

Guns don't kill people, Phila. does

By John Lott and Maxim Lott

When Mayor Street spent 15 hours waiting in line for an iPhone recently, the city was not impressed by his love of new technology. Rather, Street had to answer to a passerby asking, "How can you sit here with 200 murders in the city already?"

Local politicians say they know the source of the problem: the lack of gun control. Gov. Rendell recently complained the state legislature "has been in the control of the NRA." Street blames the increasing murder rate on "the dangerous proliferation of guns on our city streets." Last Tuesday, two City Council members announced the novel legal tactic of suing the state government to let Philadelphia pass its own gun laws.

The desire "to do something" is understandable, but new gun laws aren't the answer.

In the five years from 2001 to 2006, Philadelphia's murder rate soared more than 36 percent while nationally, the murder rate increased only 2 percent. Indeed, only two other cities in the top 40 experienced a sharper rise in murder rates, according to FBI crime statistics.

But if the cause of more murders in Philadelphia is the lack of yet more gun control, why isn't murder increasing in the rest of Pennsylvania? Pittsburgh saw just a 7 percent increase.

Why haven't murder rates gone up in the rest of the country? Should Phoenix, the city closest in size to Philadelphia, claim that its murder rate remained virtually unchanged for the last five years because of the supposed lack of new gun control? How should Dallas explain its 24 percent drop in murder?

It is not that guns are more likely to be used in Philadelphia murders, either. The proportion of murders involving guns is similar to that of other cities.

It would appear that Philadelphia's problems have something to do with Philadelphia, not the lack of more gun control coming out of Washington or Harrisburg.

Could it be that Philadelphia simply isn't doing such a great job at law enforcement? Since 2001, Philadelphia's arrest rate for murder has fallen by 20 percent, according to the Pennsylvania Uniform Crime Reporting System. Nationally, and among cities with more than 250,000 people, arrest rates have remained virtually unchanged. It isn't so surprising that Philly's murder rate has gone up more than in other cities. After all, criminals are getting away with murder in Philadelphia.

Sure, Philadelphia has slightly fewer police than it had in 2001, but that drop is no different from the small drop that has occurred nationally. What is different is that Philadelphia has experienced a significant drop in arrests per officer relative to the rest of the country.

But it is not just a problem of police. The city is seeing lower conviction rates, and it is not keeping criminals in jail for very long. One could make up for this difference by hiring more police - research has shown the number of police officers to be the main factor in reducing crime. But Philadelphia's problem is how it uses the police it has.

Pointing to more gun-control laws as the solution is simply a way for politicians to pass the blame. Besides, such proposals offer little hope for actually reducing the murder rate. They've all been tried before, from one-gun-a-month limits and reporting stolen guns to the ultimate catchall - letting Philadelphia pass its own gun laws again.

Take the law that seems to be Rendell's favorite: the one-gun-a-month purchase rule. It would reduce the number of gun shows in the state by about 25 percent and shut some stores. But since just a fraction of one percent of criminals with guns get their weapons at gun shows, there would be few benefits from those restrictions. Collectors or those who might legitimately want to get more than one gun at a time are the ones who are inconvenienced. In fact, no published academic study by criminologists or economists shows that such limits reduce violent crime.

The sooner local politicians stop playing politics in the state Capitol and realize that the problem lies in the city's low rate of solving crimes, the sooner the problem will be under control. After all, Philadelphia's current gun laws are similar to those of many others around the country.

What is not the same? In Philadelphia, criminals are less likely to answer for their crimes.

John Lott (johnrlott@aol.com) is a senior research scientist at the University of Maryland and the author of Freedomnomics. Maxim Lott is an intern at ABC News.

Philadelphia Inquirer, June 17, 2007, Commentary Section