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The Failed Experiment

Gun Control and Public Safety in Canada,
Australia, England and Wales

Gary A. Mauser

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This publication grew out of a paper originally presented to the Symposium on the Legal, Economic and Human Rights Implications of Civilian Firearms Ownership and Regulation at the Tower of London, London, England (May 2, 2003). This symposium was sponsored by the World Forum on the Future of Sport Shooting Activities. A very early version was presented at the 6th Annual Civitas Conference, Vancouver, BC, Canada, April 26-28, 2002.

Executive Summary

Widely televised firearm murders in many countries during the 20th Century have spurred politicians to introduce restrictive gun laws. The politicians then promise that the new restrictions will reduce criminal violence and “create a safer society.” It is time to pause and ask if gun laws actually do reduce criminal violence.

Gun laws must be demonstrated to cut violent crime or gun control is no more than a hollow promise. What makes gun control so compelling for many is the belief that violent crime is driven by the availability of guns and, more importantly, that criminal violence in general may be reduced by limiting access to firearms.

In this study, I examine crime trends in Commonwealth countries that have recently introduced firearm regulations: i.e., Great Britain, Australia, and Canada. The widely ignored key to evaluating firearm regulations is to examine trends in total violent crime, not just firearms crime. Since firearms are only a small fraction of criminal violence, the public would not be safer if the new law could reduce firearm violence but had no effect on total criminal violence.

The United States provides a valuable point of comparison for assessing crime rates because the criminal justice system there differs so drastically from those in Europe and the Commonwealth. Not only are criminal penalties typically more severe in the United States, often much more severe, but also conviction and incarceration rates are usually much higher. Perhaps the most striking difference is that qualified citizens in the United States can carry concealed handguns for self-defence. During the past few decades, more than 25 states in the United States passed laws allowing responsible citizens to carry concealed handguns. In 2003, there are 35 states where citizens can get such a permit.

The upshot is that violent crime rates, and homicide rates in particular, have been falling in the United States. The drop in the American 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 increasingly restrictive firearm laws.

Britain

In the past 20 years, both Conservative and Labour governments have introduced restrictive firearm laws; even banning all handguns in 1997. Unfortunately, these Draconian firearm regulations have totally failed. The public is not any safer and may be less safe. Police statistics show that England and Wales are enduring a serious crime wave. In contrast to handgun-dense United States, where the homicide rate has been falling for over 20 years, the homicide rate in handgun-banning England and Wales has been growing. In the 1990s alone, the homicide rate jumped 50%, going from 10 per million in 1990 to 15 per million in 2000.

Police statistics show that violent crime in general has increased since the late 1980s and, in fact, since 1996 has been more serious than in the United States. The firearm laws may even have increased criminal violence by disarming the general public. Despite Britain's banning and confiscating all handguns, violent crime, and firearm crime, continue to grow.

Australia

Following shocking killings in 1996, the Australian government made sweeping changes to the firearm legislation in 1997. Unfortunately, the recent firearm regulations have not made the streets of Australia any safer. The total homicide rate, after having remained basically flat from 1995 to 2001, has now begun climbing again. The decline in homicide rate in the gun-permissive United States stands out against the trend in Australia.

The divergence between Australia and the United States is even more apparent with violent crime. While

violent crime is decreasing in the United States, it is increasing in Australia. Over the past six years, the overall rate of violent crime in Australia has continued to increase. Robbery and armed robbery rates continue to rise. Armed robbery has increased 166% nationwide. The confiscation and destruction of legally owned firearms cost Australian taxpayers at least \$500 million. The costs of the police services bureaucracy, including the hugely costly infrastructure of the gun registration system, has increased by \$200 million since 1997. And for what? There has been no visible impact on violent crime. It is impossible to justify such a massive amount of the taxpayers' money for no decrease in crime. For that kind of tax money, the police could have had more patrol cars, shorter shifts, or maybe even better equipment. Think of how many lives might have been saved.

Canada

In the 1990s, sweeping changes were made to the firearms laws, first in 1991 and then again in 1995. Licensing and registration are still being phased in. The contrast between the criminal violence rates in the United States and in Canada is dramatic. Over the past decade, the rate of violent crime in Canada has increased while in the United States the violent crime rate has plummeted.

The Canadian experiment with firearm regulation is moving to farce. 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. The final costs are unknown but, if the costs of enforcement are included, the total could easily reach \$3 billion. Taxpayers would do well to ask for independent cost-benefit studies on registration to see how much the gun registry is already costing.

Restrictive firearm legislation has failed to reduce violent crime in Australia, Canada, or Great Britain. The policy of confiscating guns has been an expensive failure. Criminal violence has not decreased. Instead, it continues to increase. Unfortunately, policy dictates that the current directions will continue and, more importantly, it will not be examined critically.

Only the United States has witnessed such a dramatic drop in criminal violence over the past decade. Perhaps it is time politicians in the Commonwealth reviewed their traditional antipathy to lawfully owned firearms.

It is an illusion that gun bans protect the public. No law, no matter how restrictive, can protect us from people who decide to commit violent crimes. Maybe we should crack down on criminals rather than hunters and target shooters?

Introduction

Widely televised firearm murders in France, Germany, and Switzerland in the past few years have spurred politicians in Europe to introduce changes in their countries' already strict gun laws to make them even more restrictive. Most of us will remember the headlines about a depressed student in Germany who ran amok and killed several people in his school after he had been expelled. In both France and Switzerland, angry individuals have stormed into local councils and begun shooting legislators seemingly at random.

This is not a new story. We have seen this drama drama before, on television, from Australia, Great Britain, Canada, and the United States, as well as other countries. First, there is a horrible event—say, a disturbed student shoots people in a school or a maniac goes on a rampage in a public place. Media coverage is intense for a few weeks. Then, the government feels it must be seen as doing something to protect the public, so the police are given sweeping new powers or new restrictions are introduced on owning firearms. Claims are made that the new firearm regulations will reduce criminal violence and create a safer society. Afterwards, the media rush off on a new story, and the public forgets. Later, there is another widely televised incident somewhere else and the process starts over again. The introduction of virtually every gun law in the past half-century around the world has followed this pattern. It is time to pause and ask: If gun laws are expected to work to prevent criminal violence, have they actually done so?

Politicians promise that tightening up on gun regulations will reduce criminal violence and make society safer. Some even claim outright that gun regulations will reduce suicide rates. But do they? Do increased restrictions upon the ownership of firearms reduce homicide rates? Armed robbery rates? Criminal violence in general? Suicide rates? In short, do firearm regulations act to create a safer society as claimed by their supporters?

If laws restricting the ownership of guns are supposed to reduce violent crime, then this must be demonstrated

to be true or gun control is no more than a hollow promise. However, criminologists admit (albeit reluctantly) that there is very little empirical support for the claim that laws designed to reduce general access to firearms reduce criminal violence.¹ Frequently, assertions that they do turn out to be wishful thinking.

It is not that governments were not warned. The Cullen Commission had been presented with submissions from a variety of sources (e.g. English researcher and former Superintendent of Police, Colin Greenwood) arguing that increasing restrictions would not be effective in reducing violent crime (Munday and Stevenson 1996; Greenwood 1972). In Canada, prior to the introduction of Bill C-68, which brought in licensing of owners and registration of firearms, the Auditor General of Canada warned the government that the Justice Minister had not presented any compelling justification for additional legislation nor had the effectiveness of previous legislation been evaluated (Auditor General of Canada 1993: 647–55). I had testified before Parliament that firearm registration was “unworkable, ineffective, and outrageously expensive” (Mauser 1995: 25). At that time, I estimated that it could cost taxpayers as much as one billion dollars (Mauser 1995: 28). The Auditor General of Canada confirmed my prediction in 2002 (Auditor General of Canada 1993: chap. 10). Unfortunately, both estimates are low because they do not include costs by other cooperating government agencies nor the cost of enforcement. The best estimate to date of the cost to Canadian taxpayers for licensing owners and registering all guns is closer to 3 billion dollars (Breitkreuz 2003).

This study examines the claim that recently introduced firearm regulations, which restrict public access to firearms, create a safer society by reducing criminal violence. The question being addressed here is not whether gun laws cause a drop—or an increase—in firearms crime. That is a distinctly different issue. At the very least, gun laws should act to reduce gun crime.² The key question is: Do gun laws improve public safety? It is

important to note that, even if firearm regulations were to cause a drop in firearms crime, other violent crimes may increase and so render society less safe. This follows, since firearms violence is only a fraction of criminal violence, often only a small fraction. To test the general claim that, by restricting access to firearms for the general public, a society can reduce criminal violence, I will examine the trends in violent crime in a few countries that have recently introduced general firearm legislation. Where possible, these trends will be compared with corresponding trends in the United States.

