

Can the Canadian Firearm Registry Reduce Gun Deaths?

by Gary Mauser & W.T. Stanbury

As surprising as it may seem, a few supporters of the gun registry claim that firearm registration has somehow caused Canadian gun deaths to decrease. This is quite surprising because gun deaths began to decline in the early 1990s, yet the gun registry wasn't even started until 1997, and many gun owners still haven't registered their guns.

Despite its billion-dollar cost overrun, supporters of the gun registry argue that the registry will bring down gun deaths. This is shockingly irresponsible. Sheila Fraser, the auditor-general, reported that the registry had "astronomical cost overruns." Despite this enormous expenditure, its high error rate renders it all but useless as a tool for the RCMP.

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Even worse, the auditor-general was appalled by the flaws in the system that made it impossible for her to know the registry's real costs. "We stopped our audit when an initial review indicated that there were significant shortcomings in the information provided. We concluded that the information does not fairly represent the cost of the program to the government" (Auditor-general, 2002).

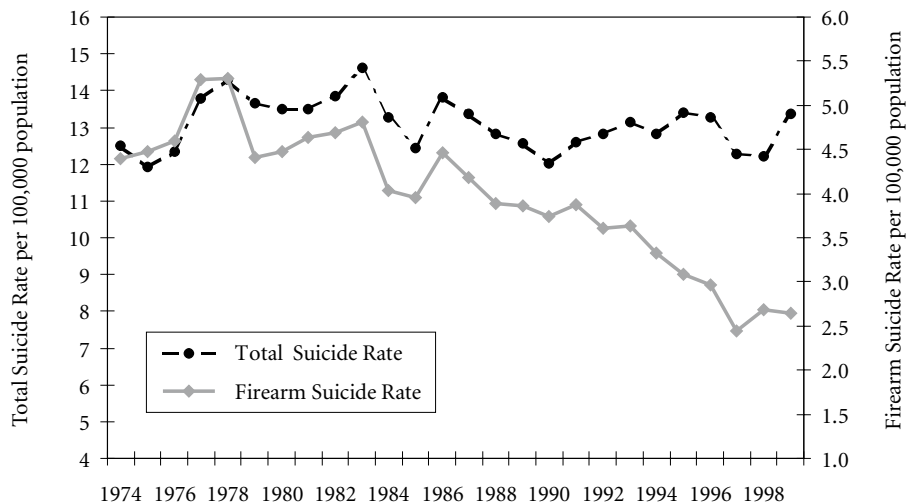
We take issue with the concept of "gun deaths." It mixes suicides, homicides, and accidents together in a confusing

amalgam that can mislead the unwary. In 1999, for example, there were 1,006 "gun deaths" in Canada. Suicides accounted for 802 of these, while 151 were homicides, 37 were accidents, 6 are euphemistically described as "legal interventions," and 10 were undetermined (Hung, 2003). While suicide makes up 80 percent of "gun deaths," the remainder is quite diverse. It seems inconceivable that firearm registration could reduce "gun deaths" in any way other than acting as a bureaucratic impediment to ownership, and so reduce the total gun stock in Canada.

The concept of gun deaths might make sense if ordinary people were somehow motivated by the presence of a firearm to kill themselves or others. This is demonstrably false (Kleck, 1997). The idea that government should protect us from ourselves stems from a public health view of people as "patients" who need treatment, and it contrasts with the more traditional view that ordinary people are responsible citizens.

Ordinary people do not tend to commit suicide. Research shows that suicide is associated with mental illness, substance

Figure 1: Firearms and Suicide in Canada





abuse, depression, and family violence (Anon., 1994). This neither describes the typical Canadian nor the typical gun owner. Firearms are involved in one-quarter of all Canadian suicides (Hung, 2003). Over the past decade, while suicides involving firearms have declined, the overall suicide rate has increased.

As figure 1 shows, the lack of firearms is not a deterrent to suicide. This should not be surprising because there are many effective alternatives available to the determined person. Firearms are not, as is often claimed, uniquely lethal.

Firearms are not uniquely lethal.

Research shows that hanging is about as effective as shooting oneself or even using carbon monoxide (Kleck, 1991, p. 258). The more determined a person is to commit suicide, the more likely he or she is to choose an effective method for doing so.

Firearms are involved in about one-third of homicides. It is a myth that murderers are “ordinary” Canadians. Deviant people with long histories of violence commit the majority of murders. Of course, these aren’t the killings that make the news. According to Statistics Canada, the typical murderer has an extensive criminal record, cannot legally possess firearms, abuses drugs and/or alcohol, and is unemployed. Two-thirds of Canadian murderers are known to have an adult criminal record, as do over half of victims (Dauvergne, 2002).

Even criminologists who do not support firearm ownership agree (albeit sometimes reluctantly) that no solid evidence can be found to support restricting

access to firearm ownership among the general public (Jacobs, 2002; Kleck 1997; Mauser and Maki, 2003). This is reassuring news since the best available research suggests that access to firearms does not increase overall suicide, homicide, or accident rates (Kleck, 1997; Lott, 2003).

Some argue that because of higher gun ownership rates, the US gun homicide rate is three times higher than Canada’s (Gannon, 2001). But such an argument neglects to mention that the vast majority of American firearm homicides occur in urban areas, such as Washington, DC, and New York City, that already have prohibitive gun laws and where levels of civilian gun ownership are already very low. Further, the levels of gun violence in the US have *declined* substantially over the past decade, while the level of civilian gun ownership has *increased* (FBI, 2002).

There are many better ways to protect public safety than diverting more than \$1 billion (possibly as much as \$3 billion if all the costs—including enforcement—are properly counted) in scarce resources to a government program that regulates law-abiding gun owners. For example, we could put more police on the streets; we could beef up CSIS; we could add more parole and probation officers; we could even track down the 36,000 illegal immigrants who were ordered deported but who Ottawa can’t find (Auditor-general, 2003; Bronskill, 2003). As long as advocates of “gun control” continue to ignore the significant body of academic research that conflicts with their own orthodoxy, Canada’s gun laws will continue to be an ineffective way to save lives.

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