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## Let everyone have a gun

**Taking away people's guns simply removes a deterrent to crime, writes John Whitley.**

Dr Lee Gordon-Brown and the others involved in subduing and disarming Huan Xiang, the alleged perpetrator in the Monash University shooting, have rightly been celebrated as heroes. According to paramedic Paul Howells, quoted in The Age: "The people on the floor at the time were just unbelievable. They definitely saved lives." But the implications of this seem to have been lost on Prime Minister John Howard and others seeking to use these events to call for more gun control.

As with most crimes, it was not the police who stopped the shooter from claiming more lives. Law enforcement activities and a police presence are obviously important factors in deterring crime, but they do not deter all crimes and they almost never stop crimes during their commission. As the tragedy at Monash indicates, the task of stopping crimes during their commission inevitably falls to private citizens.

Fortunately in the Monash case, the individuals present were able to subdue the shooter relatively quickly before more lives were lost. Unfortunately, this is not always the case, as the Port Arthur tragedy demonstrated. The obvious question being asked is: what can Australia do to prevent these tragedies and to limit the harm in cases that do occur?

The Prime Minister's answer is to further restrict the rights of law-abiding citizens to own and use guns. Presumably the benefits he sees in this policy are a reduction in the availability of guns to individuals such as the alleged Monash shooter, who apparently acquired his guns legally and, perhaps more importantly, the reduction of the flow of guns into the illegal markets that supply most crime guns. But as the Monash shooting demonstrated, it is law-abiding citizens who are most frequently called upon to stop crimes. Guns make this task easier, especially for physically weaker people such as women and the elderly.

In the rash of public school shootings in the US during the late 1990s, several shootings were stopped by armed principals or teachers (for example, the shootings at Pearl, Mississippi, and Edinboro, Pennsylvania), presumably saving many lives. Much has been made of martial arts training of one of the students who intervened in the Monash shooting, further evidence that preparation and precaution can make a difference.

It is thus not clear that more gun control laws designed to reduce rates of gun ownership will make Australians safer. While they may reduce the availability of guns for the commission of crimes, they simultaneously reduce the availability of guns for defence, reducing the ability of private citizens to stop crimes during their commission and reducing the deterrent effect received from the likelihood of criminals facing armed victims. To evaluate the Prime Minister's proposals, we need to consider these potential costs as well as their potential benefits.

Although anecdotal stories are widely available on both the costs and the benefits, these are not sufficient to evaluate the Prime Minister's policies. Unfortunately, there is very little systematic evidence available on the relative magnitudes of these costs and benefits in Australia. Contrary to the claims of some recent opinion columns and news articles, the suggestive evidence from the gun control laws passed after the Port Arthur tragedy is that crime has subsequently risen.

There have been comprehensive looks at the American experience and one recent look across countries as well. The evidence is strong that recent US restrictions on gun ownership - waiting periods for purchases, restrictions on the number of purchases at one time, safe storage rules, etc - have not reduced crime rates. The biggest reduction in crime seems to come from a relaxation of gun restrictions, allowing people to carry concealed weapons for self-defence. In a study by John Lott and David Mustard, it was found that these laws have led to substantial declines in most forms of violent crime in the states that have adopted them (using the most recent data, about a 10 per cent

drop in murder, a 3 per cent drop in rape, and a 5.7 per cent drop in aggravated assault). In Jeff Miron's recent study of crime and gun control laws across countries, he found suggestive evidence that greater prohibition of guns is associated with higher homicide rates.

Perhaps most relevant to the current debate is the impact of gun control specifically on the horrible multiple-victim public shootings like Monash and Port Arthur.

The most comprehensive empirical study on this to date was conducted by John Lott and William Landes and examined all such events from 1977 to 1995 in the US, excluding gang violence and shootings during the commission of other crimes (like drug deals and robbery). They tested for the impacts of numerous gun control laws and law enforcement activities (arrest rates, execution rates etc). The only policy found to be associated with a decline in multiple-victim public shootings was allowing the concealed carrying of firearms. States that passed such laws experienced an 84 per cent drop in the number of events and a decline of deaths of 90 per cent and injuries of 82 per cent. The reasons directly derive from what happened at Monash.

The shooters in these events generally desire to kill as many people as possible and often do not plan to live through the attack. Criminal penalties will not deter them, and it would be impossible to eliminate the possibility of them obtaining a gun. The only effective deterrence appears to be the prospect of failure.

The evidence is not in the Prime Minister's favour. Where studies have been conducted, gun control of the kind he advocates has been found to cost more lives than it saves. Australians should think twice about accepting new gun control laws sold solely on anticipated benefits. These benefits may not be realised and the costs may be large indeed.

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