In assessing the impact of legislative changes, it is necessary to examine changes over time. This study will examine crime trends in each country to see if there are any changes after the introduction of the gun regulations. The crime rates selected are those that are the most appropriate to evaluate public safety, the rates for homicides, violent crime, and property crime. In addition, I will also look at the suicide rate since anti-gun activists often claim that reduced access to firearms reduces the temptation for vulnerable people to commit suicide.

Obviously, cross-national averages are irrelevant to this endeavour. This paper does not address, for example, whether the Canadian average for a particular crime rate is higher (or lower) than the United States or England. Such patterns speak to historical and cultural differences, not the effectiveness of recent firearm legislation. Only changes are pertinent to the question of interest. If the homicide rate was low before the firearm law was passed and it continues to stay low, how can we credit the firearm law with causing the low homicide rate?

That said, the United States provides a valuable point of comparison with Europe and the Common-

wealth for assessing crime rates because the criminal justice system in the United States is unique.³ Not only are criminal penalties typically more severe in the United States, often much more severe, but also conviction and incarceration rates are usually much higher.⁴ Perhaps the most striking difference is that the United States is one of the few countries to encourage qualified citizens to carry concealed handguns for self defence. During the past few decades, while Britain and the Commonwealth were making firearm ownership increasingly difficult, more than 25 states in the United States passed laws allowing responsible citizens to carry concealed handguns. There are now 35 states where citizens can get such a handgun permit. As a result, the number of armed Americans in malls, on the street, and in their cars has grown to almost 3 million men and women. As surprising as it may seem to casual observers, these new laws appear to have caused violent crime rates to drop, including homicide rates. Professor John Lott has shown how violent crime has fallen faster in those states that have introduced concealed carry laws than in the rest of the United States.⁵

The upshot is that violent crime rates, and homicide rates in particular, have been falling in the United States over the past decade.⁶ The drop in the American 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 (Barclay et al. 1999). This contrast should provoke thinking people to wonder what happened in those countries where they believed that introducing more and more restrictive firearm laws would protect them from criminal violence.

Firearms and criminal violence

What makes gun control so compelling for many is the belief that violent crime is driven by the availability of guns and, more importantly, that criminal violence in general may be reduced by limiting access to firearms. This is a testable empirical proposition.

To examine the claim that firearm legislation will improve public safety in general, the most appropriate yard-stick to use would be a broad measure such as total violent crime or homicide rate. Criminal violence involves any crime where an individual is injured and it includes crimes committed with any weapon, not just guns. Firearms are only involved in a fraction of violent crime, often only a small fraction. For example, between 1% and 26% of violent crime incidents involve firearms in the countries examined here (table 1).

Even in serious crimes, such as homicide and robbery, where the misuse of firearms is more prevalent, firearms are still used only in a minority of cases. Between 4% and 14% of robbers use a firearm in Australia, Canada, or England, while in the United States, less than half of robbers (42%) use firearms.⁷ A lower percentage of gun misuse may not be a blessing. Research shows that robbery victims are less likely to be injured in crimes where the assailant uses a firearm.⁸

Gun crimes may dominate the news but violence involving guns is not qualitatively worse than other violence: being bludgeoned to death is not less horrific than being shot to death. In this study, the United States stands out in that most murders (63%) are committed with firearms, while in Australia, Canada or England relatively few murderers use firearms (9%–31%).⁹ In the Commonwealth, knives are usually preferred to guns by murderers.¹⁰ For example, at least as many murders are committed with knives as guns in Canada and in Australia twice as many murders involve knives as guns (Dauvergne 2001: 8; Mouzos 2001).

Although suicide is not a violent crime, it is often included in the discussion of violence involving guns. Relatively few people (between 4% and 20%) use guns to commit suicide in the Commonwealth countries examined here. As usual, the United States is unique, with slightly more than half of suicides involving a gun (56%). Despite the higher percentage of gun suicides, the United States has a lower total suicide rate than either Australia or Canada (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002; Preville 2003; NCIPC 2003).

Despite claims to the contrary, firearms are not uniquely more lethal than alternative means to commit

Table 1: An international comparison of the use of guns in violent crime

	Violent Crime	Homicide	Robbery	Suicide	Accidents
United States (2001)	26%	63%	42%	56%	1%
Canada (2001)	3%	31%	14%	20%	<1%
Australia (2001)	1% [est.]	14%	6%	12%	NA
England/Wales (00/01)	1% [est.]	9%	4%	2%	NA

Note: This table shows the percentage of each category that involved guns. For example, 26% of violent crime in the United States in 2001 was committed using a firearm.

Sources: Federal Bureau of Investigation 2003; NCIPC 2003. Canada: Kwing Hung, March 2003; Savoie 2002. Australia: Australian Institute of Criminology 2003; Mouzos 1999, 2003; Reuter and Mouzos 2002. England and Wales: Home Office 2001; Centre for Evidence Based Mental Health 2003.

suicide. Hanging and carbon monoxide (e.g., by using vehicle exhaust) have approximately the same lethality as shooting (Kleck 1991: 258). It would appear obvious that the more determined a person is to commit suicide, the more likely he or she is to choose an effective method for doing so. As there is no shortage of lethal alternatives available to a person who wishes to end his or her life, restricting access to any one method—for example, firearms or subway trains—still leaves available many other methods for achieving the same end.

Accidents involving guns, despite the media coverage they seem to generate, are quite rare. Typically, guns account for less than 1% of accidental deaths in any developed country. Perhaps this rarity is why they receive such emotional media attention. Vehicle accidents are far more common and pose a far greater risk to the public than do gun accidents, yet car accidents receive little or no interest from the mainstream media. This is yet another example that media coverage does not indicate the seriousness of a threat.

“Gun death” is a red herring, as it conflates two very different phenomena, homicide and suicide, to produce a large and misleading number (Mauser and Stanbury 2003). It is inappropriate to use “gun deaths” to evaluate gun laws for several reasons. First, guns are not involved in the bulk of criminal violence, so “gun deaths” ignores much of importance for evaluating public safety. Second, even though few people use guns to commit suicide, suicides by gunshot constitute the lion’s share of “gun deaths” in developed countries. For example, 80% of gun deaths in Canada are suicides, while 76% of gun deaths in Australia are suicides. Third, there is little support for the claim that gun laws of any sort reduce the suicide rate (Kleck 1997: 288; Jacobs 2002: 6).

In summary, the most appropriate measures to evaluate public safety in general are global measures such as overall violent crime or homicide. Gun laws are certainly intended to reduce gun crime, but the more important question is whether gun laws can reduce overall criminal violence. Since gun crime is such a small fraction of criminal violence, it would be extremely misleading, particularly in Commonwealth countries, to use “gun crime” or “gun deaths” to evaluate the impact of any legislation on public safety. Clearly, gun crime could decline for a number of reasons while total criminal violence in-

creases simultaneously. The main body of this paper will examine the claim that violent crime can be reduced by focusing on reducing gun crime.

Do guns provoke murders?

Supporters of gun control like to claim that the availability of firearms somehow can provoke normal people to become violent and even to commit murder. This is false. This claim is analyzed at length elsewhere but a few points should be made briefly to illustrate the groundlessness of this claim (Kleck 1991: 205–06, 1997: 222–24). While it may be true that we all have evil in our hearts, very few of us ever attempt to kill anyone. Murder is a rare event and the typical murderer is not normal and cannot legally own a firearm in any of the countries discussed here.

In the developed world, the vast bulk of gun owners are hunters or target shooters. In Canada, for example, as table 2 shows, over two-thirds of gun owners say that hunting is their principal reason for owning a firearm. Gun owners are normal citizens as can be seen in table 3. Compared to the Canadian average, gun owners tend to be male, somewhat older, slightly less well educated, but earning an income that is higher than average.

It is a myth that murderers are “ordinary” people. Murders are usually committed by deviant people with a history of violence. Of course, these are not the killings that make the news. According to Statistics Canada, the typical murderer in Canada has an extensive criminal record, cannot legally possess firearms, abuses drugs

Table 2: Reasons reported for owning firearms

Hunting	73%
Target shooting	13%
Pest control	8%
Collection	6%
Protection	5%
Other	13%
Total	118%

Note: Total exceeds 100% because respondents could indicate more than one reason for owning a firearm.

Source: GPC Research 2001: figure 11.

Table 3: Profile of firearm owners and the general population

Demographic Variables	Owners of Firearms	General Canadian Population
Gender		
Male	88%	49%
Female	12%	51%
Age		
18–34	15%	33%
35–54	49%	40%
Over 55	34%	27%
Education		
High School or less	51%	43%
College/Some Post Secondary	28%	28%
Completed University	19%	30%
No response	2%	1%
Household Income		
Under \$20,000	8%	15%
\$20,000 - \$39,999	24%	24%
\$40,000 - \$59,999	25%	19%
\$60,000 and over	33%	27%
No response	10%	15%

Source: GPC Research 2001: table 5.

