Suicides and the "Gun Deaths" Fraud

by Gary Mauser

tatistics Canada recently reported that "gun deaths" have declined (Wilkins, 2005). The media love such factoids, but they are meaningless. What would you think if hospitals announced that "bed deaths" have decreased—or increased? Would that be very helpful in understanding health problems? Doctors would be embarrassed to use such a vague term. But not public health bureaucrats.

It is time to stop using the term "gun deaths." The term is being used to distract the reader from understanding what firearms have to do with homicide or suicide. "Gun deaths" is a pot pourri of suicides, homicides, and accidents. The supposed link is that these deaths share a common cause: a gun was accessible. But the mere availability of guns doesn't make ordinary people commit murder, or suicide, or have accidents. This term perpetuates this pernicious myth.

It is demonstrably false that ordinary people are somehow motivated by the

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presence of a firearm to kill themselves or others.² This paternalistic notion stems from a public health view of people as "patients" who need treatment and it is incompatible with the view that ordinary people are responsible citizens. By portraying the ordinary citizen as vulnerable, it is easier to justify government intervention to protect us from ourselves (see Mauser and Stanbury, 2003). Democracies or economies could not function as well as they do if ordinary people were not basically responsible.

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 suicide and accidents in Canada.

Since "gun deaths" are mostly suicide, let's consider the nature of suicide in Canada.

Ordinary people do not tend to commit suicide. Research shows that suicide is associated with mental illness, substance abuse, depression, and family violence (Wilson, 1991). This neither describes

the typical Canadian nor the typical gun owner. Moreover, shooting oneself is not a popular method of suicide. It is the third most frequent method after hanging and poisoning oneself; guns are involved in about 1 out of six suicides (18 percent).

Table 2:	Methods	of	Suicide
in	Canada,	200)1

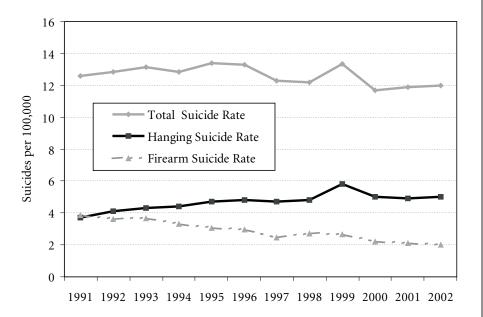
Hanging	1,509
Poisoning	968
Shooting	651
Jumping	264
Drowning	106
Sharp object	94
Other	96
Total	3,688

Source: Statistics Canada (2004), "Deaths, by Cause, Canada, 2001," cat. no. 84-208-XIE.

When people decide to commit suicide, they naturally choose a method that will accomplish their goals.3 Since guns are not uniquely more lethal than alternative methods, such as hanging, one would expect that removing firearms would not eliminate other effective alternatives (Kleck, 1997, p. 266). And that is what is observed. Over the past decade in Canada, as firearms have fallen out of fashion as a method of ending one's life, hanging has increased in popularity, almost doubling in frequency since 1995. The net result is that the suicide rate in Canada has remained relatively stable over the past ten years, declining very slightly from 13 to 12 per 100,000 population. 4 If reduced access to guns is indeed responsible for the decline in suicides involving firearms, it has not saved any lives.⁵ Unfortunately, determined people still manage to find ways to end their own lives.



Figure 1: Trends in Canadian Suicide Rates



Source: Canadian Mortality Database.

Wilkins compares Canada with the US, but she does not mention that overall Canadian suicide rates are higher than those in the US. Despite the greater availability of guns in the US, suicide rates (by any method) have long been higher in Canada than in the US. In 2001, the overall suicide rate was 11.9 in Canada and 10.7 in the US (WISQARS and Statistics Canada's Canadian Vital Statistics—Death Database). This would be unlikely if overall suicide rates were driven primarily by the availability of firearms. It is simplistic to think that suicide hinges upon the availability of any single method. Suicide patterns arise from a variety of depressing personal or social conditions. Unfortunately, such conditions exist in Canada as well as in the United States.

Conclusions

The use of the term "gun deaths" offers no insight into why people

commit suicide. The term may have its uses, but it is inappropriate for analyzing social problems, such as suicide or homicide. Not only does the term overly flatter bureaucrats by implying that they have a paternalistic superiority over ordinary people, but it denigrates ordinary people as vulnerable "patients" needing treatment. Such treatment undermines the basic assumptions of democracies and markets. By ignoring the idea that ordinary people might be responsible and capable individuals, it justifies further government intervention in order to protect us from ourselves.

In this article, I've limited myself to discussing guns and suicide and postponed any mention of Canadian gun laws. The Wilkins article irresponsibly implies that our gun laws, including the two-billion dollar gun registry, have helped to bring gun deaths down. This begs to be refuted. I'll take up that discussion in a future issue of Fraser Forum.

Notes

¹The author would like to thank Peter Allan of Adelaide, South Australia, for his ideas and his editorial help.

²This can be seen in that insurance companies do not raise rates for life insurance customers who own firearms.

³By the same logic, people who do not intend to die, but who wish to signal others that they desperately need help, tend to pick less effective methods, or at least methods that take a longer time to work, like overdosing on pills.

⁴According to Statistics Canada's Canadian Vital Statistics—Death Database, in 1991 there were 3,591 suicides in Canada compared with 3,688 in 2001.

⁵Numerous studies have shown that the availability of firearms is correlated with firearm suicide but not with overall suicide rates (see Kleck, 1997, p. 285).

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