVEL?		IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ECONOMISTS AND CRIMINOLOGISTS ANSWERING “YES” SIGNIFICANT AT THE 10% LEVEL?	IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE PERCENTAGE OF ECONOMISTS AND CRIMINOLOGISTS, COMBINED, ANSWERING “YES” SIGNIFICANT AT THE 10% LEVEL?
	ECONOMISTS	CRIMINOLOGISTS		
1) In the United States, are guns used in self-defense more often than they are used in the commission of crime?	Yes (0.0%)	No (71.1%)	Yes (6.6%)	Yes (0.05%)
2) Are gun-free zones, areas where civilians are banned from having guns, more likely to attract criminals than they are to deter them?	Yes (0.0%)	No (85.6%)	Yes (0.15%)	Yes (0.01%)
3) Would you say that, in the United States, having a gun in the home causes an increase in the risk of suicide?	Yes (0.0%)	No (86.8%)	Yes (3.5%)	Yes (6.8%)
4) Would you say that concealed handgun permit holders are much more law-abiding than the typical American?	Yes (0.0%)	Yes (2.1%)	Yes (0.86%)	Yes (0.0%)
	IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN “INCREASE” AND “DECREASE” SIGNIFICANT AT THE 10% LEVEL?		IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ECONOMISTS AND CRIMINOLOGISTS ANSWERING “DECREASE” SIGNIFICANT AT THE 10% LEVEL?	IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE PERCENTAGE OF ECONOMISTS AND CRIMINOLOGISTS, COMBINED, ANSWERING “DECREASE” AND “INCREASE” SIGNIFICANT AT THE 10% LEVEL?
5) How does allowing people to carry a permitted, concealed handgun affect the murder rate?	Yes (0.0%)	Yes (7.0%)	Yes (0.10%)	Yes (0.0%)

Note: Two-tailed t-test. Significance level in parentheses. Estimates between economists and criminologists assume unequal variances and unequal number of observations.

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FIGURE 1
GALLUP SURVEY: DO GUNS MAKE HOMES SAFER?



the combined respondents believed that permitted concealed handguns reduce murder rates, while only 11 percent believed that permitted concealed handguns increase murder rates—a difference of 40 percentage points. All those results are statistically significant at the 10% level.

COMPARISON TO U.S. GENERAL POPULATION SURVEYS

Interestingly, the results of our survey of academics roughly mirror recent survey results for the general U.S. population. Last fall, Gallup asked a representative group of Americans if they thought residents are safer with a gun in the home. People answered “Yes” by a margin of 63 to 30 percent. Another Gallup survey found that 60 percent of gun owners listed “Personal Safety/Protection” as the reason they own a gun. A December 2014 Pew Research Center survey found that 57 percent of Americans believe gun ownership “protects people from becoming victims of crime,” whereas 37 percent believe that it “puts people’s safety at risk.”

Figure 1 sketches the results from Gallup gun surveys over time. It shows a dramatic change over the past 14 years as Americans have increasingly become more convinced that gun ownership makes them safer. (The Pew gun survey has only been asked twice.)

CONCLUSION

The point of this survey wasn’t to discover whether economists or criminologists are *correct* in their views of the effects of legal gun accessibility. Instead, it simply identifies what their views are and how broadly they are held. Interestingly but (probably) not surprisingly, those views correspond closely with their fields’

respective conceptions of human nature.

The vast majority of researchers who have published refereed articles in economics journals think that gun ownership makes people safer. With the exception of the effect of guns on suicide, a plurality of criminologists agrees with them, but the differences in the criminologist group are smaller and often not statistically significant. The only two answers where economists and criminologists generally agree and the results are statistically significant are that permit holders are “much more law-abiding than the typical American” and that concealed handgun permits are more likely to decrease murders than to increase them.

There has been a dramatic change in the views of Americans generally on legal gun accessibility, with their views becoming much closer to those of academics. While we don’t have similar surveys of academics in previous years, the literature reviews have consistently pointed to similar results. It thus appears that the views of American adults on gun ownership are approaching those of economists.

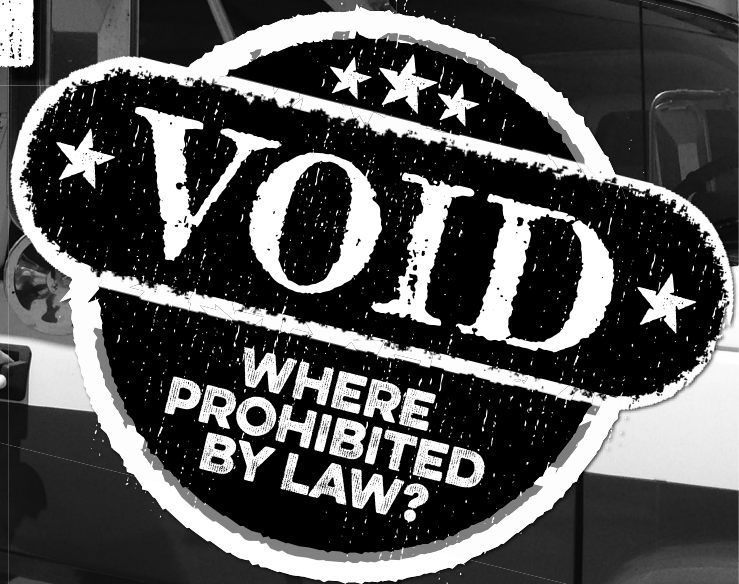
American economists feel strongest about two issues: that gun-free zones attract rather than deter criminals, and that concealed handgun permit holders are much more law-abiding than the typical American. For criminologists, they feel strongest that permit holders are more law-abiding.

Combining the responses of economists and criminologists shows that by more than a 2:1 margin researchers view gun-free zones as a magnet for criminals and believe that permit holders are more law-abiding than the average American. These researchers believe by about a 5:1 margin that permitted concealed handguns are more likely to reduce than increase murder rates. R

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