Note: Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.

or alcohol, and is unemployed. Two-thirds of Canadian murderers are known to have an adult criminal record, as do over half of the victims (Dauvergne 2002). These are not normal Canadians.

It is important to note that gun crimes are limited to a very small number of people. In Canada, for example, it is estimated that there are between 2.3 and 4.5 million legal gun owners.¹¹ There are around 10,000 violent crimes committed with guns annually.¹² Even if these crimes were committed by previously law-abiding gun owners (and they are not), this would still represent less than 1% of all gun owners. The same argument, *a fortiori*, holds for firearms; very few guns are misused. There are between 7.9 and 15 million firearms in Canada. The same 10,000 gun crimes represent about one-tenth of 1% of the total gun stock.

Supporters of gun control claim that every criminal gun starts out as a legal gun. This is used to suggest

that legal gun owners (knowingly or unknowingly) are providing all, or almost all, of the firearms used by violent criminals. This is false. First, on an international level, a few countries illegally manufacture and distribute firearms presumably in order to promote terrorism. A number of these firearms fall into the hands of ordinary criminals. Second, theft is not the primary source of guns used in criminal violence. In Commonwealth countries, a very small percentage of guns used in violent crime have ever been in the registration system. For example, in England and Wales, between 13% and 16% of guns used in homicide had ever been registered (Home Office 2001: table 3D). In Canada, the number of registered handguns used in a homicide is estimated to be 8%.¹³ In Australia, the share is also quite small: only 10% of guns used in a homicide were ever in the system.¹⁴ Nor is theft the primary source of guns used in homicides in the United States (Kleck 1997: 94).

To the extent that stolen guns are involved in criminal violence, one needs to examine thefts from military or police armories as well as individuals. A sizeable proportion of the gun stock in Canada is in the hands of the authorities and these guns are stored in large armories that are not always as well guarded as they should be. It is extremely difficult to estimate how many thefts take place annually from official armories, as statistics are unavailable. Nevertheless, one can speculate that firearms stolen from the police or military probably account for an important percentage of guns used in crime. At the international level, one of the major sources of guns for criminal activities is smuggling from sources such as military depots from decaying communist countries (Landesman 2003; Polsby and Kates 1997; Rummel 1994).

In summary, I have tried to show here that it is not reasonable to imagine firearms provoking normal people to commit homicide or any other violent crime. The typical murderer is not normal and cannot legally own a firearm in any of the countries discussed here. There are so few gun crimes compared with the number of firearms in any of the countries considered here that, if guns provoke people to kill, they are not doing a very good job of it.

Can violent crime be reduced by stricter gun laws?

England and Wales

Firearm policy in the United Kingdom has been driven by sensationalized coverage of firearm murders for over 15 years. First, in August 1987, the small town of Hungerford, England, was stalked for eight hours by a deranged man, who shot people seemingly at whim. By the time the killing was over, Michael Ryan had killed 16 people and wounded another 14, before shooting himself (Malcolm 2002: 201). Media attention focused almost exclusively on how such a person had managed to obtain firearms legally, although in hindsight other matters are more amazing. The public was not shocked that the disarmed police could do nothing to stop him nor that no one in the town had the will or the means to resist.

Almost 10 years later, in 1996, in Dunblane, Scotland, Thomas Hamilton, who was known to the police as mentally unstable, walked into a primary school with his legally registered handguns and murdered 16 young children and their teacher. Before killing himself, he wounded another 10 students and three teachers (Malcolm 2002: 203). The media were outraged that citizens in Britain could own handguns, not that the police failed to follow the rules for granting the killer a firearm permit. According to information presented to the Cullen Commission, Hamilton had been refused membership in several gun clubs, which had requested the police to revoke his permit. The police had not acted on these complaints (Cullen 1996).

The Firearms (Amendment) Act of 1988 was brought in by the Conservative government following the Hungerford incident and the Firearms (Amendment) Act of 1997, which banned all handguns, was introduced by the Labour government following the shooting in Dunblane in 1996 (Greenwood 2001; Munday and Stevenson 1996). Unfortunately, these Draconian firearm regulations have not curbed crime (see Malcolm 2002). Police statistics show that England and Wales are enduring a serious crime wave. In contrast to North America, where

the homicide rate has been falling for over 20 years, the homicide rate in England and Wales has been growing over the same time period. In the 1990s alone, the homicide rate jumped 50%, going from 10 per million in 1990 to 15 per million in 2000 (Home Office 2001).¹⁵

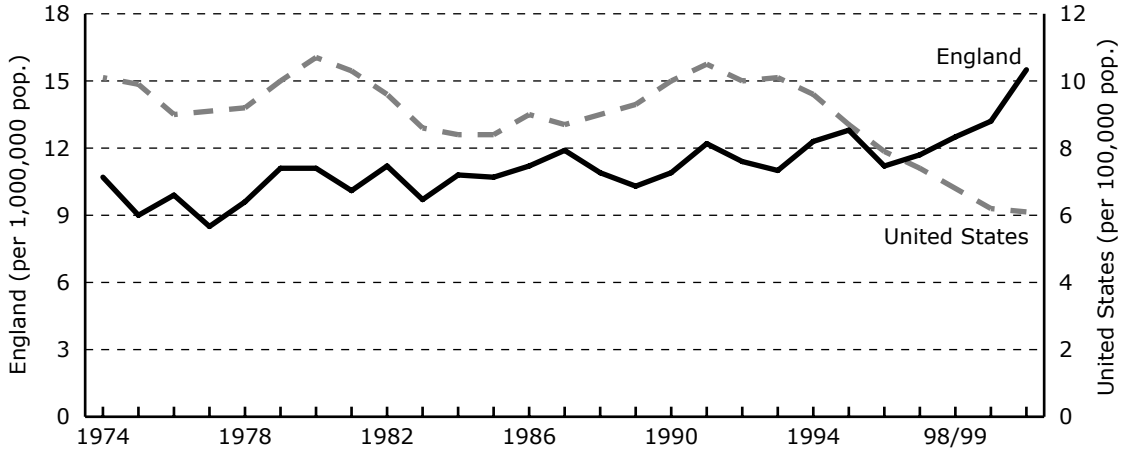
Police statistics show that violent crime in general has increased since the late 1980s and, in fact, since 1996 has been more serious than in the United States (figure 2).¹⁶ The rate of violent crime has jumped from 400 per 100,000 in 1988 to almost 1,400 per 100,000 in 2000. (An unknown amount of the recent increase may be attributed to changes in the recording rules in 1998 and 1999.) In contrast, not only are violent crime rates lower in the United States, they are continuing to decline (Home Office 2001; Federal Bureau of Investigation 2003: table 1).

Property crime has also grown more serious since the early 1980s. Although property crime rates have fallen back somewhat in the 1990s, they are still higher in 1997, at over 8000 per 100,000 population, than they had been in 1982, at about 6,000 per 100,000 (figure 3). In contrast, property crime rates are falling in the United States (Home Office 2001; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2003).

Suicide rates have eased somewhat in England and Wales (table 4). In 1989, age standardized mortality rates for suicide of all types was 10 per 100,000 and, in 1999, it is now 9.5 per 100,000. Similarly, suicide rates in the United States have also declined—going from 12.4 to 10.7 per 100,000 population—even as firearm ownership has risen (McIntosh 2000).

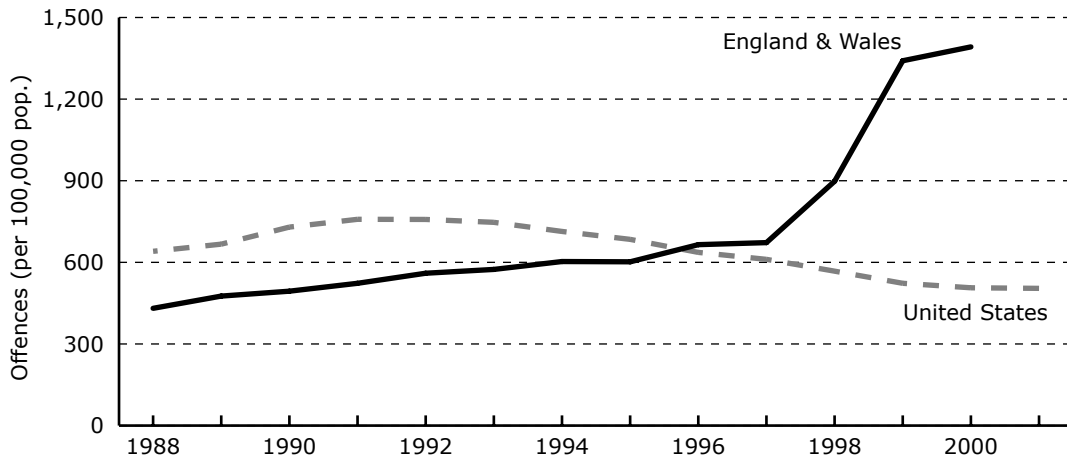
The Home Office has also tightened up on enforcement of regulations to such an extent that the legitimate sport-shooting community has been virtually destroyed. For example, shotgun permits have fallen almost 30% since 1988 (Greenwood 2001) (figure 5). The British Home Office admits that only one firearm in 10 used in homicide was legally held (Home Office 2001) (figure 6). But, there is little pressure from within bureaucratic and governmental circles to discontinue the policy of disarming responsible citizens.

