

Spree Killers – the role of the weapon in crime

by
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It's always fascinating to see how others see us: Rachel Blevins' article published on thefreethoughtproject.com on the 18th February and attached to the SRA's Facebook page by Edward Beck a few days later is a case in point.

The thrust of the article is that the spree killer suspect in a recent Florida school shooting had purchased the AR15 rifle legally and that while his rampage has sparked calls for more gun control, in countries like the UK where such controls already exist, he could have used his legal knife collection for the rampage instead. (We haven't checked his knife collection against UK law: some types legal in Florida may be prohibited here.)

The American gun 'debate' is a polarized one in which any literary entrant has to present as 'pro' or 'anti' and then is only going to be read by the side he or she is writing in support of. Writers who can't be easily categorised are background-checked and investigated to the enth degree before being dismissed by whichever side disagrees with them. The polarised sides of the debate have to know whether a writer aids their cause or not *before* bothering to read them. So whether Rachel Blevins is pro, anti or just inquisitive as to the facts may matter to some readers, who will immediately ignore her perspective if she in any way intrudes on their preconceived position. It doesn't matter to us, because the point she is reaching toward isn't a gun debate point: it's an old sociological one.

As Shooters' Rights Association secretary, nobody is likely to assume I'm anti-gun, which means some people who don't own guns will have stopped reading by now. That said, I used to write on Handgunner Magazine; that had a huge readership among which gun owners were a minority. My writing approach was double-layered. The practical side was always written from experience, but had to be supported by the wider academic background to any subject, so if I were writing about the AR15 rifle in this piece, the history of its development, the teething troubles experienced in Vietnam and the way in which design (and manufacturing material) changes brought about the product we know today is as important to a rounded article as what it's like to use, its fitness for purpose, its quality and panache. Will it be around in a hundred years time like our centenarian Short Lee Enfield rifles are now and still will be?

Personally, I take a libertarian view of what this world has to offer us. As the 'BREXIT' debate raged around Westminster and the BBC, I couldn't help pointing out that the free movement of people and goods between Britain and Europe was all sorted out in the Bronze Age. What our forebears lacked was governments and once they'd caught up with that concept, their problems started and have been passed down to us. The problem with governments is they believe their reason for being is to control the rest of us.

Control is a question of give and take: they take taxes off us and then spend that money on things they give us. The Romans used tax money on infrastructure to help the rich grow richer, while they gave the poor free clean water (all those aqueducts), free bread and free entry to stadia to watch chariots races, gladiators fighting or lions eating: so enough about what you can have as a prole in Roman society.

Rachel Blevins summarizes Britain (in the context of her article) as 37,443 knife offences (September 2016-17), of which 12,980 took place in London and these numbers are 21% higher than the year before. Four people were stabbed to death in London on 31st December 2017, making 80 for the year. She comments on our strict gun laws and suggests that the Florida spree killer suspect could not have owned his AR15 in the UK before pointing out that despite our laws (actually, because of them) 6,694 gun crimes were recorded in the year September 2016-17.

The numbers are a distraction from her point, but as an aside consider a few more numbers. The late Colin Greenwood reckoned on an average 600 murders a year in the UK, of which 50 would be by firearms. Those ballpark numbers have changed so little in my lifetime, despite a 50% increase in population since WW2, that percentage differences between years are worthlessly erratic. The actual numbers though, are low when set against the number of lethal weapon 'crimes', so immediately one can see that there is a lot more to 'gun' and 'knife' crime than murders. The most recent homicide figure available (709) includes 96 people unlawfully killed in 1989 at Hillsborough Stadium in a crowd control failure, so other years will have other anomalies.

Murder is a crime at common law, so it's always been there. Most gun and knife crimes are not murders, so they'll be violations of statute law. Firearms laws in the UK start in 1870 with a licensing act, followed by firearm certificates in 1920; to which additional categories of prohibited weapons (1937) and shotguns (1968) were added. Since then, various knee-jerk measures have caused unintended consequences that additional knee-jerk measures have been patched onto but fail to address and that process continues to this day.

