

"You can have peace, or you can have freedom. Don't ever count on having both at once."

Robert Heinlein, "Time Enough For Love"

Debunking the myths about gun control.

Gary A. Mauser

The treacherous attack on the World Trade Center on September 11th showed Canadians just how far off the mark our government's priorities have been. Our previous efforts to fight violence have been badly misdirected. The government has focused on gun owners, rather than terrorists and criminals. It was not wise to freeze the RCMP budget for a decade, slash CSIS, eliminate the Vancouver Port Police. And for what? To create a massive bureaucracy to register the guns of ordinary Canadian citizens. We would have all been safer, if the government had been more serious about screening immigrants and deporting those who were criminals or linked to terrorism.

It's not easy telling the Emperor he has no clothes. Not many of my colleagues at Simon Fraser University have supported me during the past 15 years that I have been conducting research on gun control. I won the Nora and Ted Sterling Award for Controversy because SFU recognized the validity of my efforts to examine public policy on firearms.

I knew little about guns when I started researching gun control. What I did know about firearms, I'd mostly learned from television: guns were scary and gun owners were dangerous. I guess I wasn't all that different from the typical university professor. I remember thinking that stricter gun laws would help reduce gun crime. However, the results of my research, first, made me a skeptic about the usefulness of gun laws, and then, later, convinced me that it's important for society to have widespread firearm ownership. Here are some of the facts that helped change my mind.

Myth #1: Gun ownership leads to crime or violence

We frequently hear that firearm availability encourages violence. A normal disagreement, say between a man and his wife, can be transformed into a deadly conflict if there is a gun in the house. If true, then those regions where firearms are most plentiful should have the highest rate of firearm crime. In both the US and Canada, firearm ownership is higher in rural areas than it is in urban areas. However, in both countries, there is less violent crime in rural areas.

Big cities, such as Vancouver, tend to have higher homicide rates than the national average. Violent crime rates generally decline, particularly the homicide rate, as city size shrinks.

How can this be? Owning a gun does not predispose people to violence. About three-quarters of gun owners in both the US and Canada are hunters. The people who choose to own firearms in both countries are normal people. Hunting does not pose a threat, it is a benefit to society.

Myth #2: The typical gun crime is a man using a gun to terrorize a woman.

The media gives the impression that murderers are normal people who suddenly attack their wives or girl friends with a gun. But consider the facts. Two out of three homicide victims are male, and less than one-third (30%) of homicides involve a firearm.

Murderers are not normal people. Statistics Canada reports show that homicides are typically committed by drunk or drugged criminals. About two-thirds of those accused of homicide have a criminal record, and 70% of those have a violent criminal record. The majority has a history of alcohol or drug abuse. Almost 3/4 of the spousal murderers had a history of spousal abuse prior to the killing. At the very least, these statistics suggest that firearm registration won't be useful in stopping violent crime.

Myth #3: Canadians do not use guns in self-protection.

I've conducted three surveys of the public in Canada and my studies find that between 60,000 – 80,000 Canadians report using firearms annually to protect themselves, their families or their property. Between 19,000 and 35,500 of these cases involved defense against criminal violence; the rest (more than half) involved defense against dangerous animals.

Self-defense incidents are all but invisible to authorities. The participants have no motive to report them to the police, and indeed every reason to keep them quiet. Defensive gun use doesn't mean Hollywood-style shoot-outs. Surprise: TV doesn't reflect real life. Research in the US shows that over 95% of the times a gun is used in self-protection, the gun is not fired but merely displayed. There is no victim.

My three surveys had three different sponsors: the National Rifle Association, the Canadian government, and the Langley Symposium. All three studies found roughly the same results. How could this be? In judging the quality of scientific research, it is much more important to know their methodology than the sponsor.

Myth #4: Canadian gun laws keep us safe.

Little support can be found for such a belief. American criminologists widely admit that there is little or no solid empirical research to back the claim that gun laws have a significant effect on crime rates. Shocked? Many researchers are very disappointed.

Handguns have been registered for over 60 years in Canada, but gun crime is increasing, particularly handgun crime. Since the mid-1970s, handgun homicides have increased from around 25% to almost 60% of gun homicides. Since 1998, when the government started registering firearms, homicides involving firearms have also increased over 20%. The Solicitor General even admitted in Parliament that handgun registration has never been useful in solving a crime.

Canada has long had strict gun laws. Nevertheless, each new law is introduced as if there had never been any previous firearm legislation. A number of studies, including my own, have evaluated Canadian gun laws. These researchers vary considerably in their position on gun control. In finding no significant effect, my research is consistent with all other academic studies of Canadian firearm legislation. The only exceptions are unpublished governmental studies with flawed methodologies.

## **Conclusion**

My research debunks some of the “urban myths” about firearms and gun laws. Many people have warned us that, in fighting terrorism, we shouldn’t wage war on Islam, but only on terrorists. Islam isn’t the problem, terrorists are. It is particularly important to distinguish between the terrorist minority and the majority of Muslims. Not only on the grounds of basic fairness, but also on important strategic grounds. It is crucial to isolate the terrorists in order to get help from the rest of Islam.

Unfortunately, we have not been so thoughtful when fighting crime in Canada. Rather than aiming at violent criminals, the federal government launched a cultural war against traditional Canadians. Gun owners aren’t the problem, criminals are. Canadians have owned firearms for centuries; and done so responsibly. Firearm registration fails the test of good police strategy. In order to stop violent criminals – society needs the support of gun owners.

Firearm registration may have won votes for Chrétien in Toronto and Montreal, but it alienated the rest of the country. Opponents include most provincial governments, all territorial governments, and many aboriginal bands. At least one-quarter of all gun owners have decided not to comply.

Canadian taxpayers will not support open-ended government spending. Perhaps it would be wiser to beef up border security, keep terrorists and violent criminals in jail, instead of spending hundreds of millions of dollars on trying to register the firearms that have been used for decades by ordinary hunters.

Chrétien’s bill to fight terrorism is déjà vu. The government is exploiting the current tragedy to grab more power. The government already has enough power to fight terrorism; there is no need for us to throw away the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Why do we need to give the government additional

powers when the current laws are not enforced? If the government is afraid to deport those linked to terrorism, or to keep violent criminals in jail, what's the point of passing more laws?

September 11th frightened us all. However, it is important not to panic. We shouldn't surrender our cherished individual freedoms in a rush to buy safety. We need to fight terrorism, but we also need to retain what we rightfully pride ourselves about our Western Civilization: our individual liberties. The terrorists will win if they can get us to abandon our liberties and our freedoms.

Professor Gary A. Mauser was awarded the Nora and Ted Sterling Award for Controversy in October 2001 for his research on firearms and gun control legislation. For more information, please see his web page ([www.sfu.ca/~mauser](http://www.sfu.ca/~mauser))

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