Figure 1: Homicide rates—England and the United States (1974–2000/2001)



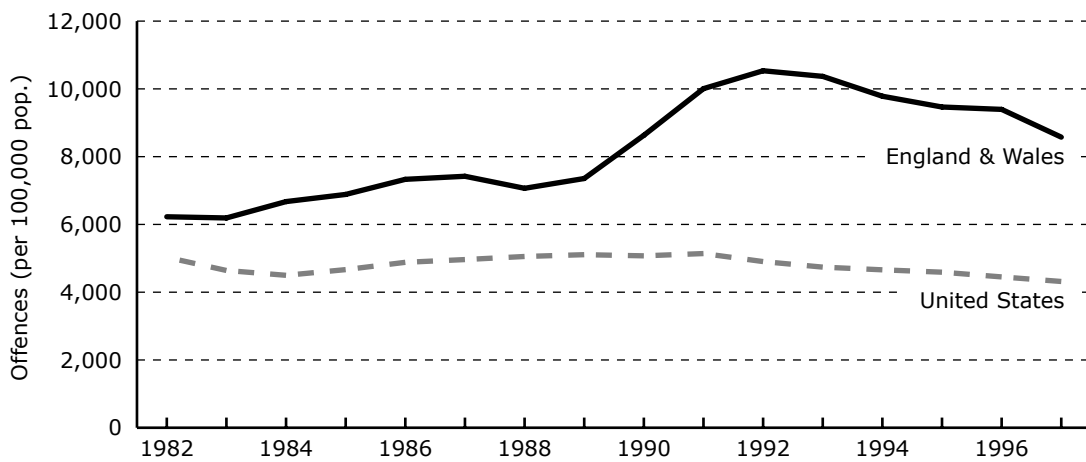
Sources: Home Office 2001; Federal Bureau of Investigation 2003.

Figure 2: Violent crime rates—England and the United States (1988–2001)



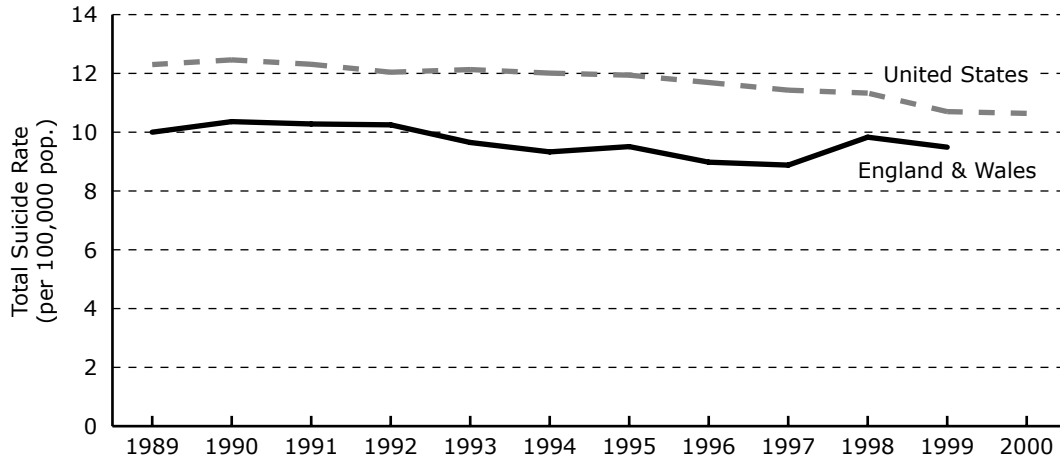
Sources: Home Office 2001; Federal Bureau of Investigation 2003.

Figure 3: Property crime rates—England and the United States (1982–1997)



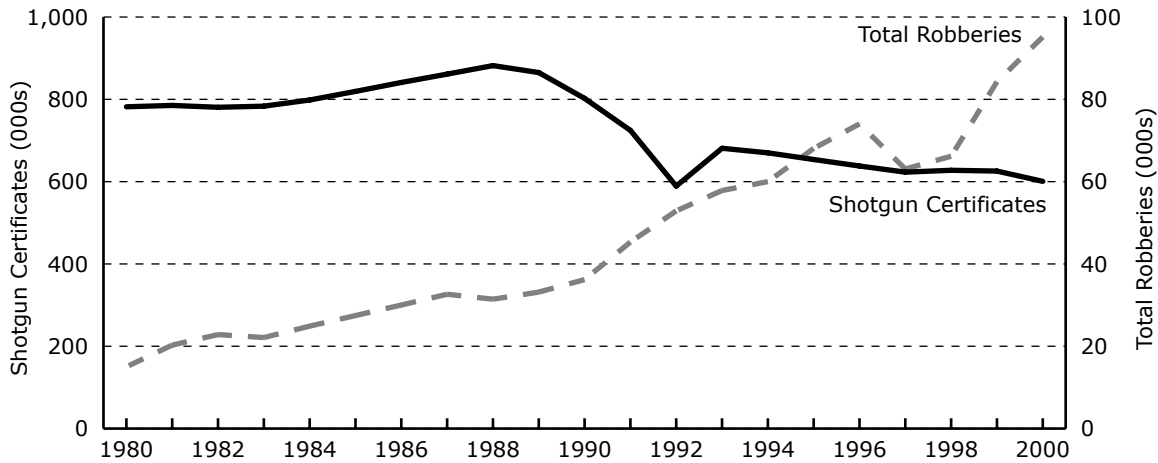
Sources: Home Office 2001; Federal Bureau of Investigation 2003.

Figure 4: Suicide rates—England and Wales compared to the United States



Sources: NCIPC 2003; National Statistics 2003.

Figure 5: Increase in robberies compared to decline in shotgun certificates issued—England and Wales

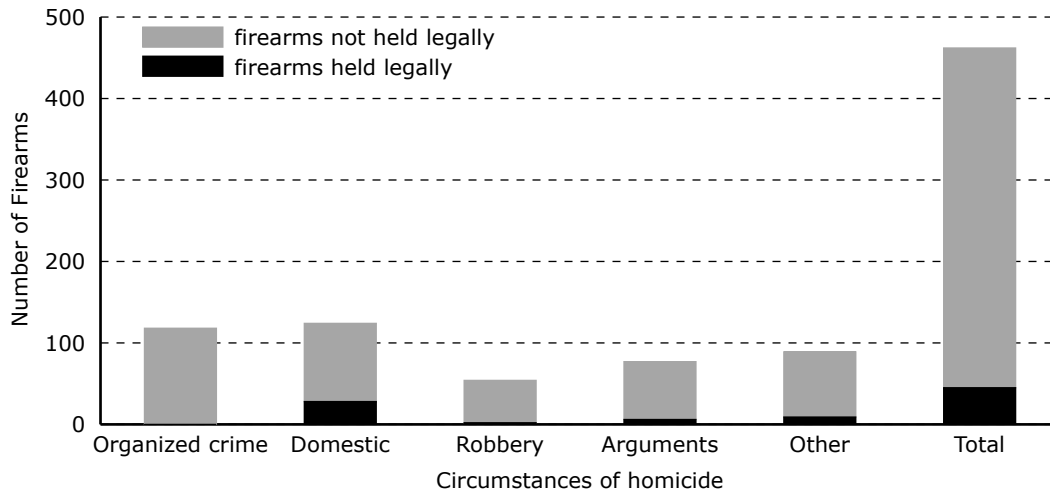


Source: Greenwood 2001.

Clearly, there is no evidence that firearm laws have caused violent crime to fall. The firearm laws may even have increased criminal violence by disarming the general public. Despite banning and confiscating all handguns, violent crime—and firearm crime—continue to grow. The number of violent crimes involving handguns has increased from 2,600 in 1997/1998 to 3,600 in 1999/2000. Firearm crime has increased 200% in the past decade.

