

D.C.'s 'Well-Armed' Well-to-Do Residents Are 99% Unarmed

Jacob Sullum | February 17, 2011

Last week *The Washington Post* ran a [story](#) about newly legal gun ownership in the District of Columbia that highlighted a class angle: So far residents of richer, safer neighborhoods have been more likely to register handguns than residents of poorer, rougher neighborhoods.

"Since D.C.'s Handgun Ban Ended," the headline said, "Well-Heeled Residents Have Become Well Armed." Reporter Paul Duggan began the piece this way: "In the 2½ years since the U.S. Supreme Court ended the District's handgun ban, hundreds of residents in Washington's safest, most well-to-do neighborhoods have armed themselves, registering far more guns than people in poorer, crime-plagued areas of the city." Cato Institute Chairman Robert Levy—a driving force behind *D.C. v. Heller*, the case in which the Court overturned the D.C. gun ban—questions the *Post's* emphasis:

The important conclusion...is not the difference between two inconsequential registration numbers [151 among the 15,000 wealthy households of the 20016 ZIP code vs. 240 among the 52,000 households east of the Anacostia River], but the fact that the two numbers are so close to zero. In Zip code 20016, nearly 99 percent of the households did *not* register firearms. East of the Anacostia, more than 99 percent did not register. Rather than ask why there were so few registrants, Mr. Duggan conjured up class warfare with his rich-poor comparison.

Here is the relevant point: The District still has no gun retailers, and a de facto ban on firearms endures. When a *Post* reporter tested the registration process, he found that it cost \$834—dwarfing the cost of most weapons. Moreover, registration required 16 hours, four trips to the police department, two background checks, fingerprints, photos, a vision test, a five-hour class and a 20-question examination. No wonder only 1,400 firearms have been registered since June 2008 in a city of 600,000 people.

The city is violating the spirit, if not the letter, of the *Heller* decision. More litigation is sure to follow.

Near the end of his story, Duggan himself notes one of the reasons so few Washingtonians are exercising their right to keep arms:

Federal law requires handgun buyers to purchase their firearms in the states where they live, which is a problem for many D.C. residents who want pistols, because there are no gun stores in Washington. Some...already owned guns that they kept elsewhere. But most...need a middleman.

In the District, the middleman is Charles Sykes Jr., the city's only licensed firearms dealer. He works quietly, without advertising, in a hard-to-find office in Southeast.

Sykes charges \$125 for his services. Add that to the price of a gun and the cost of the city's registration process (which includes taking time off from work), and it's not terribly surprising that rich people are more likely than poor people to register a handgun. But as Levy says, the real scandal is that the process is costly and cumbersome enough to deter almost everyone.