

# Why a Drop in “Gun Deaths” Cannot Justify the Gun Registry

by Gary Mauser

To date,<sup>1</sup> Canadians have spent an estimated \$2 billion on our failed gun registry.<sup>2</sup> The government has advanced primarily two arguments to defend this bureaucratic exercise: “gun deaths” have declined over the past decade and the gun registry is effective in screening out potentially dangerous firearms owners. I will deal with the second argument first: since the number of rejected applicants is actually lower than it had been under the previous system, this argument cannot justify the additional expense.<sup>3</sup> Like passenger screening at airports, the perceived severity of the screening procedure is its own justification.<sup>4</sup>

This leaves the drop in gun deaths as the most important justification for implementing the gun registry. On the surface, such a concept appears plausible enough. Gun laws are supposed to stop

gun misuse, so an obvious measure of success would be a drop in “gun deaths.” However, it is a fallacy to imagine that a reduction in “gun deaths” means that any lives have been saved. Because of the variety of alternative ways to kill, the only useful measures are more meaningful ones, such as rates of violent crime, suicide, and homicide. In a previous article I showed how Canadian suicide rates have stayed stable even though firearm suicides have fallen (Mauser, 2005a). In this article I expose the inappropriateness of “gun deaths” for evaluating firearm laws.

A recent Statistics Canada report implies that our firearm laws have been effective because “gun deaths” have declined (Wilkins, 2005). Wilkins was not foolish enough to state explicitly that the gun laws have been the driving force behind the drop, nor that any lives have been saved, because she provides no empirical evidence to support either claim.

Borrowing a tactic from Michael Moore’s *Bowling for Columbine*, Wilkins selectively quotes statistics while featuring graphics that mislead the reader. Her report prominently displays a large graph that highlights the dates when firearm legislation was introduced along the downward trend of gun related deaths. This graph leads the naïve to infer that gun deaths have declined as a consequence of the restrictive gun laws in Canada, and that lives have been saved.

**Table 1: Gun Deaths between 1979 and 2002**

Suicide	80%
Homicide	15%
Accidents	4%
Total	100%

Source: Wilkins, 2005.

Note: 2002 is the most recent date for which statistics are available for suicides and accidents in Canada

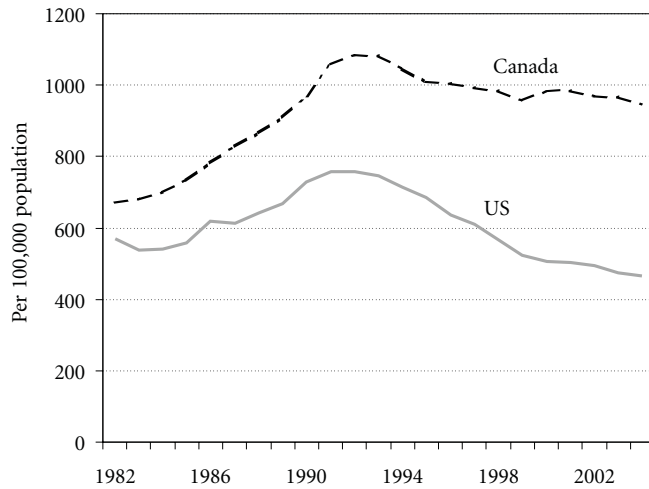
The concept of “gun death” is a red herring. It is a meaningless term that diverts attention from real questions. The concept of “gun deaths,” like “bed deaths” or “motor vehicle deaths,” is a grab bag that confuses rather than clarifies. Gun deaths are largely suicides, some homicides, and a very small percentage of accidents (table 1).<sup>5</sup> Trends in gun deaths are not a good indicator of suicide trends, because firearms are involved in only a small fraction (18%) of suicides. No convincing empirical support has been presented, for any country in the world, that gun laws have lowered the overall suicide rate or homicide rate. In contrast, research consistently shows that restrictive gun laws only influence the gun suicide rate (Kleck, 1997, pp. 49-53, pp. 286-288; Ozanne-Smith *et al.*, 2004; Mouzos, 1999; Beautrais, *et al.*, 1996). A reduction in firearm availability rarely influ-



