

Multiple-victim killings: the facts
Gary Mauser

If it bleeds, it leads. The media love multiple-victim shootings – particularly public shootings by berserkers. Immediately afterwards, demagogues then use shootings to lobby for more gun restrictions by demonizing firearms owners. But what are the facts? How serious a social problem are multiple-victim murders? Are guns usually involved? How many murders end with the perpetrator committing suicide? How likely are strangers to murder someone? Are these problems growing? It's time to examine some basic facts about multiple-victim shootings in Canada.

To probe beneath superficial news stories, over the years I have made several Special Requests from Statistics Canada. My analyses have helped to debunk myths about domestic violence (2010) and to expose the failure of the long-gun registry (2011). Here I examine two related phenomena, multiple-victim murders and murder suicides. This article can only address a few of the most basic questions. More remains to be uncovered.

Multiple-victim shootings tend to happen in “gun-free zones,” as John Lott has shown; places where victims can't shoot back. Since Canada is pretty much a nation-wide “gun-free zone” (thanks to our emasculating gun laws), in this article I look at Canada-wide statistics.

First, it is important to take an overview of homicide in Canada:

- *In 2012 (the most recent year statistics are available) there were 543 homicides, or 1.56 per 100,000
- *Homicide rates reached their peak in 1991, declined rapidly through the late 1990s, and then remained stable.

- *In 2012, there were 172 fatal shootings and 164 fatal stabbing
- *In most years, shootings and stabbings each constitute roughly one-third of homicides annually; alternating as the most frequently used murder method

- *In 2012, there were 132 unsolved homicides (24% of all homicides)
- *This is higher than the long-term average of 17% unsolved homicides
- *The percentage of unsolved homicides has gradually increased since the 1980s

- *Most homicides involve criminals killing criminals
- *In 2011, 59% of cleared homicides the accused had a criminal record
- *Just over half of murder victims also have a criminal record
- *Half of all homicides involving firearms were gang-related
- *One-third of all homicides are due to drug trafficking or drugs

- *In 2012, there were 82 intimate-partner homicides (20% of solved homicides)
- *44% of these families have histories of family violence

*In 2012, there were 65 stranger homicides (16% of solved homicides)

*This is higher than the average (12%) over the past 30 years

Multiple-Victim Homicides

Five primary motives for mass murder have been identified:

1. Revenge (e.g., seeking payback for perceived personal failures);
2. Power (e.g., a personal war against society);
3. Misplaced loyalty (e.g., a deranged father kills his family to spare them from a miserable existence);
4. Terror (e.g., a political dissident sends a strong message to those in power); and
5. Greed (e.g., a criminal executes customers/employees to eliminate witnesses).

In my most recent Special Request to Statistics Canada, I asked for a year-by-year analysis of multiple-victim homicides since 1974. I will follow the standard definition of an MVH as a homicide incident with four or more victims.

In Canada, there were between two and three multiple-victim homicide incidents (with a total of about 14 victims) per year from 1974 to 2010, on average. This is less than one-half of one percent (0.4%) of all homicides. In some years there were none (1995, 1998, 2003, 2004, 2010), and in others up to seven (1977) MVH incidents.

Multiple-Victim Homicides and Firearms Laws in Canada

	Multiple-Victim Shootings	Annual Average	Multiple-Victim Homicides	Annual Average
1974-1981	61	8	200	25
1982-1994	102	8	187	14
1995-2003	43	5	65	7
2004-2010	22	3	52	7

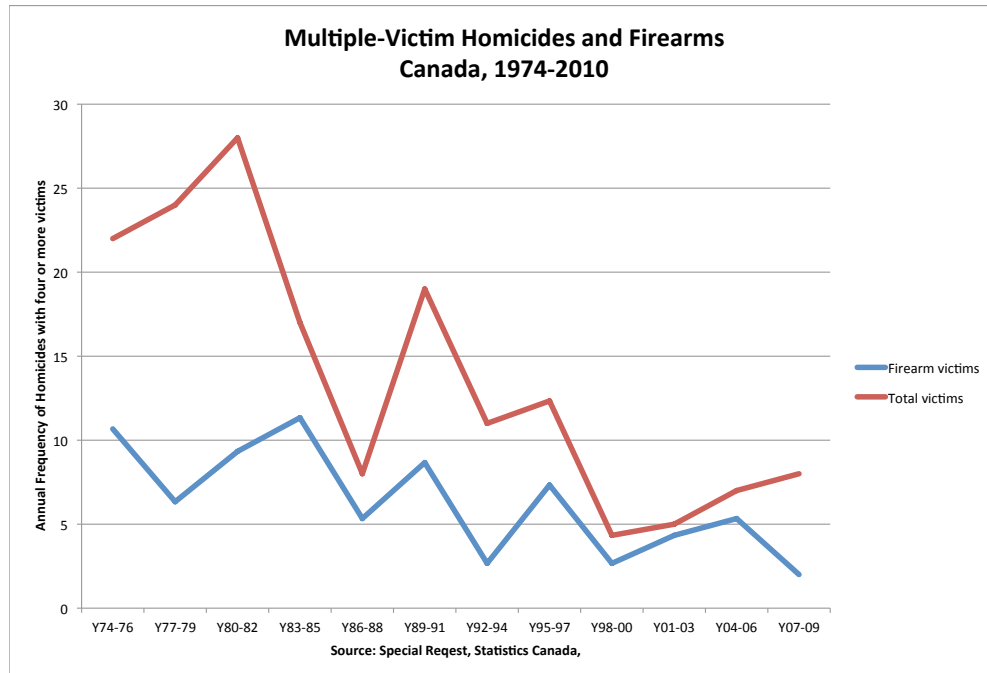
Source: Special Request, Statistics Canada, 2011

About half (45%) of multiple-victim homicides involve a firearm, although the percentages have gradually decreased over the decades. Many of the MVH incidents appear linked to criminal activity, but close to half of the MVH incidents were family-related. However, about one-third of multiple victim shootings have not yet been solved by police, meaning that the victim-accused relationship remains unknown for these incidents. The unsolved MVH incidents are probably gang related.

