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Fraser University professor Gary Mauser, seen handling an old Belgian copy of a British revolver, says it is an illusion that restrictive gun laws protect the public.

Do gun laws really improve public safety?: Statistics show that violent crime in Canada is on the rise even as we do more to restrict firearms

Paul Martin's image as a fiscal conservative is already fading. In his year-end interview with Global TV, the prime minister refused to scrap the most infamous Chretien-era boondoggle -- the billion-dollar firearm registry.

A study I did recently shows that not only has the registry squandered billions, but more importantly, it hasn't had any discernable impact on violent crime.

In *The Failed Experiment: Gun Control and Public Safety in Canada, Australia, England and Wales*, published by the Fraser Institute, I examine trends in violent crime in Commonwealth countries that had recently introduced firearm regulations.

The widely ignored key to evaluating firearm regulations is to examine trends in total violent crime, not just gun crime. Firearms are involved in only a small fraction of criminal violence. The real problem is criminal violence, not just gun violence.

I use the United States as a point of comparison for assessing crime rates because its criminal justice system differs so dramatically from those in the Commonwealth. Not only are criminal penalties typically more severe in the U.S., but also conviction and incarceration rates are usually much higher.

Perhaps the most striking difference is that qualified citizens in the U.S. can carry concealed handguns for self-defence. During the past few decades, more than 25 states in the U.S. have passed laws that relax the rules for allowing responsible citizens to carry concealed handguns. In 2003, there are 36 states where qualified citizens can get such a permit.

As surprising as it may seem to some, violent crime rates, and homicide rates in particular, have been falling in the U.S. The drop in America's crime rate is even more impressive when compared with the rest of the world. In 18 of the 25 countries surveyed by the British Home Office, violent crime increased during the 1990s. This contrast should provoke thinking people to wonder what happened in those countries where they introduced more and more restrictive firearm laws.

During the 1990s, Canada increasingly restricted firearm ownership, but the violent crime rate in Canada increased during that period. New laws were introduced in 1991 and again in 1995. Licensing and registration are still being phased in. How can that be while violent crime has plummeted in the U.S.? Some will say that homicide rates have been falling in Canada. Unfortunately, homicide rates are falling even faster in the U.S.

Given that violent crime continues to increase, can the Canadian experiment with firearm regulation be justified? The effort to register all firearms, which was originally claimed to cost only \$2 million, has now been estimated by the Auditor-General to top \$1 billion. Final costs are unknown.

Gun laws must be demonstrated to cut violent crime, or gun control is no more than a hollow promise. It's time to pause and ask: Do gun laws actually work?

At the same time that funds seem to flow freely for gun registration, the RCMP, Immigration, and prisons were starved for money. For a billion dollars, we could have kept the Ports Police, which was disbanded early in the 1990's, conducted more investigations of the Hells Angels, as well as kept better track of violent criminals who had been released from prison.

Recent gun laws introduced in the United Kingdom and Australia have also failed to improve public safety. In the past 20 years, the U.K. has introduced increasingly restrictive laws on firearm ownership, finally banning handguns in 1997. The result? Police statistics show that the homicide rate in England and Wales jumped 50 per cent in the 1990s, going from 10 per million in 1990 to 15 per million in 2000. Violent crime rates are twice as high in England and Wales as in the U.S.

The Australian government made similar draconian changes to its firearm laws during the 1990s, even confiscating a large number of firearms from hunters and target shooters. Unfortunately, this effort has not made Australia any safer. Homicide and violent crime continue to increase in Australia, while both are decreasing in the U.S. Robbery and armed robbery rates have doubled in Australia, while they are decreasing south of our border. The homicide rate in Australia has started climbing again.

Restrictive firearm legislation has failed to reduce violent crime in Australia, Canada, or the U.K. The policy of restricting gun ownership has been an

expensive failure. Unfortunately, policy dictates that the current directions will continue. And more importantly, it will not be examined critically.

It is an illusion that restrictive gun laws protect the public. Maybe we should crack down on criminals rather than hunters. Maybe that really would save lives.

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