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Efforts to Curb Cheap Pistols Called Failure

By WAYNE KING

Efforts to curb the growing traffic in small, cheap pistols, the so-called Saturday night specials, that have plagued police departments in urban areas for more than a decade, have failed completely, an inquiry into the multimillion dollar pistol industry indicates.

A 1968 ban on importation of such weapons, in fact, appears simply to have generated a thriving domestic industry in cheap guns.

Even as President Ford called yesterday for a Federal ban on the manufacture, sale or possession of such weapons, there were approximately 40 gun control bills already before a House subcommittee, a number of them calling for strictures on the sale of Saturday night specials.

Passage of such controls could affect the manufacture of from 20 to possibly 50 per cent of the nearly 1.9 million handguns now assembled yearly in the United States.

Americans paid \$91-million for hand guns in the fiscal year 1974, according to the House Committee on Crime, and some 414,002 (or 22 per cent) of the 1,894,872 handguns manufactured in the United States last year fell into the Saturday night special category.

Although some advocates of street hand gun controls, notably Representative Michael J. Harrington, Democrat of Massachusetts, argue that all pistols, regardless of type, price and caliber, should be banned or rigidly controlled, the President followed the expected course of emphasizing small, cheap, easily concealable weapons that Federal studies have shown are responsible for 47 per cent of the gun-related crimes committed in 16 urban areas studied since 1973.

Guarded Figures

The companies that manufacture and market Saturday night specials guard their production figures zealously, and are assisted in this by the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, the Government agency that regulates the manufacture, sale and transportation of firearms. Although the bureau obtains individual production figures from all firearms manufacturers, the agency refuses to release them, except as totals, even to some members of Congress who have requested them.

"We have to have the cooperation of these people," said one official of the bureau.

Moreover, the major manufacturers and distributors of cheap, pocketable guns have

shown a remarkable resilience in the face of increased local and Federal regulation, continuing to make and sell huge quantities of Saturday night specials despite tightened laws. The Gun Control Act of 1968, which banned imports of small, cheap handguns, caused a number of manufacturers to spring out in this country to make the guns here.

The House Subcommittee on Crime, which has been conducting hearings on the handgun problem, defined Saturday night specials as guns made of poor quality materials, selling for less than \$50, firing bullets of .32 caliber or less and having a barrel length of less than three inches. It said they would not qualify for importation into this country.

About 30 of the 320 federally licensed manufacturers of firearms in this country make guns. Another 15 are licensed but show no production. Thirty-seven handgun manufacturing companies have started in business since the passage of the 1968 act.

Impact on Sales Unclear

The subcommittee found, moreover, that of the approximately 30 handgun makers, 22 had more than half of their total production in 1974 in weapons that would not meet import standards. The import standards are considerably more strict than those generally used to define Saturday night specials, since they prohibit importation of any weapon, for example, that has a barrel less than three inches in length, regardless of price or quality.

Thus, if the definition used by the House Subcommittee on Crime is ultimately adopted in legislation banning Saturday night specials, about 22 per cent of the nation's production would be affected. If the import standards are used, the figure could approach 50 per cent. What this would mean to total sales is unclear, as it is generally thought that those who want a gun will simply turn to a better, more expensive weapon.

There are certain handguns, familiar to the police, however, that are certain to be eliminated if any effective ban is placed on Saturday night specials.

These include cheap, small caliber weapons such as the Rohm 22 caliber, the Clerke "First," the Buddie 22 caliber derringer, the Valor and similar guns.

Officials of the firearms bureau are reluctant to criticize the makers of these weapons, saying only that, as a spokesman put it, "They obey the law, which is all we ask."

Police officials in New York and elsewhere, however, say that the cheapness of these guns, their size, and their ready marketability make them prime candidates for illegal gun-running into areas with strict local gun laws.

Five manufacturers or distributors of Saturday night specials—the Buddie Arms Company of Fort Worth, Clerke Technicorp of Santa Monica and three Miami companies—Firearms Import and Export Corporation, the Valor Corporation and R. G. Industries, Inc.—refused any comment when contacted by The Times about sales figures and possible new regulations.

Special Through June 30

However, Leonard J. Goldstein, an officer of the Valor Corporation, emphasized that his company does not manufacture the pistols that bear the company name. They are, he said, made under contract with other manufacturers. Valor is currently offering special wholesale prices on two popular guns, the CDM Aluminum .22 caliber and the Clerke Chrome Snub, at \$12.50 and \$14.50 through June 30.

According to a Federal official, the Valor Corporation, which Mr. Goldstein contended did less than 15 per cent of its total business in handguns, incorporated as a Florida corporation in 1969.

Prior to the 1968 act, Sol Mogal, the chief stockholder of Valor, had been importing guns from Germany and Italy through the New York concern of Mitchell-Mogal. After the act banned importation of the small hand guns, the Valor Corporation commissioned a Bohemia, N. Y., company, Criterion Die and Mold, to manufacture Valor guns with domestically made frames, but with other parts from abroad.

According to the Federal official, when a New York law made such manufacturing difficult, the company moved to Watertown, Conn., where the manufacture of the Valor weapon continued.

Later, after a Criterion employee and several others were arrested for stealing parts from the company and illegally assembling and selling guns, the contract was withdrawn and turned over to a Florida company.