

U.S. Catholic Conference

Handgun violence...

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HANDGUN VIOLENCE: A THREAT TO LIFE

STATEMENT ON
HANDGUN CONTROL

COMMITTEE ON
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
AND WORLD PEACE

UNITED STATES
CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

SEPTEMBER 11, 1975

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*Firearms - Laws and
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The Problem

There are currently 40 million handguns in the United States.¹ More than 2½ million new handguns will be manufactured and sold this year. In most of our cities and rural areas, purchasing a weapon is as easy as buying a camera.

In 1973, the last year for which complete figures were available, there were 28,000 firearms deaths.² In 1975, it is estimated that nearly 30,000 will die from gunshot wounds. Added to this are over 100,000 people wounded by guns each year, the victims of 160,000 armed robberies and 100,000 assaults with guns.³

Gun accidents are now the fifth most common accidental cause of death according to the National Safety Council. In 1973, 2,700 people died in gun-related accidents.

Some have suggested that homeowners and citizens should arm themselves to protect their families from murder, assault or robbery. The sad fact is that a handgun purchased for protection is often used in a moment of rage or fear against a relative or acquaintance. A recent study in the Cleveland area indicates guns purchased for protection resulted in the deaths of six times as many family members, friends and neighbors as intruders or assailants.⁴ The 1973 *FBI Uniform Crime Report* indicates that of all murders almost 25% involved one family

member killing another and an additional 40% occur among people who are acquainted. Most homicides are not the result of criminal design but rather they are the outcome of quarrels and arguments among spouses, friends and acquaintances. In these situations, it is the ready availability of handguns that often leads to tragic and deadly results.

Handguns play a disproportionate role in gun violence. They account for 53% of all murders, yet make up only 20% of all firearms. The problem is growing. The annual sales of handguns have quadrupled in the last ten years.

A National Firearms Policy

The growing reality and extent of violent crime is of great concern to the Committee on Social Development and World Peace and to all Americans. It threatens more and more of our citizens and communities. The cost of this violence in terms of human life and suffering is enormous. We speak out of pastoral concern as persons called to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus, who "came that they may have life and have it to the full." (John 10:10). We are deeply committed to upholding the value of human life and opposing those forces which threaten it.

One of these factors is the easy availability of handguns in our society. Because it is so easily concealed, the handgun is often the weapon of crime. Because it is so readily available, it is often the weapon of passion and suicide.

This is clearly a national problem. No state or locality is immune from the rising tide of violence. Individual state and local action can only provide a partial solution. We must have a coherent *national* firearms policy responsive to the overall public interest and respectful of the rights and privileges of all Americans. The unlimited freedom to

possess and use handguns must give way to the rights of all people to safety and protection against those who misuse these weapons.

We believe that effective action must be taken to reverse this rising tide of violence. For this reason, we call for effective and courageous action to control handguns, leading to their eventual elimination from our society. Of course, reasonable exceptions ought to be made for the police, military, security guards, and pistol clubs where guns would be kept on the premises under secure conditions.

We recognize that this may be a long process before truly comprehensive control is realized. We therefore endorse the following steps to regulate the use and sale of handguns:

- 1) A several day cooling-off period. This delay between the time of the sale and possession of the handgun by the purchaser should result in fewer crimes of passion.
- 2) A ban on "Saturday Night Specials." These weapons are cheap, poorly made pistols often used in street crime.
- 3) Registration of handguns. This measure could provide an improved system of tracing weapons by law enforcement officials. Registration will tell us how many guns there are and who owns them.
- 4) Licensing of handgun owners. Handguns should not be available to juveniles, convicted felons, the mentally ill and persons with a history of drug or alcohol abuse.
- 5) More effective controls and better enforcement of existing laws regulating the manufacture, importation and sale of handguns.

These individual steps will not completely eliminate the abuse of handguns. We believe that only prohibiting the importation, manufacture, sale, possession and use of handguns, with the exceptions we have already cited, will provide a comprehensive response to handgun violence.

Conclusion

We realize this is a controversial issue and that some people of good faith will find themselves opposed to these measures. We acknowledge that controlling possession of handguns will not eliminate gun violence, but we believe it is an indispensable element for any serious or rational approach to the problem.

We support the legitimate and proper use of rifles and shotguns for hunting and recreational purposes. We do not wish to unduly burden hunters and sportsmen. On the contrary, we wish to involve them in a joint effort to eliminate the criminal and deadly misuse of handguns.

We are, of course, concerned about the rights of the individual, as these rights are grounded in the Constitution and in the universal design of our Creator. We are convinced that our position is entirely in accord with the rights guaranteed by our Constitution, and particularly with the Second Amendment to the Constitution as these rights have been clarified by the United States Supreme Court. We affirm the traditional principle that individual rights to private property are limited by the universal demands of social order and human safety as well as the common good.

¹ Estimate of the Division of Alcohol, Firearms and Tobacco, U. S. Department of the Treasury. Handgun refers to a firearm held and fired by the hand, usually a pistol or revolver. It does not include rifles, shotguns, long guns or other shoulder arms.

² There were 13,070 murders involving firearms according to *Crime In The United States 1973*, the FBI Uniform Crime Report (September, 1974). In addition, there were 2,700 deaths involving firearms accidents according to *Accident Facts*, National Safety Council. And, approximately 13,317 people committed suicides with firearms according to the National Center for Health Statistics.

³ *Crime In The United States 1973*, FBI Uniform Crime Report. September, 1974.

⁴ A 1968-1972 study of the Medical School of Case Western University. Of the 131 persons killed, 114 were family members or acquaintances killed because a gun was present in the home and 17 were robbers or other persons engaged in criminal activity.

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