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Republican

By John Littig

Gun-related Murders

Are gun-related murders in the United States increasing or decreasing? Conventional wisdom says gun violence is on the rise, right?

A May 2013 Department of Justice (DOJ) report answers the question. The report covers the period 1993 through 2011, and its results are surprising.

The number of gun-related murders fell from 18,253 in 1993 to 11,101 in 2011—a decline of 39 percent. That's a pretty impressive drop, especially when you consider that the population increased at the same time.

The DOJ also reports that non-fatal gun-related crimes fell by 69 percent during that same period.

But the public perception of the trend in gun crimes is much different. In fact, the public perception is exactly the opposite of the DOJ's findings.

A Pew Research Center survey conducted in March 2013 found that 56 percent of Americans believe the number of gun crimes is higher than 20 years ago. Only 12 percent correctly thought it was lower. (The remainder thought it was about the same or didn't answer.) I would have answered like the 56 percent who thought gun-related crime was on the rise. But I would have been wrong, since gun violence is actually falling.

So, by a lopsided ratio of nearly five to one, Americans think gun crime is increasing rather than decreasing. All of which raises the question: Why is the public perception the opposite of the truth?

Clearly, something is causing the public's misconception. Let's consider two possibilities: media coverage and gun control advocacy.

Certainly the sheer volume of news coverage has greatly expanded in recent years, including the emergence of the 24-hour news channels. Along with this comes the news

media's saturation coverage of sensational events such as mass shootings. The combination creates the appearance that gun crime is more prevalent than it actually is.

The news media's coverage is further expanded when the victims are children or high-profile individuals. We think of the Sandy Hook tragedy as the worst-ever school massacre. But horrific as it was, the death toll was far less than a 1927 school bombing in Michigan, in which 44 were killed and 58 injured.

The emotional impact of mass murders, especially of children, and the intensity of media coverage both serve to magnify our perception of the prevalence of such crimes.

Following each sensational murder and its intense media coverage, gun control advocates in Congress and throughout the country can be counted on to call for stricter gun laws. They are, of course, opposed by Second Amendment advocates in Congress and beyond, and by organizations like Gun Owners of America and the National Rifle Association. The result is a loud and acrimonious debate which, like the intense media coverage of the underlying crime itself, also serves to magnify our perception of the amount of gun violence.

This is likely the first time most readers will have heard of the DOJ's report revealing the decline of gun-related crimes. Perhaps that's because the report fits neither the agenda of the gun control advocates nor the sensationalism on which the media thrives. The DOJ findings are inconvenient to both the media and the gun control advocates.

Gun violence is falling, but the public thinks it's growing. Clearly, something is influencing public opinion to believe the opposite of the truth. The actions of both the news media and the gun control advocates are likely reasons the public has gotten it backwards.

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