

Jonathan Schechter – “Corpus Callosum” Column
Jackson Hole News&Guide – March 6, 2013

In its abbreviated form, Schechter’s maxim holds that economies change faster than perceptions, perceptions change faster than politics, and politics change faster than laws. The maxim certainly holds true for the Wyoming state legislature, where change usually occurs quite slowly.

Not always, though, as evinced by two issues hallmarking this year’s legislative session.

The first example of the legislature moving at warp speed is its emasculation of the State Superintendent of Public Instruction. In 2010, then-candidate Cindy Hill handily won her Republican primary, receiving 44 percent of the votes cast (in contrast, then-candidate Mead won just 28 percent). Three months later, Ms. Hill won the general election with 59 percent (versus 65 percent for candidate Mead). In just two years, though, she so antagonized the legislature’s grandees that, in just a few weeks, they ram-rodged through legislation which stripped her office of its administrative authority.

In response, Ms. Hill is suing the legislature for acting unconstitutionally, and there are some, including local Representative Keith Gingery, who feel she is on solid ground. Regardless of the legalities, though, the impressive thing about L’affaire Hill is how it demonstrated that, when riled, the legislature can move both quickly and decisively.

The second issue which riled the legislature is gun rights. In response to the December 14, 2012 shootings in Newtown, CT, federal politicians began to consider limiting certain types of guns, ammunition, and sales. Before any proposals were even introduced in Washington, though, Wyoming’s legislature was debating a variety of pro-firearm bills, ranging from naming a state gun to making it illegal for Wyoming law officials to enforce any federal law restricting gun ownership.

While the two legislative warp-speed occurrences have different dynamics – Ms. Hill’s mistake was to anger the legislature’s old bulls, while the pro-gun legislation was more the doing of rank-and-file legislators – what’s notable is not just how quickly the legislature can act when motivated, but how such speedy actions run roughshod over many of the legislature’s usual deliberative processes (e.g. legislative study groups and statewide hearings).

All this fascinates me. What lifts it to the level of column fodder, though, is the juxtaposition of the legislature’s actions and what I think is President Obama’s most interesting post-Sandy Hook action, namely lifting the ban forbidding federal government agencies from researching gun violence. We are a nation whose governance, political, and legal systems are grounded on the concept of vigorous debate, and the foundation of our economic and technological success is the Scientific Method’s relentless quest for facts, evidence, and truth. Yet thanks to the power of the gun lobby, for well over a decade the federal government has barred itself from conducting even the most basic research into the causes of gun violence, not to mention steps which might reduce it. For me, this “embracing ignorance” ban is compelling evidence that gun-related issues have long-since passed out of the realm of public policy and into the world of theology.

Thinking about all this led me to a pretty basic question: What is the relationship between gun ownership and gun-related homicides? To refine that question further, I decided to research how the U.S. compares to other countries on both scores. Here’s what I found.

Data on rates of both civilian gun ownership and gun-related homicide are available for 111 of the world’s 196 countries (57 percent). Not perfect, but not bad.

Graph 1 is a logarithmic-scale scatter plot comparing gun-ownership rates to gun-related homicide

rates (both rates are per 100,000 people). As is immediately obvious, Americans own far-and-away more guns than do the residents of any other country. In 2007, Americans owned 88,800 guns per every 100,000 residents, or nearly 9 guns for every 10 residents. In distant second place was Switzerland, with 45,700 guns per 100,000 residents, or roughly one-half the US rate.

Thankfully, we're not the world's leader in gun-related homicide rates. That honor belongs to Venezuela, which has an annual gun-related homicide rate over 10 times higher than America's rate of 3.2 gun-related homicides per 100,000 residents.

