



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on February 2, 2013

Private Enterprise Interrupts Seattle's Gun Buyback Program

When the Seattle, Washington, gun buyback program was announced on January 8, King County Executive [Dow Constantine](#) claimed that removing guns from the streets would "certainly prevent ... senseless tragedies." He didn't say how many tragedies might be prevented, but he certainly couldn't have predicted that the program would turn into [a private gun show](#).



When the buyback started on Saturday morning, January 26, thousands of people showed up carrying weapons of every variety, which they planned to exchange for gift cards. But private gun buyers up also showed up, and they offered cash instead of gift cards and even [provided donuts](#) and other refreshments to attract sellers and displayed signs with messages such as "Fast cash for your gun" and "Want more than a \$100 gift card?"

It was private enterprise in action. And it annoyed Police Chief John Diaz, who [told the Seattle Fox affiliate](#) that "I would prefer that they would not sell them, but once again this is a decision each individual has the right to make." Many did decide to turn in their guns for destruction. The Seattle Police Department gave out more than 1,000 give cards of \$100 or \$200 (depending on the gun) before running out. Private donations totaling nearly \$120,000 were raised to fund the buyback program.

[Gun buyback programs](#) have been going on for years, each with the stated or implied purpose of removing firearms from the streets in order to (in theory) reduce crime. In Seattle the police announced that no names would be recorded, thus inviting anyone with an unsavory background to come forth and turn in his gun with impunity.

In fact, the impact, if any, on street crime as a result of such programs has been immeasurably small. The National Research Council [published a study](#) in 2004 that analyzed any effectiveness of these programs and concluded that "the theory underlying gun buyback programs is badly flawed and the empirical evidence demonstrates the ineffectiveness of these programs."

The theory is that the program will lead to fewer guns on the streets, and that this will result in fewer guns being available for use in crimes. In reality, the guns traded in for cash or gift cards are, according to the study, "the least likely to be used in criminal activities." Those turned in are usually old malfunctioning ones with little or no value, or else are owned by people who have inherited them and have kept them in a closet or a drawer or otherwise have little use for them. In contrast, said the study,

Those who are either using guns to carry out crimes or as protection in the course of engaging in



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other illegal activities ... have actively acquired their guns and are unlikely to want to participate in such programs.

Put simply, the guns turned in via buyback programs are not the guns on the streets. Instead, the programs serve as a way to offload useless firearms onto the police department in exchange for cash or gift cards, while the “good stuff” is kept at home. It is Gresham’s Law in action once again.

[Gresham’s Law](#) states that “when a government ... overvalues one type of money and undervalues another, the undervalued money will ... disappear ... while the overvalued money will [remain] in circulation.” When more is offered for a firearm than it’s worth, it’s an easy calculation for its owner to make: Stand in line for a while, drop off the low-value firearm, get some cash or a card, and keep the good stuff at home.

It also illustrates another law: [the law of human action](#) where an individual is always trying to improve his condition when given the opportunity to do so.

Even if it’s assumed that the buyback programs take weapons “off the streets” (more accurately, the weapons are removed from the closets and drawers of low-risk citizens), there is precious little real change in supply. According to a [study done by the Huffington Post](#) there are nearly 90 firearms for every 100 people in the United States. If that statistic holds for Seattle, [with a population of 620,000](#), then there are approximately 545,000 firearms owned privately in the city. One thousand gift cards were exchanged for firearms during its buyback program, which brings the number privately held down to 544,000.

That’s hardly impressive — even if one were to accept the anti-gun argument that fewer guns means less crime — and those in charge know it. Following a similar buyback program in Santa Fe, New Mexico, on January 12, Sheriff Raymond Rael [was asked](#) by host Scott Simon about how effective it was expected to be in reducing street crime:

Simon: Do you expect any real criminals to turn in their guns?

Rael: Well, in reality, probably not. Anyone who is serious about stealing a weapon, and using it in a criminal act, isn’t likely to turn it in....

Simon: In the end ... what does a gun buyback program achieve?

Rael: There are millions of guns in the United States.... Do I believe that we’re going to make an impact in reducing the overall numbers? Not immediately ... [but] there’s always the hope - and the possibility.

The Seattle gun buyback program did serve to prove several points: People will tend to take advantage of a situation when they are allowed the freedom to do so, whether offering low-value firearms in exchange for high-value gift cards, or offering to buy firearms from people tired of waiting in line or willing to go for the best deal. It also proved Gresham’s Law as it applies to firearms: The owners kept the “good stuff” at home. It also served to provide politicians with the opportunity to make it appear that they are doing something, often appearing in photographs standing next to piles of essentially worthless weapons and claiming benefits that don’t exist.

The *Los Angeles Times* [saw through the sham](#):

For political theater, few things beat gun buyback programs such as the one held Saturday in Los Angeles. The resulting stacks of shotguns, rifles, handguns ... make great TV and give the impression that politicians and police chiefs are putting a dent in the supply of dangerous firearms.



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The great Seattle gun buyback served to teach essential truths and for that reason it was a worthwhile program.

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