Australia

Publicity surrounding a multiple murder triggered recent changes in Australian firearm policy. In Port Arthur, Tasmania, on April 28, 1996, Martin Bryant, a mentally deranged man, went on a rampage murdering anyone he encountered. The media afterwards focused almost exclusively on the killer’s use of military-style semi-automatic firearms. The police arrived, surrounded the isolated building, and began negotiations. When he tried to escape, he was quickly captured (Bellamy 2003). In all, he killed 35 people and seriously injured another 18. He was tried and sentenced to life in prison (Guirguis 2003). Confusion remains over many of the details of this incident, including how Bryant came to have the

Figure 6: Legal status of firearms used in homicides—England and Wales (1992–1998)

Note: Of the guns legally held, 11 were stolen from their owners, one of whom was a victim (p. 66).
Source: Home Office 2001: table 3D.

firearms he used, and whether or not the police response was adequate. No Royal Commission has ever examined the incident. The media focus on the type of firearms used at Port Arthur has diverted public concern over police procedures.

Following garish media coverage of the Tasmania killings, in 1997 the Australian government brought in sweeping changes to the firearm legislation. The new controls on firearms introduced included the prohibition and confiscation of almost 600,000 semi-automatic “military style” firearms from their licensed owners as well as new licensing and registration regulations (Lawson 1999; Reuter and Mouzos 2002).

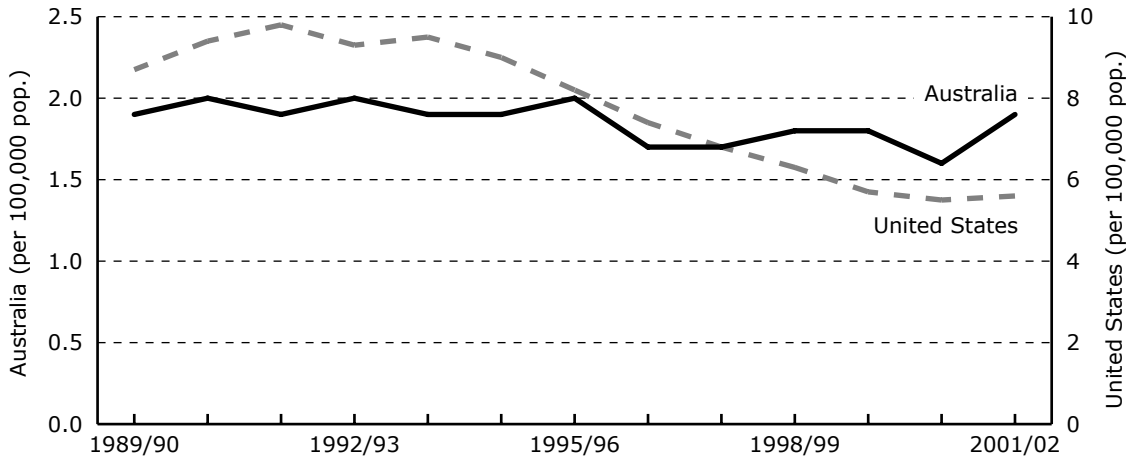
Unfortunately, these new firearm regulations do not appear to have made the streets of Australia safer. Consider homicide rates. Homicide involving firearms is declining but the total homicide rates have remained basically flat from 1995 through to 2001 (Mouzos 2001). However, early reports show that the national homicide rate may have begun climbing again. Mouzos (2003) reports that homicides in 2001/02 increased by 20% from 2000/01. She also reports that, despite the declining firearm homicides, there is an increase in multiple victim incidents. Homicide rates remain at a historic high. Shortly after World War II, the Australian homicide rate was around 1 per 100,000. Since then, it has climbed until it peaked at 2.4 per 100,000 in 1988 (Graycar 2001).

The decline in homicide rate in the United States stands out against the flat—or even rising—homicide rate in Australia (figure 7). The divergence between Australia and the United States is even more apparent when one considers violent crime (figure 8). While violent crime is decreasing in the United States, it continues to increase in Australia. Over the past 6 years, both assault and robbery show no signs of decreasing (Australian Institute of Criminology 2003) (figure 9). It is too early to tell whether the gun ban has exacerbated the problem or simply not had any effect.

Recent changes in the firearm law appear to have had no impact upon the suicide rate (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001) (figure 10). Despite the new prohibitions and firearm buybacks, the suicide rate in Australia continues to rise. This contrasts with the slight decline in suicide rates in the United States even while the availability of firearms continues to increase.

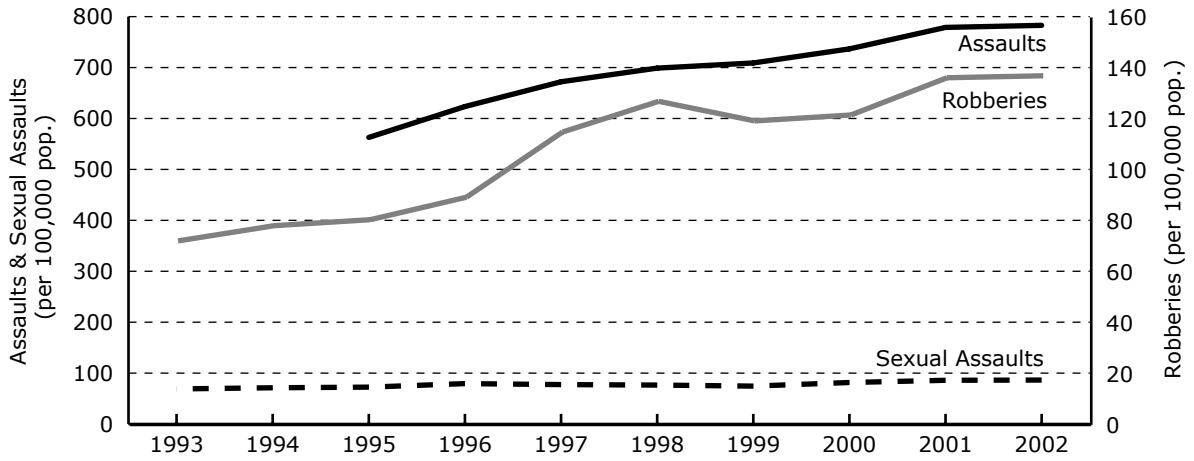
The destruction of the confiscated firearms cost Australian taxpayers an estimated \$AUS500 million and has had no visible impact on violent crime (Lawson 1999). The costs do not include the costs of bureaucracy, which, as has been shown in Canada, can be considerable. Robbery and armed robbery rates continue to rise. Armed robbery has increased 166% nationwide—jumping from 30 per 100,000 in 1996 to 50 per 100,000 in 1999 (Australian Institute of Criminology 2001; Mouzos and Carcach 2001). The homicide rate has not declined

Figure 7: Homicide rates—Australia and the United States



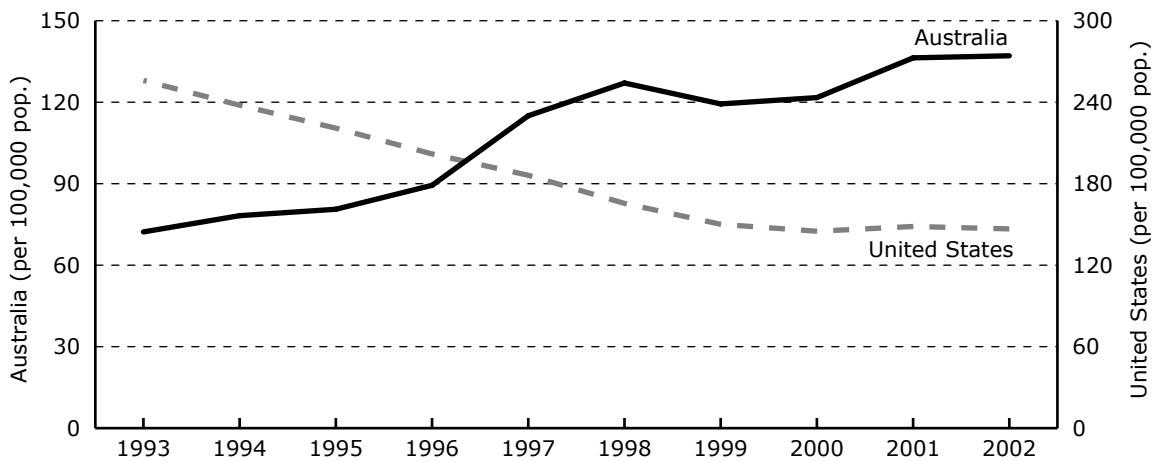
Sources: Australian Institute of Criminology 2003; Federal Bureau of Investigation 2003: table 1:

Figure 8: Violent crime rates—Australia

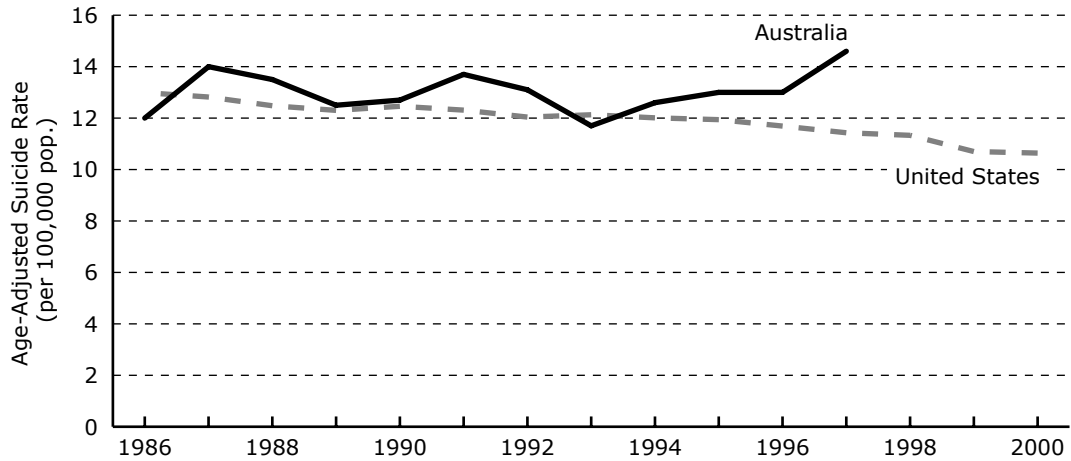


Sources: Australian Institute of Criminology 2003.