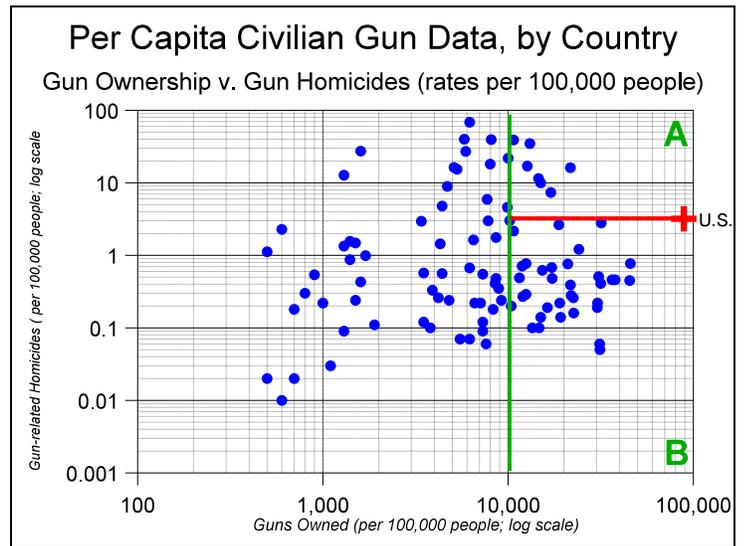
To make further analysis easier, I decided to focus on "gun culture" countries; i.e. those countries with more than 10,000 guns per 100,000 residents. I further divided those countries into ones with at least 3.2 gun-related homicides per 100,000 residents (i.e. those countries with the same or higher gun-related homicide rate than the U.S. – quadrant "A") and those with a lower gun-related homicide rate (quadrant "B").

Graph 2 gives a detailed view of quadrant "A." None of these countries has as high a gun ownership rate as the U.S., but all eight have higher gun-related homicide rates: Belize, Guatemala, Guyana, Mexico, Panama, Paraguay, South Africa, and Venezuela.

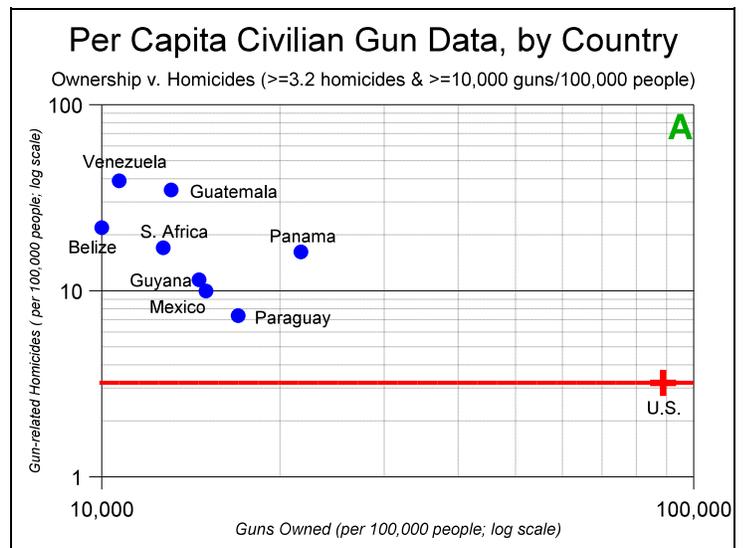
Two quick reactions. One is that a larger number of guns doesn't necessarily correlate with higher murder rates. The other is that none of the countries with higher gun-related homicide rates than America has ever been held up as a model for the U.S. to emulate.

Graphs 3 and 4 look at quadrant "B," i.e. those countries with at least 10,000 guns per 100,000 residents, but with a lower gun-related homicide rates than America's.

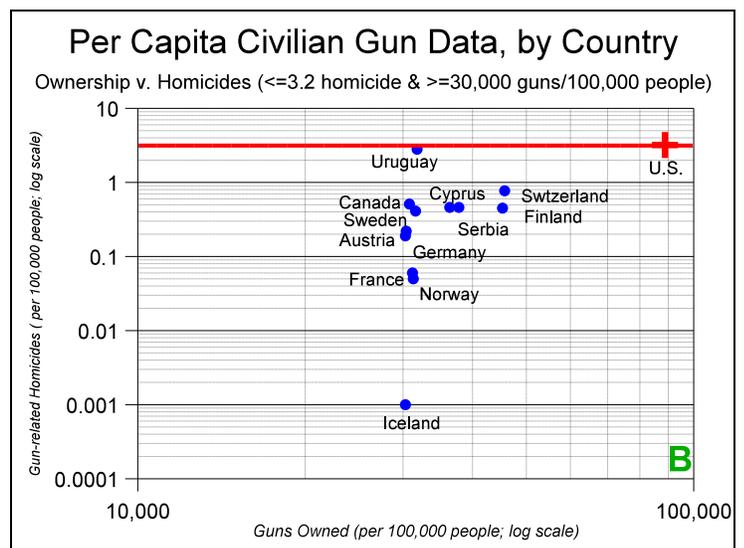
Graph 3 simplifies things by focusing on the eleven countries with at least 30,000 guns per 100,000 residents, and lower-than-the-U.S. gun-related homicide rates: Austria, Canada, Cyprus, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and Uruguay.



