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Milwaukee Journal Sentinel (WI)

Concealed-carry law unlikely to make Wisconsin safer

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Officers of the law are working to take guns off the streets. Makers of the law are working to put guns on the streets.

Two opposite theories for keeping the peace are clashing. One theory has it that the fewer the guns, the safer the streets. The other theory has it that the more the guns, the safer the streets.

Law enforcement officers here are proceeding on the basis of the former theory. They're confiscating weapons hidden on people and inside vehicles in high-crime neighborhoods. Milwaukee County Sheriff David Clarke has even formed a special unit to stop motorists who are breaking traffic laws and then to get their OK to search their cars for firearms.

Meanwhile, Madison politicians are proceeding on the basis of the latter theory. A bill to permit ordinary residents to carry concealed weapons is sailing through the Legislature.

The thinking of the pols pushing this measure meshes with the thinking of some inner city residents who pack heat. They do so to avert trouble. But the frequent "bang, bang" sounds, the flashing red lights, the yellow tape testify that trouble shadows guns in the city's core neighborhoods.

Both sides of the concealed-carry issue ought to concede these two facts:

-- Guns in the hands of private citizens with clean records have done some good. They have stopped murders, rapes and robberies.

-- Guns in the hands of private citizens with clean records have done some harm. They have aided murders, rapes and robberies or prompted accidental shootings or just worsened the violence.

Here's the true question: Do guns in the hands of private citizens with clean records do more good than harm?

Notably, the officials who deal with the nitty-gritty of crime -- that is, the state's sheriffs and police chiefs -- overwhelmingly believe a concealed-carry law would hurt much more than it would help. Listen to Ozaukee County Sheriff Maury Straub, who told this paper: "As sheriff, I know of very few people who have had to protect their lives or the lives of others by deadly force."

In short, the use of private guns to stop crimes is rare; the misuse of guns, on the other hand, is an everyday occurrence somewhere in the state even by people who lawfully possess them.

Avid gun fans subscribe to a world view in which just the opposite is true: Gun-toting, law-abiding citizens are frequently John Waynes to the rescue, busting up crimes and rarely falling prey to the dark side of human nature. But this outlook is sheer fantasy.

An academician, John Lott, has fed this fantasy with a 1998 book titled "More Guns, Less Crime," which purported to show that the crime rate goes down when the number of concealed weapons goes up. This book has flunked peer review, however. Independent scholars from many disciplines have debunked it. And questions have emerged of late about whether Lott made up a key survey on which his argument rests.

Lott's discredited thesis is that, out of fear you might be packing heat, bad guys are less likely to pick on you if your state features a concealed-

carry law.

That outcome is, indeed, one possibility. Another possibility is that outlaws will be quicker to shoot you to stop you from nulling a gun