



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

GUNS AND GUN LAWS

A life-saving holiday gift

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Like most people, I struggle every year to come up with creative gift ideas for all the family members and close friends on my holiday shopping list. Well, this season, the task was easy. With an eye toward the practical, I'm buying them all bullet-proof vests.

Why should I be so motivated this year when crime rates, including that of murder, are relatively low? My worry is two-fold: the growing momentum of concealed-carry legislation in many jurisdictions combined with Congressional action that would establish reciprocity among the states in the right to carry loaded firearms.

Just this year, for example, bills were introduced or are pending in no less than 23 states to permit licensed gun owners to bring their firearms onto college campuses. Although most of these initiatives failed to become law, two states -- Mississippi and Wisconsin -- did in fact join Utah in allowing concealed weapons on the campuses of all their public and private colleges.

Having just returned from giving a keynote talk at Jackson State University -- specifically about school and campus violence, I can report that those who work or study at schools in Mississippi are not thrilled about what the state legislature imposed upon their campus communities.

And witness absurdity in the extreme inside the Florida state legislature. The elected officials in Tallahassee enacted a new law that allows citizens to carry concealed weapons in state government buildings including the legislature (except for the legislative chambers). Now these same lawmakers, realizing that they might get a visit from an armed and angry constituent, are asking that their offices be equipped with [panic buttons](#).

Of course, that's the culture and climate in places like Florida and Mississippi. Why should I worry here in Massachusetts with our relatively strict rules for obtaining concealed carry permits? Well, just last month, by a vote of 272-154, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a [measure](#) that would grant reciprocity rights to licensed gun owners. Should H.R 822 ever become law, residents of states with permissive licensing regulations would be able to carry their concealed weapons in Massachusetts, or anywhere else they might wish (except as specifically prohibited by law).

Supporters of the federal bill point to driving licensure as a comparison. A motor vehicle license granted by any state is valid nationwide. But, of course, state regulations regarding age and vision requirements for obtaining a driver's license are fairly uniform across the country. Imagine if some state were to grant driver's licenses to 10-year-olds or were not to require eye tests? Would we want sight-impaired pre-teens sitting behind the wheel on the Mass Pike?

Unlike that for driving, gun permitting is hardly uniform around the country. We Massachusettsians should not have to be imperiled on account of other states whose gun licensing practices are relatively lax.

It is abundantly clear and disappointing that the NRA has gained renewed strength in impacting the political agenda. The controversial organization makes it seem almost noble by adopting Celebration of American Values as its mantra.

Last April, while many Americans were watching the Royal wedding, I tuned into the live streaming of the NRA national convention held Pittsburgh. Speaker after speaker talked about the need to protect family and family values by expanding concealed carry rights. However, in light of the thousands of Americans who are killed every year by their spouses, parents, siblings or other relatives with guns that were ostensibly purchased for the purpose of protecting the family, I am unconvinced.

As far as I'm concerned, I'll protect the friends and family that I value, wherever they may travel, with a quality bullet-proof vest. Does anyone know where there might be a holiday sale?