Figure 9: Robbery rates—Australia and the United States



Sources: Australian Institute of Criminology 2003; Federal Bureau of Investigation 2003: table 1.

Figure 10: Suicide rates—Australia and the United States

Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics 2002; NCIPC 2003.

and the share of firearm homicide involving handguns has doubled in the past five years (Mouzos 2001). The proposed solution to the failure of gun regulations is banning handguns, even though, as in Great Britain and Canada, few firearms used in homicide are legally held; in 1999/2000 only 12 out of 65 (18%) were identified as being misused by their legal owner (Mouzos 2001).

Canada

As in other countries, recent changes in firearm policy were precipitated by a media frenzy over a multiple murder. On December 6, 1989, Marc Lepine, born Gamil Gharbi, went to the University of Montreal campus, where he wandered around the halls of the engineering building shooting people he encountered while shouting hatred for feminists. In one classroom, after sending the men from the room, he shot the remaining women. In all, he killed 14 women and wounded another 13 students, including four men, before he finally shot himself (Jones 1998). Even though he encountered almost one hundred students and at least three teachers, no one tried to stop the murderer. Most did what they were told.

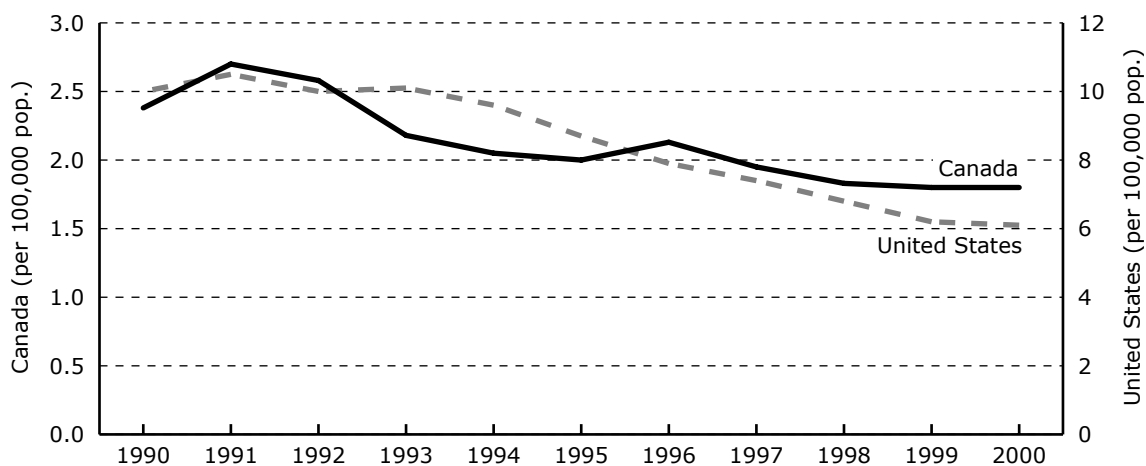
An investigation by the Montreal coroner severely criticized the police for their inadequate response (MacDonald 1990). The police did not even arrive until after the killings were over. After taking 30 minutes to arrive at the university campus, the police could not find the engineering building. The coroner's office stated that

the type of weapon used was not a significant factor in the murders. Nevertheless, activists used this hideous crime to launch a campaign that promoted tighter firearm restrictions as the way to protect women from male violence and, as a result, Canada twice introduced sweeping changes to its firearms laws, first, in 1991, under the Conservative government and then again, in 1995, before the first changes had been fully implemented, under the Liberals. The 1995 Firearms Act is still being phased in.

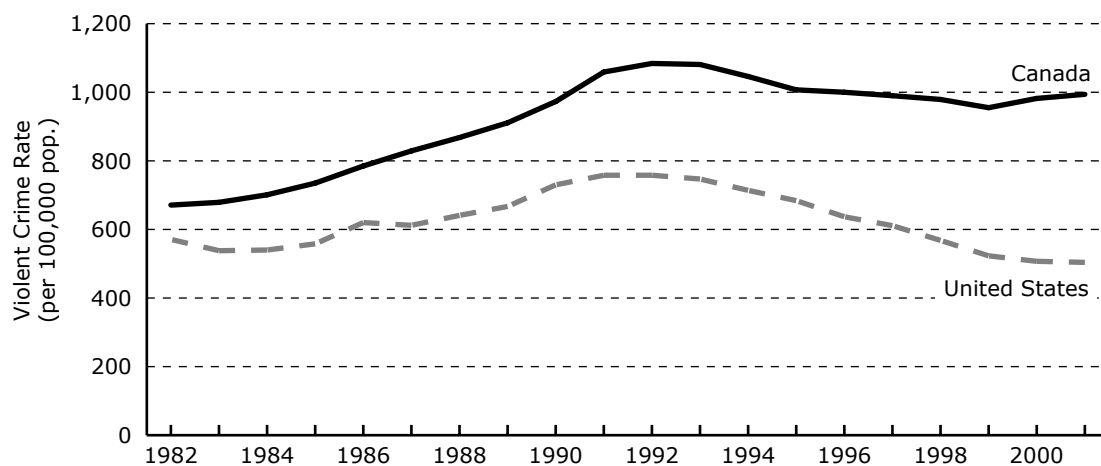
The Canadian government uses the falling homicide rate and the falling rate of violent crime to support the claim that these firearm laws are working to reduce criminal violence. Unfortunately for this argument, the homicide rate has been falling as fast or faster in the United States (figure 11), where during the same time frame, more than 25 states have introduced less restrictive firearm laws. The homicide rate in the United States has fallen from 10.5 per 100,000 in 1991 to 6.1 per 100,000 while the Canadian rate has fallen from 2.7 per 100,000 to 1.8.

The contrast between the rate of criminal violence in the United States and that in Canada is much more dramatic (figure 12). Over the past decade, the Canadian rate of violent crime has stayed basically flat while, in the United States during the same time period, the rate of violent crime has slid from 600 per 100,000 to 500 per 100,000 (Gannon 2001).¹⁷

Econometric studies undercut the claim that firearm legislation caused the homicide rate in Canada to de-

Figure 11: Homicide rates—Canada and the United States

Sources: Kwing Hung 2003; Federal Bureau of Investigation 2003: table 1.

