

Philip J. Cook and Kristin A. Goss. *The Gun Debate: What Everyone Needs to Know*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. xi, 280 pp. (\$74.00 cloth, \$16.95 paper).

Every now and then students, and members of the general public, call me and ask me to recommend complete and unbiased sources of information on important public policy issues. Cook and Goss produce an encyclopedic overview of the debate over guns in the United States. The book focuses on the history, politics, and public policy involving firearms. This work is not the typical public policy tome; rather, the authors organize their examination as a series of questions and answers. This format is a little challenging for the reader working through the book from cover to cover. The student seeking specific information about the gun debate will find the extensive table of contents helpful in pinpointing that information in the question and answer format.

Chapter 1 serves as the introduction to the broad contours of the American gun debate. The chapter opens with a clear definition of the subject of the book, “weapons owned by households for hunting, target shooting, and self-defense, and by police and private security as tools of their trade” (1). The bulk of the chapter outlines the different types of firearms and their uses through the course of American history. One particularly interesting question addressed by Cook and Goss is “Why Do People Choose to Own Guns—or Not?” (5). The answer summarizes recent public opinion data demonstrating that many Americans own firearms for protection or to use for hunting or target shooting. People who do not own a firearm identify expense or the danger in owning a weapon as problems.

In Chapter 2, the authors consider questions related to the value of guns for self-protection and to combat tyranny. Again, they turn to a large body of public opinion data to explain how owning a gun makes many Americans feel safer. The scope of the authors’ review of the literature emerges in this chapter. One of the more unique questions presented is “What Is It Like to carry a Concealed Gun?” (22). The authors summarize a study in which a small group of Michigan gun owners was interviewed. “One theme that emerged from these interviews was that they had decided to go armed because public systems of protection—911, the police—were ineffective or absent” (22-23).

Chapters 3 and 4 analyze the costs and causes of gun violence. Cook and Goss subject the questions of gun violence with an evenhanded, and detailed, review of the literature. Where previous research produces contradictory findings, the authors point out the contradictions. To the question “Are US Mass Shootings Increasing?”, the answer is “Maybe. It depends” (46). The authors carefully weave their way through a potential minefield by assessing the issue of mass shootings scientifically, first pointing out that mass shootings receive significant media attention and then turning to the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s crime data to mine it for trends in the number of mass shootings.

The gun industry and its productive capacity are considered in Chapter 5. Questions examined here involve the production and sale of firearms. Regulations governing gun dealers are assessed. A fascinating question is “What Is the Supply Chain for Guns Used in Crime?” The authors argue, “Almost all firearms that end up being used in crime originate with a sale by a licensed dealer” (82). That first sale by a licensed dealer is but the initial step in a long journey the firearm takes until it is used in a crime.

The authors consider American history and a long line of legal decisions to assess the ability of the United States to regulate fire arms, the subject of Chapter 6. A table summarizes the different types of gun regulations including laws governing gun ownership, types of firearms that may be possessed by Americans, the use of firearms, and the sale of firearms. Of course, the Second Amendment to the United States Constitution plays a significant role in the discussion in this chapter. The authors concisely summarize the debate over the concept of a “well regulated Militia” (91-92). Regulations enacted at the federal, state, and local levels of government are included in this chapter’s analysis. Chapter 7 presents an assessment of the effectiveness of firearms policies.

Cook and Goss examine the American gun culture in Chapter 9. The question that opens the chapter sets the theme for the investigation: “Is There a Uniquely American Gun Culture?” (155). Answering in the affirmative, the authors argue, “We know of no other country where firearms are as plentiful and as inextricably linked to individual identify and popular values as they are in the United States” (155). The chapter presents the history of gun laws tracing back to colonial America.

In Chapter 9, the reader is introduced to public opinion on guns and learns how gun regulations divide American political parties. Chapter 10 considers the gun rights movement, “several hundred local, state, and national organizations that seek to promote a positive view of firearms in public life and to prevent and remove restrictions on their ownership and use” (188). The weaker gun control movement is the subject of Chapter 11. Finally, a short chapter looking to the future of gun laws concludes the work.

Part of Oxford’s *What Everyone Needs to Know* series, this book is a balanced investigation of the contours of the gun debate. The work’s novelty is the authors’ ability to present all sides of a complex, controversial issue. The authors let other researchers speak through the detailed summaries. Skillful writing allows for a complete and concise review of this contentious issue. In addition to endnotes, the authors organize the references by chapter to allow readers ease of access to the complete works summarized in the book. Cook’s and Goss’ work will find a place in the libraries of public policy analysts as well as in classrooms.

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