Policing adopted a policy of trying to prevent 'the public' having access to firearms in 1972, which in their terms meant reducing the numbers registered. A poor measure, since barely 10% of the UK's gun stock is registered, but that's another article. That policy has been aided by the government banning some types and the courts exempted others from certificate controls and the fray continues, such that it's a reasonable bet that a lot of 'gun crime' in the UK is actually people in the registration system failing to get the paperwork right: which means its law-abiding taxpayers in court, such as James Edmiston – respected firearms dealer – whose horrific gun crime was failing to tell the police about shotguns he transferred from his business to his personal certificate. That would account for six of the gun crimes in the year it was recorded as taking place.

Knife crime escalates after the Prevention of Crime Act 1953, which created a new category at law of 'offensive weapons'. Additions have been made to this in 1988

and since, so some knife types are banned (butterfly knives, switchblades etc.) and others are 'offensive weapons' when carried in a public place. As with firearms crime, most culprits in the aftermath of the 1988 legislation were law-abiding taxpayers carrying a knife because they always had. One in nine adults had been in the Scout movement (which abolished wearing knives on the uniform in 1966) and most men over fifty had seen military service (conscripted in 1958) and had a jack knife issued as part of kit. So the crime figures came from stop-and-search of fishermen, electricians and lorry drivers. British knife and crime statistics include all this policing of soft targets; people who didn't know they were doing anything wrong and certainly hadn't violated any of the Ten Commandments.

But back to Rachel Blevins: her point is that if one way of murdering schoolchildren in bulk is denied to the wannabe spree killer, he'll adopt another method. Emile Durkheim (French sociologist 1858-1917) established that point in the context of suicides (published in 1897) and his points are transferable to other violence. Would the Syrians have resorted to dropping improvised barrel bombs on schools and hospitals if poison gas was readily available to them? Can North Korea resist the urge to use nuclear weapons now that they have a delivery system for them?

British spree killer David Copeland used nail bombs powered by gunpowder from readily available fireworks for his 2002 killings. The AR15 type rifle available to the Florida spree killer is a variant that was banned in the UK in 1989. It seems to be a given point that spree killers use what's available and thus what's legal in their jurisdiction at the time, but will have committed some other existing offence prior to the homicides they committed. It's also a consistently apparent fact that spree killers commit their atrocities where it's safe (for them) to do so – of which more below. David Copeland's crime prior to murder was dismantling fireworks, which is illegal in the UK. Both the Hungerford murderer in 1987 and the Dunblane school killer in 1996 violated firearms legislation by taking their guns together with ammunition into a public place without lawful authority or a reasonable excuse prior to killing anybody: so they deliberately violated one law on their way to violating another.

What prevents crime in society generally is twofold: one element is that there is sufficient for your needs: your parents don't deprive you of anything essential and the other is us learning the parameters of social control from our peers and teachers by which we each develop a moral compass. Jesus Christ had that figured when he summarized the law and commandments as love your god with all your heart and love your neighbour as yourself: which sounds fair as a moral compass until one remembers that his criminality attracted the death penalty. Must've been some statute law he crossed. And that happens a lot in the UK, hence our knife and gun crime rates.

The Home Office studied the role of firearms in robberies in the 1990s. Their study was limited in scope, but what came out of it was how many armed robbers were (a) predisposed to serious crime beforehand and (b) decided upon the armed robbery for which they were in prison when interviewed *as a result of coming across*

the weapon they used. A couple had real guns and ammunition. The rest had something else (the old sawn-off cucumber in a paper bag trick), a 'realistic imitation firearm' or just said they had something. What they all had in common (apart from the WW2 veteran who was trying to make a point) was that the 'remote control' of a firearm in the furtherance of gaining cash *prevented* violence both by and toward victims.