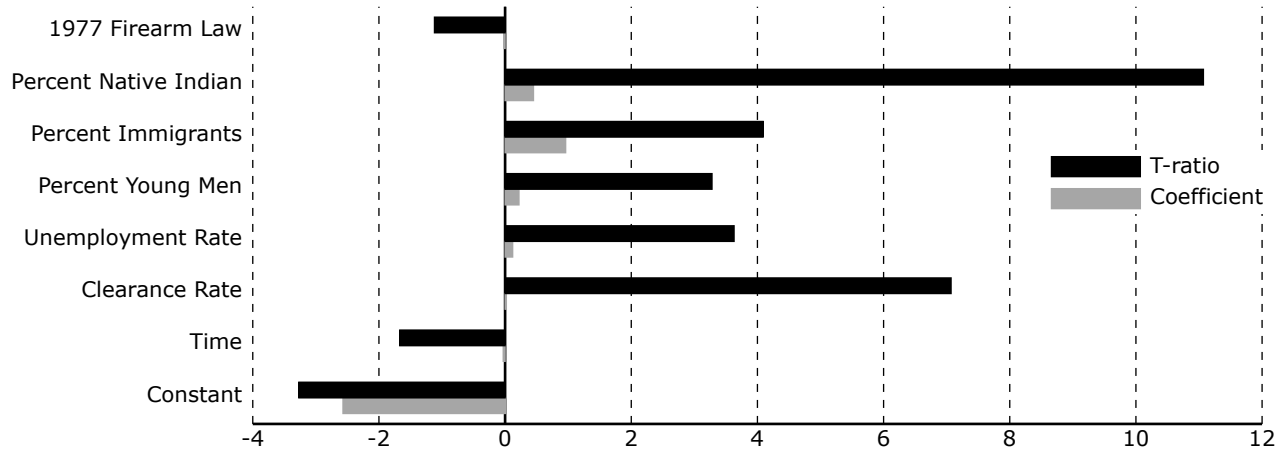
Figure 12: Violent crime rates—Canada and the United States

Sources: Savoie 2002; Federal Bureau of Investigation 2003: table 1.

cline. This is clearly seen in a study that Professor Richard Holmes and I did, where we found that firearm legislation had no significant impact on the homicide rate (Mauser and Holmes 1992) (figure 13). In this study, we analyzed the effect of six independent variables on the homicide rate for each province from 1968 through 1988. The length of the horizontal lines indicate the strength of the independent variables. Lines that extend to the right are positively associated with the homicide rate, while those that extend to the left are negatively associated. Any T-ratio over 1.65 is statistically significant. As hypothesized, the 1977 Firearm Law is negatively associated with the Canadian homicide rate, although not significantly. The other independent variables are all in the expected direction, and significant.

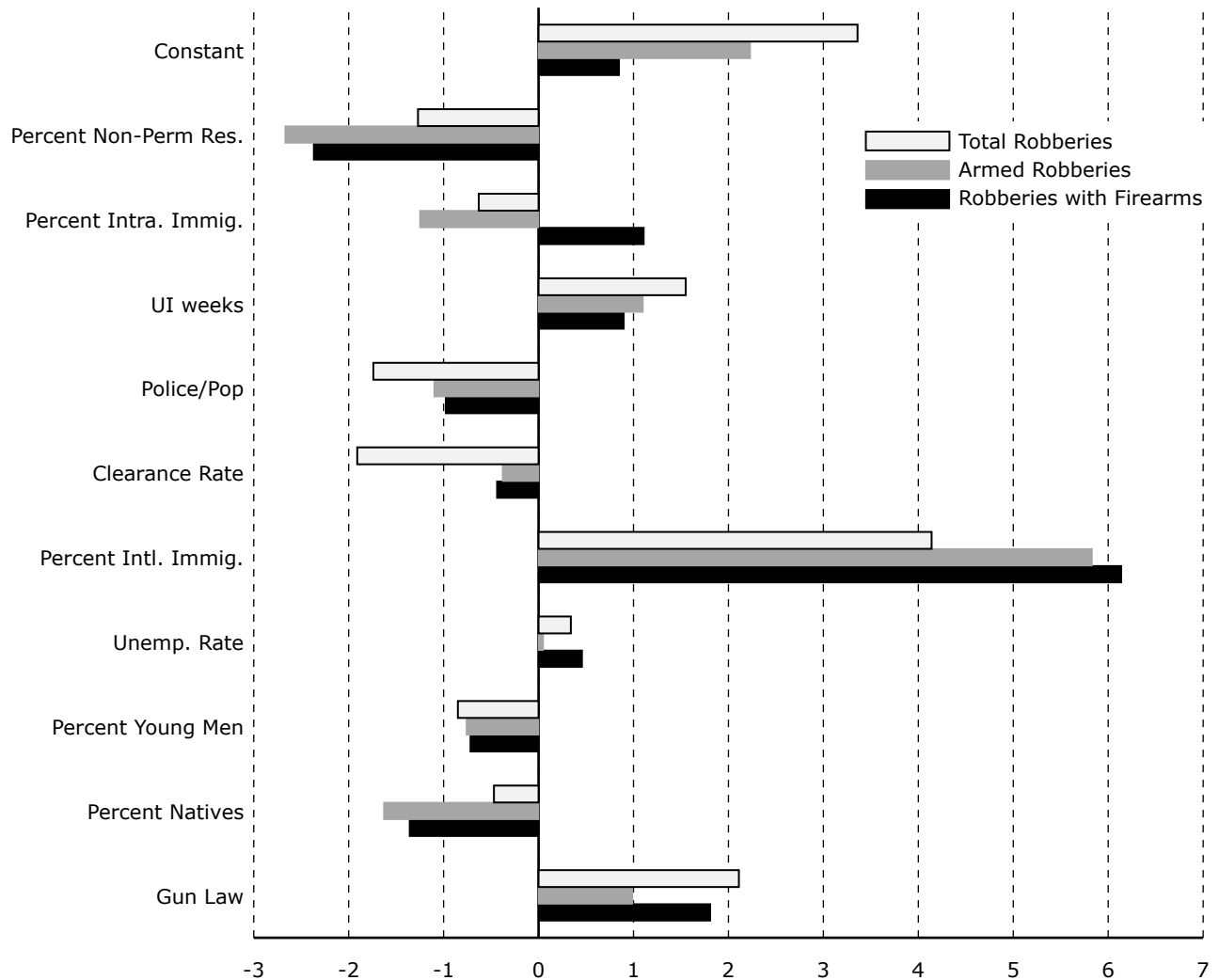
Nor does firearm legislation operate to reduce other violent crimes. Professor Dennis Maki and I have shown that Canadian gun laws may even have caused an increase in armed robbery (Mauser and Maki 2003). In this study, we looked at the impact of nine independent variables upon three related dependent variables: (a) armed robbery, (b) armed robberies involving firearms, and (c) total robberies for each province from 1974 through 1992. We analyzed each of the dependent variables separately (figure 14). As in figure 13, the length of the horizontal lines indicate the strength of the independent variables. Lines that extend to the right are positively associated with the dependent variable, while those that extend to the left are negatively associated. Any T-ratio over 1.65 is statistically significant. The

Figure 13: Evaluating the 1977 Canadian Firearms Law—Homicide



Sources: Mauser and Holmes 1992.

Figures 14: Evaluating the 1977 Canadian Firearms Law—Robbery



Sources: Mauser and Maki 2003.

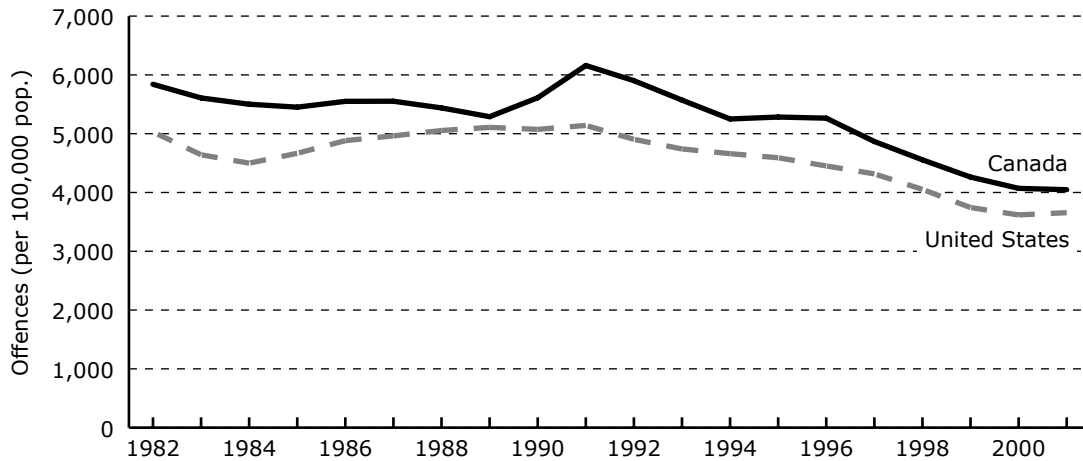
results of all three analyses are quite similar. The power of econometric analysis is that the model accounts for the most important other factors as co-variates. Professor Maki and I found that once we factored out the effects of the other variables, the Canadian gun law still had a significant effect. Unfortunately, this effect was positive, that is to say, the gun law acted to increase criminal violence. Nearly identical trends are seen in property crime rates, which are declining both in Canada and in the United States (figure 15).

Suicide rates have been stable in Canada at the same time they have been declining in the United States (figure 16). Despite a drop in suicide involving firearms, no impact can be seen in the total Canadian suicide rate,

which recently has begun to increase again (Preville 2003). The lack of linkage is one of the points obscured by the misleading factoid of “gun death.” By creating this pseudo-scientific amalgam of suicide, homicide, and accidental deaths, anti-gun activists impede a serious understanding of the link between government policy and the misuse of firearms.