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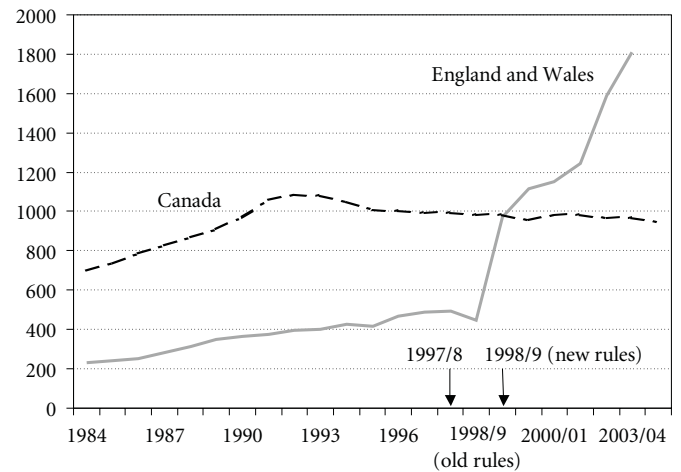


**Figure 1: Trends in Canadian and American Violent Crime**



Source: FBI and Juristat.

**Figure 2: Trends in British and Canadian Violent Crime**



Source: UK Home Office; Statistics Canada.

ences the overall suicide rate since there are numerous effective alternatives available to those who wish to kill themselves (e.g., hanging, carbon monoxide poisoning, etc.).

“Gun deaths” is not an appropriate measure for evaluating firearms laws. If the point of gun laws is to improve public safety, as a string of justice ministers have claimed they are, then it is rational to ask whether the gun law has reduced homicide or violent crime. The primary goal of public safety is to protect the public from criminal violence. Certainly gun laws should reduce homicides with guns, and violent crime involving guns, but this should be part of a strategy to improve public safety by reducing homicide and violent crime overall. Since gun crimes are less likely to result in serious injury than crimes involving other weapons, simply reducing gun crime without reducing total violent crime is no real improvement. Only 6 percent of assaults with firearms result in victims being seriously injured, while 11 percent of victims receive serious injury in assaults with knives (Mauser, 2005b). If firearms are difficult to

obtain, criminals easily find other weapons. And that will simply cause more serious injury. The important goal is public safety, not gun deaths.

There are benefits to consider as well as costs. Firearm ownership by responsible citizens contributes to public safety. High-density gun ownership is a socially stabilizing factor that deters criminal violence (Lott, 2000, pp. 94-96; Kleck, 1991, pp. 130-141; Mauser, 1995). Criminals fear breaking into homes in a neighborhood where some owners might be armed. This deterrence effect begins to unwind as criminals find it less and less likely they will be disturbed in their work by someone with a gun. Thus, violent crime, especially rates of aggravated assault and hot burglary (a burglary where the dwelling is occupied), is lower in rural areas, where a greater proportion of homes have guns, than in urban areas. This suggests another weakness of focusing on “gun deaths”—the term ignores prevented crime.

Since the firearm registry was introduced in 1998, the Canadian homicide

rate has increased by 3 percent,<sup>6</sup> and the violent crime has slid by 4 percent (Sauvé 2005). These small changes are not consistent with the claim that our gun laws are protecting us. The recent jump in the homicide rate by 12% in just one year, which was caused by the shocking increase in gang-related murders, suggests just the opposite. In comparison, the American homicide rate has dropped by 33 percent and their violent crime rate has fallen by 32 percent during the same ten-year period (Dauvergne, 2003; and FBI Uniform Crime Reports. See also Mauser, 2003, figure 11). For all their faults, the Americans appear to be doing something effective.

Wilkins acknowledges that there has been virtually no change in the percentage of homicides that involved a firearm over the entire period, but she seems unaware of the implications. The unchanging share of homicides involving firearms suggests that the drop in firearm homicides is driven by the fall in overall homicides, and not the other way around.

Econometric studies also undermine the claim that gun laws are responsible for the decline in homicides (Mauser and Holmes, 1992). Murder, like suicide, appears to depend primarily upon motive, not the availability of a particular tool. Homicides are not more likely to occur in homes with firearms.<sup>7</sup> Homicide rates have not been shown to drop when laws are introduced to increase the difficulty of legally owning firearms (Mauser and Holmes, 1992; Kleck, 1997, p. 377). Canadian gun laws have saved no lives.