Graph 1



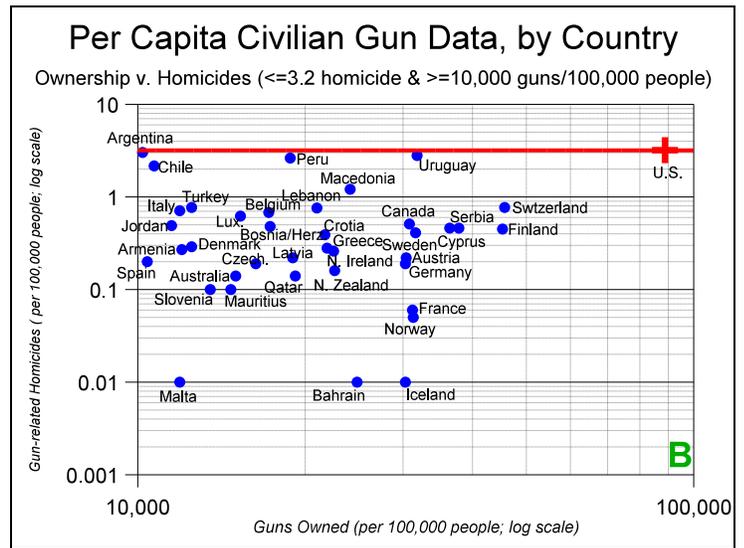
Graph 2



Graph 3

The quick reactions here are the mirror-image of those from Graph 2. One is that a country can have high gun ownership rates and a low homicide rate. The other is that, by and large, these countries are company the U.S. wants to keep.

Graph 4 further drives home these points. It shows countries where residents own at least 10,000 guns per 100,000 residents. On this graph, the only countries besides the US which have more than one gun-related homicide per 100,000 residents are Argentina, Chile, Macedonia, Peru, and Uruguay; again, not countries generally held up as peers of the U.S. In contrast, the countries which have fewer than one gun-related homicide per 100,000 residents – in other words, murder rates at least two-thirds lower than America’s – include such long-time U.S. allies such as Australia, Belgium, Denmark, Italy, New Zealand, Spain, and Turkey



Graph 4

Comparing the countries on graphs 2 and 4, the most fundamental conclusion is that the countries in graph 2 are those known for a Wild West culture, with some even verging on lawlessness. In contrast, the graph 4 countries tend to be ones which share American values and culture.

Except, of course, none of them share America’s much higher rates of gun ownership and gun-related homicides.

Combined, the population of the 38 non-U.S. “gun culture” countries is 550 million, or roughly 80 percent greater than America’s. Do the math, and these same 38 countries have gun-ownership rates of 21,000 per 100,000 residents, or roughly one-quarter that of America’s. Coincidentally, these countries’ combined gun-related homicide rate is just one-quarter of America’s.

In another interesting coincidence, Americans own roughly as many vehicles as we do guns, and about three times as many people suffer vehicle-related deaths as are murdered with guns each year. Interestingly, the vehicular death rate has been dropping steadily for the last 40 years, the result of a concerted effort to educate and train drivers, improve vehicles and roads, and generally address what is viewed as a significant public safety issue.

Even more interesting is that during this same 40 year period, traffic fatality rates dropped 60 percent while the number of vehicles on the road rose about 60 percent. This suggests that, with some concerted study and effort, significant problems closely intertwined with America’s identity can be addressed without threatening that identity.

Then throw in the fact that three dozen other “gun culture” countries have much lower gun homicide rates than the U.S., and it suggests that we can address gun-related homicides without affecting our relationship with guns. To do so, though, we need to be open to actually learning about gun violence, a quality sorely missing from the gun control “debate” of the last few decades. Sadly, it remains an open question whether we as a nation are ready to bring thought and reason to as impassioned and ideologically-charged an issue as firearms.