Surge in Gun Sales? The Press Misfires

By Tom W. Smith

In the months following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the newspapers were filled with stories about "soaring" gun sales as Americans rushed to arm themselves. *The New York Times* on December 16, 2001, wrote of a "steep rise" in gun purchases, and the *Boston Globe* on January 3, 2002, described sales as "rocketing" and asserted that "gun ownership in the United States is near its all-time high."

The *Patriot-News* of Harrisburg on December 21 quoted a gun store owner who said, "I've never before had an increase in gun sales like this," and the *Las Vegas Review* on December 30 reported a dealer saying that sales "soared the day after the attacks and haven't ebbed since... [I] cannot even accommodate most of my customers."

When the stories turned to "hard numbers," the conclusion was the same. In 31 newspaper reports of gun sales, numbers of permits being issued, or people taking firearm training courses, the average increase was 106%, more than a doubling of previous rates.

But these stories have greatly exaggerated what happened. Gun sales apparently did increase in response to 9/11, but the gains were in the 4.5 to 12% range.

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The best figures on the demand for guns come from the background checks that are required before guns can be purchased from licensed firearms dealers. The National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) of the Federal Bureau of Investigation has monitored gun checks since December 1998. Post-9/11 gains in the public demand for guns can be calculated in several ways from these figures:

Were more gun checks carried out in September-December 2001 than would have been expected based on sales in January-August 2001? Yes. Estimates of what could be expected for Fall 2001, based on 1999 and 2000 trends, show gun checks were 6.6% higher than predicted.

Were gun checks in September-December 2001 higher than for the same months in 1999 and 2000? Yes and no. Checks in 2001 were 1.8% lower than in 1999, 11.7% higher than in 2000, and 4.5% higher than the average of 1999 and 2000.

The clearest sign of a post-9/11 impact was that gun checks in October 2001 were up 21.7% over October 2000 (and 8.9% over October 1999). However, this gain was short-lived and largely represented in a speed-up in gun applications. In 1999 and 2000, gun checks rose from a midsummer low to a December peak. In 2001 they followed a similar path, except that October exceeded November. This suggests that much of the October gain resulted from people who would have applied to buy guns in November just acting a few weeks earlier. In any event, the October increase, though often cited in stories, was not sustained.

Another common theme of post-9/11 gun stories was that women accounted for much of the increase. The *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* on September 22 said that gun sales were up "especially among women," the *Los Angeles Times* of October 14 found that "the majority of first-timers seeking guns and permits are women," and an op-ed piece in *The New York Times* on March 8, 2002, headlined "Chicks with Guns," described a rise in gun use among female students at Mount Holyoke as one of the "far-reaching consequences of 9/11."

But claims of dramatic gains in the use and ownership of firearms by women have been around since at least 1986, and careful analysis of trends has repeatedly shown these stories to be baseless.*

Gun sales did rise modestly as a result of the 9/11 attacks, by about 4 to 12%. But the gains were short-term, and many resulted merely from people buying weapons a little sooner than they would have otherwise. In addition, there is no reliable evidence that women accounted for most of this gain, or that women were "catching-up" with men in an arms race. This notion has not been true over the past two decades, and there is no reason to believe that the latest claims are correct.

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*Studies include "Armed and Dangerous Statistics," an article by Tom W. Smith that appeared in the May/June 1990 issue of *Public Perspective*; "Changes in Firearm Ownership Among Women, 1980-1994," by Tom W. Smith and Robert J. Smith, published in the Fall 1995 *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*; and "The 2001 National Gun Policy Survey of the National Opinion Research Center," also by Tom W. Smith.