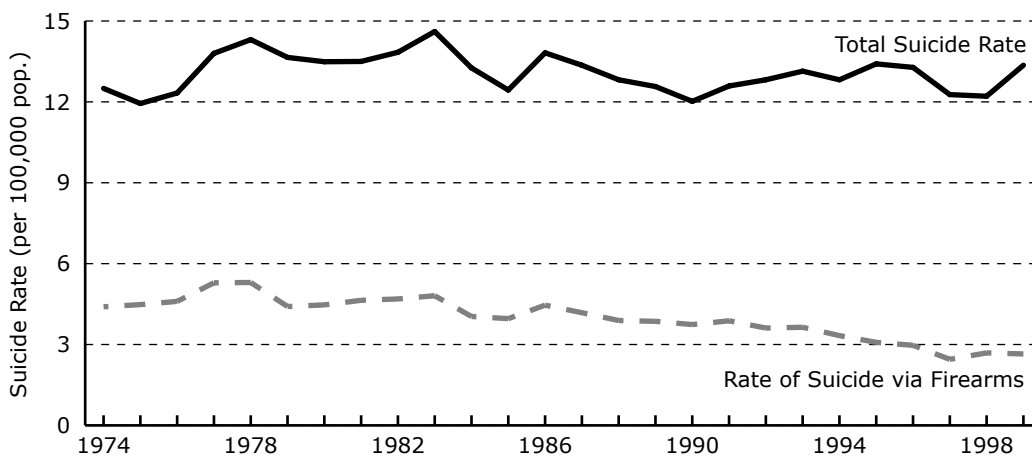
The Canadian experiment with firearm regulation is moving towards farce. Although it was originally claimed that this experiment would cost only CDN\$2 million, the Auditor General reported that the effort to register all firearms has now topped CDN1\$ billion. The final costs are unknown but, if the costs of enforcement are included, estimates now reach CDN3\$ billion.

Figure 15: Property crime rates—Canada and the United States



Sources: Savoie 2002; Federal Bureau of Investigation 2003: table 1.

Figure 16: Total suicide rate and rate of suicide via firearms—Canada



Source: Preville 2003.

Conclusion

This brief review of gun laws shows that disarming the public has not reduced criminal violence in any country examined here: not in Great Britain, not in Canada, and not in Australia. In all cases, disarming the public has been ineffective, expensive, and often counter productive. In all cases, the means have involved setting up expensive bureaucracies that produce no noticeable improvement to public safety or have made the situation worse. The results of this study are consistent with other academic research, that most gun laws do not have any measurable effect on crime (Kleck 1997: 377; Jacobs 2002). As I have argued elsewhere (Mauser 2001a),

the history of gun control in both Canada and the Commonwealth demonstrates the slippery slope of accepting even the most benign appearing gun control measures. At each stage, the government either restricted access to firearms or prohibited and confiscated arbitrary types of ordinary firearms. In Canada, registration has been shown to mean eventual confiscation. As well, police search powers have been increased. The expansion of the state's search and seizure powers should be taken very seriously by all civil libertarians concerned about the erosion of Canadians' individual rights. Canada's democratic institutions may also have been damaged by the transfer of what many would consider legislative powers to both the police and cabinet under firearm legislation.

Firearm registration also violates the basic rules of policing set forth in the 1820s by Sir Robert Peel, the founder of the first professional police force, the British Bobbies. In order for laws to be enforced effectively, the police must have the support of citizens being policed. However, experience in several countries shows that passive resistance to firearms registration is widespread. Instead of seeing gun control as a policy response to violent crime, it is more useful to view it as the product of conflict between urban and rural cultures (Kleck 1996). Much as the tem-

perance movement was an attempt to impose rural values upon urban residents, firearm registration may be seen as an attempt by urbanites to impose their cultural values upon the rest of society.

The demonization of average people who happen to own a gun lays the foundation for a massive increase in governmental intrusiveness in the lives of ordinary citizens. Firearm registration and owner licensing threatens long-standing Canadian liberties and freedoms. The type of gun control Canada has enacted is not consistent with many democratic principles and the protection of civil liberties. Nevertheless, Canada is spearheading a move in the United Nations to impose a similar regime of draconian restrictions around the world.

Disarming the public greatly increases cynicism about government among much of the population and it diminishes their willingness to comply with other, future regulations that might even be more sensible. The sense of alienation grows with the severity of the restrictions and with the ineffectiveness of their result. Unfortunately, policy dictates that the current directions will continue and, more important, will not be examined critically. This last is a guarantee of the increase of that future alienation.

It will only worsen as the mass media become slowly aware that their bias towards the banning of guns has been misdirected and begin shifting their attention to the large quantities of money that have been wasted in pursuit of a dream of social engineering that was doomed from the start.

Only the United States has witnessed a dramatic drop in criminal violence over the past decade. The justice system in the United States differs in many ways from those in the Commonwealth but one of the important reasons for the drop in violent crime may be that responsible citizens are increasingly carrying concealed handguns (Lott 2000). In contrast, authorities in the

Commonwealth insist upon a monopoly of force. If the goal is deterring criminal violence, perhaps it is time for Commonwealth countries to encourage more individual self-reliance.

Gun laws may not reduce violent crime but criminal violence causes gun laws—at least, well-publicized crimes do. The only winner in this drama is bureaucracy. The rest of us lose liberty as well as safety. It is an illusion that further tinkering with the law will protect the public since no law, no matter how restrictive, can protect us from people who decide to commit violent crimes. There

have always been criminals, and there have always been deranged people. Murder has been illegal for thousands of years: we need only remember the saga of Cain and Abel. The mass media find gun crimes more newsworthy but multiple civilian murders by arson have historically claimed more lives than incidents involving firearms. The truth is we live in a dangerous world and the government cannot protect us, if for no other reason than the police cannot be everywhere. We must ultimately rely upon ourselves and it is only right we have the necessary tools to do so.

Notes

- 1 Perhaps the best known are Gary Kleck (1997: 377) and Colin Greenwood (1972: 240) but similar statements have been made by James B. Jacobs (2002) and Peter Reuter and Jenny Mouzos (2002) in their presentation to the American Society of Criminology.
- 2 There is little evidence that gun laws are effective. For example, Joyce Malcolm (2002) convincingly demonstrates that English gun laws have backfired and are actually causing both gun crime and violent crime to increase.
- 3 For a more thorough discussion of the differences among a wide variety of countries, including the United States, see Kopel 1992.
- 4 These points have been made most tellingly by Patrick Langan and David Farrington (1998), who compare the criminal justice systems of the United States with that of England and Wales. Marie Gannon (2001) also compares crime rates in the United States and Canada.
- 5 See John Lott 2000, 2003. Despite being subjected to severe empirical scrutiny by critics, his basic assertions still stand.
- 6 These trends are easily seen in the Uniform Crime Reports (UCR) data on the website of the federal Bureau of Investigation (<http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm>).
- 7 It is important to remember that the United States has long been a violent country. Some observers believe this is due to long standing problems of racism and poverty. As mentioned earlier, the question under study in this paper is the effectiveness of recent firearm legislation, not basic historic or cultural differences among countries.
- 8 Gary Kleck (1997: 238) speculates that one reason for this might be that the assailant armed with a firearm can command compliance from his victim without first injuring him.
- 9 The United States is not the most violent country in the developed world. That distinction belongs to Russia, which has a murder rate two to three times higher than that of the United States, despite having draconian gun laws that are very strictly enforced (Miron 2001: 624).
- 10 Jamaica is a glaring exception: despite draconian firearm laws, firearms are used in about two-thirds of all homicides and over half of all robberies (Edwards 1999: 30).
- 11 The Canadian Justice Centre officially claims there are 2.3 million gun owners in Canada; my best estimate (2001b) is that there are 4.5 million gun owners.
- 12 This estimate is based upon a recent report from Statistics Canada and an earlier special request to Statistics Canada. Josée Savoie (2002) reports there are almost 4,000 violent crimes that involved a firearm but this does not include any assaults that might have used a firearm.
- 13 Handguns are the most common type of firearm used in homicide in Canada, and up until recently, the only type of firearm that was registered (Dauvergne 2001: 10).
- 14 Only 11 of the 117 homicides committed with a firearm between 1997 and 1999 involved a firearm legally held by the perpetrator (Mouzos 2000: 4).
- 15 According to police statistics published by the Scottish Executive (2001), the homicide rate in Scotland has also increased during this same time period, going from 16 per million population to 21 per million population.
- 16 Recent survey data show a decline in violent crime but this is not reflected in police data (Simmons et al. 2002).
- 17 The comparison here shows the official statistics from both countries. Gannon (2001) constructs indices of violent crime that are more directly comparable. In her analysis, the trends in violent crime in the two countries resemble each other more closely, but her data also show that violent crime in Canada is increasing while it is decreasing in the United States.
- 18 This study is consistent with almost all other research on Canadian firearm legislation. The only studies that have found an impact have been funded by the Canadian Department of Justice.

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