Following the four knife murders in London on 31st December, the Metropolitan police wanted help with tackling the menace – as they saw it – of people carrying knives in public. These are mostly carried, according to them, for defence. The obvious problem with carrying a lethal contact weapon for *defence* is what can you do with it *to defend yourself?* That predicament for Londoners has a long backstory, but in summary, knives are easy and legal to access, while all the obvious non-lethal options for encouraging others to mind their own business have been banned in the UK: more accurately, they are 'police only'. Stun guns, Taser, kobutans and truncheons are all prohibited to the public in public: so following the time-honoured 'solution' to that problem, as articulated by Emile Durkheim in 1897, 'the public' move on to what is available.

This is a separate debate point from the wider one of why one might need a weapon for self-defence while out in public at all. Not an easy one to answer, but historically, Brits *who could afford it have always done so.* Before the handgun ban in 1997, Birmingham auction house Weller and Dufty was the gun trade's second-hand engine room at which civilian pocket pistols and revolvers were a common sight. Pocket bulldogs in .45", continental revolver in .320", pinfire and rimfire vied with post-nitro .25ACP pocket pistols for small bids. Pre-WW1, carrying firearms was as common in the UK as it is in westerns, except traditionally Brits carried concealed. Wearing a sword fell out of convenience as coach travel was made easier by George III's road building programme. Gentlemen switched to overcoat pocket pistols, hence the large patch pockets on topcoats.

In 1909, some Eastern European types tried robbing a factory payroll in Tottenham and got chased to Chingford by police who borrowed guns from passers by – some of whom joined in the hue and cry. At the time, police optionally carried concealed revolvers on night duty, so they were armed as Jack the Ripper prowled Whitechapel in 1888, while his victims were not: too poor for that, they could only rely on the forces of law and order to defend them.

In principle, being armed for defence is a critical mass issue, the same as inoculations: for the latter to work, a large enough proportion of the population has had to have the jab so the disease can't readily jump from one host to another. In the case of self-defence, the more people *prepared*, the less likely the need to use it. An armed society is a polite society and courtesy of Massad F Ayoob, I worked with police in New Hampshire, where half the adult population had concealed carry permits. One accidental suicide, one attempted suicide and an M1911 in an out-of-town drug dealer's car was it. The teenage gang fight involved non-lethal weapons. Provocation by skinheads led a yuppie to produce a stun gun, whereupon someone

lumped him with a 13-ounce drinks can and his mate added pepper spray to the mix. Everyone went home – eventually.

Yet in the UK, our government's policy has been aimed precisely at criminalising preparedness: disparaged as “on the off-chance of being attacked”, it's what everybody did quite naturally from 55BC at least until a government official in the 1950s felt the need to 'do something' and the result is that avoiding becoming a victim is now as judicially dangerous as being the attacker. British policing has been trying, for some decades now, to take responsibility for public safety upon themselves: i.e. by not recognising the public common law right to defence, while at the same time not accepting responsibility for their failures to provide that protection.

So the solution to being a potential victim is preparedness, which is what Donald Trump was thinking of when he spoke of arming teachers; he also made the point immediately that they would be properly trained – a sentiment we endorse in the certain knowledge that an example of an untrained person with a gun is Oscar Pistorius. It is common ground that spree killers attack soft targets – where they won't get hurt by return fire. We are not aware of a single example of a spree killer breaking this rule, which suggests that Donald Trump's lateral thinking is pointing the right way.

Spree killers attack in gun free zones: we thought about this when a British soldier – Lee Rigby – was run down and then hacked to death by a couple of halfwits in 2013. The aerial shot of the crime scene showed a lorry had stopped behind the crime car: now if the lorry driver had been armed, the outcome might have been different and a lesson handed to wannabe terrorists not to mess with Britain: but instead we have a deer stalker in prison because the blocks on four of his licensed revolver chambers were deemed ineffective and a movie armourer is in prison because one of his blank firing weapons supposedly passed through the prohibited weapons classification between being an inert replica and becoming a blank firer. The police are making it very clear to the public that it's too dangerous to get involved with firearms; for however hard you try to be legal, they'll find a way of getting you into court, as with James Edmiston, and that's the message behind the UK's gun crime figures.