The annual average of multiple-victim homicides (and MV shootings) in Canada dropped steadily since 1974, continuing to fall after new gun laws (Bills C-17 and C-68) came in

force, in 1994 and 2003, respectively. The gun laws do not appear to be a factor in the decline because the number of multiple-victim homicides that did not involve firearms fell even faster than multiple-victim shootings.

In sum, MVH incidents are rare in Canada, and their frequency, both with and without firearms, has been decreasing for decades. Many of these incidents appear linked to criminal activity, but close to half of the solved MVHs were family-related.



Murder suicides

There are on average 38 murder suicides per year (or 7% of cleared homicides). Most murder suicides (80%) involve family members. Despite lurid media presentations, murder suicides involving strangers are quite rare (under 5% of all murder-suicides or fewer than 1% of all cleared homicides). Firearms are involved in almost two-thirds (62%) of murder suicides.

In sum, murder suicides are few (if not rare) and have been generally declining since the early 1990s. The number of murder suicides involving firearms has been declining since the 1970s. Murder suicides committed by strangers are so infrequent it is difficult to identify a trend.

Comparing Canada with other countries

There are fewer MVH per capita in the United States than in Canada. Between 1974 and 2011, there were about 25 MVH per year in the US: just 0.2% of 13,750 homicides. The lower rate in the US is consistent with John Lott's hypothesis that armed citizens can deter or stop public shootings.

An article in the left-wing *Mother Jones* that received wide publicity erroneously claimed public mass shootings have recently surged in the United States. Other analysts have refuted this using better methodology.

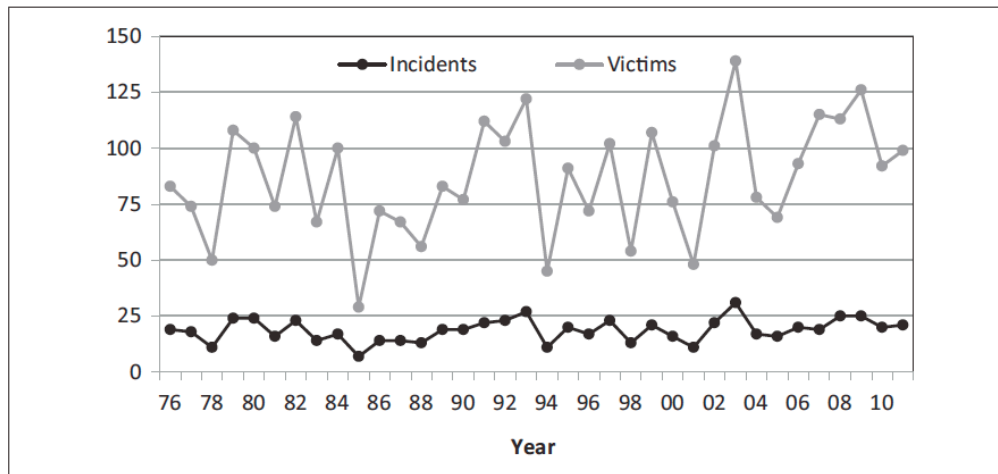


Figure 1. Mass shootings in the United States, 1976-2011.

Figure 1 (from Fox and DeLateur) shows that there was no effect found from the Assault Weapon Ban (which was in effect from 1994 to 2004) on multiple victim homicides.

In Europe, MVH are more frequent than in the US or Canada. The percentage of homicides involving two or more victims is 7% of all homicides in Europe, while it is 4% in both Canada and the United States.

Is it firearms owners?

Despite lurid media accounts of murders involving firearms, law-abiding gun owners are not a threat to public safety. According to Statistics Canada, Canadians who have a firearms licence are less than one-third as likely to commit murder as other Canadians. Statistics Canada data show that licensed gun owners have a homicide rate of 0.60 per 100,000 licensed gun owners between 1997 and 2010. Over the same period, the average national homicide rate was 1.85 per 100,000.

Conclusions

Multiple victim homicides are rare in Canada, and becoming even less frequent. Similarly, murder suicides are few (if not rare) and have been declining since the early 1990s. The number of murder suicides involving firearms has also been dropping since the 1970s. Murder suicides committed by strangers are so infrequent it is difficult to identify a trend.

No effect was found for any gun law. In the US, multiple-victim homicides did not decline during the Assault Weapon Ban. In Canada, multiple-victim homicides that did not involve firearms fell faster than did multiple-victim shootings, which suggests that gun laws were irrelevant. MVH are much more frequent in Europe than in the US, which is consistent with the argument that MVHs are lower in jurisdictions where citizens can shoot back. The low Canadian MVH rates are perhaps due to the lower level of criminal activity in Canada.

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