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Firearms Access and Mental Health Issues in Selected Countries

BUILDING A SAFE AND RESILIENT CANADA

Mass shooting incidents such as those in the United States (US) at the Washington D.C. Navy Yard in September 2013, the December 2012 shooting at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, and the United Kingdom (UK), Cumbria, England shootings in 2010, have brought the question of gun access by the mentally ill to the forefront of public attention.

The primary focus of this annotated bibliography is to identify relevant research that could identify the relationship between mental illness, firearms access and violence. It involved a search of empirical literature relating to mental issues, substance use, and legal rights. Compared to the media attention given to such incidents, the literature on the surrounding issues was limited.

This paper reviewed open source literature regarding the legislation and practices followed in Australia, New Zealand (NZ), the UK and the US. To prevent firearm violence, each country reviewed has established legislation and undertook initiatives to tackle violence and violent crime. In the aftermath of various mass shooting incidents, each country used the event as a window of opportunity to garner support for policies to reduce gun violence.

Australia, NZ, the UK and the US were selected based on their interest in firearms control legislation, as well as how their laws are implemented. They are all common law countries with well-established democracies and an effective and impartial law enforcement and judiciary. The paper also focuses on how these jurisdictions restrict access to firearms by individuals who are mentally ill or have a history of mental illness.

Restrictions on gun ownership by people with mental illnesses are not new. Only a limited amount of high quality research was found that directly examined

whether the laws prohibiting persons in the high-risk groups from accessing or owning firearms reduce criminal offending by prohibited individuals.^{1,2} In each country, either the federal, state, provincial, local government or some combination of those jurisdictions had established laws to prohibit firearm possession by individuals who were: “felons; fugitives; persons convicted to a misdemeanour crime for domestic violence, those who are subject to certain restraining orders for domestic violence; unlawful users of or those addicted to controlled substances; those who have been found by a judge to be mentally incompetent, a danger to themselves or others as a result of mental illness, or been involuntarily committed to a mental institution.”³

Federal government policies on safe use of consumer products, such as tobacco (i.e., cigarettes), motor vehicles, alcohol and poisons offer successful strategies that have potential for application to the reduction of gun violence. For example, efforts to prevent unintentional poisonings provide options for immediate application to gun education, physical safety measures, and ease of access to legally held firearms. These options include safety measures to limit access to appropriate users, such as the use of childproof safety packaging that could be transformed into key or security code locking devices on guns and storage cabinets. All of these have the potential to reduce the likelihood of gun violence.

Efforts to reduce motor vehicle deaths suggest additional options. Driver education targets the use of seat belts, distractions such as texting, and above all, alcohol consumption. There are strict prohibitions regarding the operation of machinery while under the influence. The extension to the use of firearms would seem to have merit given the causal connection found in the literature between alcohol abuse, violence and irresponsible use of firearms. Introducing smart guns with automatic

security or locking devices could reduce the number of unintentional deaths and suicides of children, adolescents and persons who are mentally ill.

Highlights

- Most individuals with serious mental illnesses are not dangerous.
- Most acts of violence are committed by individuals who are not mentally ill.
- Being a young male or substance abuser (alcohol or drugs) is a greater risk factor for violent behaviour than being mentally ill.
- Individuals who are mentally ill are victimized by violent acts more often than they commit violent acts.
- Examples of mass shootings that, in retrospect, can be explained by mental illness, suggest that current regulations and practices do not sufficiently constrain individuals who are mentally ill from accessing firearms.
- Safe use of firearms, ammunition and component parts (through education and increased acceptance by gun owners of responsible storage practices) will reduce gun violence, particularly the number of suicides and unintentional deaths of individuals who are mentally ill, children and adolescents.

http://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/johns-hopkins-center-for-gun-policy-and-research/publications/WhitePaper102512_CGPR.pdf

For more information on research at the Law Enforcement and Policing Branch, Public Safety Canada, please contact the Research Unit at ocr-rco@ps-sp.gc.ca.

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¹ Hahn, R.A., Bilukha, O., Crosby, A., Fullilove, M.T., Liberman, A., Moscicki, E., Snyder, S., Tuma, F., and Briss, P.A. "Firearms Laws and the Reduction of Violence: A Systematic Review," *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 28(2S1), February 2005:40-71.

² Webster, D.W., Vernick, J.S., Vitti, K., McGinty, E.E., Teret, S.P., and Frattaroli, S. *The Case for Gun Policy Reforms in America*, John Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research, October 2012:19:8, [accessed 2013-09-15] from: : http://www.jhsph.edu/research/centers-and-institutes/johns-hopkins-center-for-gun-policy-and-research/publications/WhitePaper102512_CGPR.pdf.

³ Webster, D.W., Vernick, J.S., Vitti, K., McGinty, E.E., Teret, S.P., and Frattaroli, S. *The Case for Gun Policy Reforms in America*, John Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research, October 2012:19:3, [accessed 2013-09-15] from: :