How do American gun laws differ from ours? Since the 1970s, Canadian gun laws have increasingly restricted civilian access to firearms. The primary effect of these laws has been to raise the costs of gun ownership, and therefore to reduce availability for anyone who wishes to own firearms legally. The 1995 law virtually ignored violent criminals to focus on hunters, target shooters, and collectors.<sup>8</sup> Conceivably, this could be driving the drop in violent crime. It would seem not, because if gun availability were the primary force, then, because guns are increasingly available in the US, one would expect that homicide and violent crime rates would have increased in the US.

In stark contrast, American gun laws have been relaxed over the past decade, and so guns are more available now than ever. Two important changes have occurred. The ban on so-called “assault weapons” that was introduced under former president Clinton lapsed in 2004, so Americans can now purchase a wider variety of firearms than they could before. More importantly, an additional 28 states have passed laws that allow responsible citizens to carry concealed handguns for protection, bringing the current total to 38 states.<sup>9</sup>

Of course, firearms laws are not the only difference between the US and Canada. As I have shown in *The Failed Experiment*, there are many important differences between the US and Canadian justice systems. Criminals are much more likely in the US to be caught, tried, and punished than in Canada. Punishment is more severe in the US, even including capital punishment, which was abandoned in Canada in the 1960s. Observers have noted other important differences, including poverty, racism, and greater personal freedom (Kopel, 1992). It is simplistic to see our firearm laws as the driving factor in violent crime.

Great Britain provides another valuable point of comparison. Despite having firearm laws even more repressive than Canada’s, the violent crime rate has tripled since 1997, when all handguns were banned and confiscated. At the same time, the homicide rate has increased by 28 percent (Dodd, Nicholas, Povey, and Walker, 2005, table 2.04; and Povey, 2005, table 1.01.). British restrictive gun laws have not even reduced gun crime, which has now doubled since 1997 (Povey, 2005, table 2.03). The failure of firearm laws in Great Britain undermines still further the claim that declines in Canadian violent crime and homicide are caused by our paternalistic firearm laws.

## Conclusions

It’s time for Statistics Canada to stop mimicking Michael Moore. The notion of “gun death” is a red herring that stems from a paternalistic view of people as victims who need protection, and it is incompatible with the more traditional view that ordinary people are responsible citizens. Democracies or economies could not function as well as they do if ordinary people were not

basically responsible. By portraying ordinary citizens as vulnerable, as victims, it is easier to justify government intervention to protect us from ourselves. “Gun deaths” are no more than a deliberate conflation of figures designed to bolster government policy. We should all be concerned that murder and violent crime remain stubbornly stable despite the imposition of expensive gun laws.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>I would like to thank Peter Allen, of Adelaide, South Australia, for his insightful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

<sup>2</sup>In 2002, the Auditor General estimated that the Department of Justice costs alone on the firearm registry would reach 1 billion in 2005. She could not get complete expenditures from the government (Fraser, 2002, ch. 10, p. 9). The costs are unavailable for the cooperating departments, provinces and territories because they have been classified as “cabinet secrets” (Breitkreuz, 1999, 2000, and 2003).

<sup>3</sup>The current system, introduced in 1995, requires that all firearm owners obtain a licence, and keep it current, as well as requiring that that privately owned firearms be listed in a registry. The previous system, first introduced by Prime Minister Trudeau, in 1977, and significantly modified by Justice Minister Kim Campbell in 1991, required that prospective purchasers pass both a criminal record check and a firearm safety exam.

<sup>4</sup>A third argument is also given, that government officials use a lot, but this is undercut by the government’s admission that no crimes have ever been solved with information derived from the registry.

<sup>5</sup>Compare “gun deaths” with “motor vehicle deaths,” which are predominately accidents, some suicides, and very few homicides.

<sup>6</sup>The homicide rate has recently increased, jumping 12 percent in 2004 from 2003 (Sauvé, 2005).

<sup>7</sup>Between 20 percent and 30 percent of Canadian households are known to have legal firearms, but few homicides are committed with a legal firearm. Only 7 percent



of the firearms used in a homicide are registered, and less than 20 percent of the accused have a valid FAC or firearms licence (Dauvergne, 2004, p. 8). See also Mauser, 2003.

<sup>8</sup>The 1995 legislation included provisions for increasing the penalties for criminals who used firearms in the commission of a violent crime. But research shows that prosecutors prefer not to bring such charges, and when they do, they are typically plea-bargained away.

<sup>9</sup>The modern trend of introducing “right to carry” laws started with Florida in 1987. See National Rifle Association, 2005.

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