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Critical Issues Bulletin:
*a supplement to the monthly publication
from The Fraser Institute*

Gun Control is not Crime Control

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About this Publication

This Critical Issues Bulletin was originally published by The Fraser Institute in March 1995. This archived version of it was created and posted to the Institute web site in 2003 to provide, in an easily accessible online format, background information about a subject which remains a current public policy concern.

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Date of issue

Original edition: March 1995
On-line version: January 2003

Editing, design and production

Kristin McCahon

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The Fraser Institute is an independent Canadian economic and social research and educational organization. It has as its objective the redirection of public attention to the role of competitive markets in providing for the well-being of Canadians. Where markets work, the Institute's interest lies in trying to discover prospects for improvement. Where markets do not work, its interest lies in finding the reasons. Where competitive markets have been replaced by government control, the interest of the Institute lies in documenting objectively the nature of the improvement or deterioration resulting from government intervention. The work of the Institute is assisted by an Editorial Advisory Board of internationally renowned economists. The Fraser Institute is a national,

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Introduction

by Michael Walker, Executive Director, The Fraser Institute

What has gun control got to do with economic policy? The Fraser Institute is both an economic and social research organization, and has long maintained an interest in a variety of subjects which are only tangentially economic in their principal content. But this is not the main reason for undertaking a study of the relationship between gun control and violence, or for examining the gun control legislation which the government of Canada seeks to pursue.

The real function of the Fraser Institute in Canadian society is to encourage the enhancement of our quality of life and our standard of living by encouraging more rational public policy. And that means public policy that is constructed after taking into account what is understood about cause and effect relationships in society, and, therefore, after taking into account the unintended consequences that policy actions will have, and taking into account a careful appreciation of the extent to which the policy goal being pursued can in fact be achieved by the policy in question. We also want to know the minimal level of intervention required to achieve the policy goal.

All of The Fraser Institute's 21-year body of work has been careful to note that there is a distinction between an agreement with the objectives of a policy, and with the policy being suggested to pursue that objective. Good intentions don't necessarily make good policy. The current Critical Issues Bulletin is a perfect illustration of this concern. One can wholeheartedly agree that reducing violent crime is an objective worthy of pursuit by all Canadians. Indeed, if it were true that violent crime could be reduced by increasing control over the general public's access to firearms, then it would be rational to expend more effort controlling access to firearms. But the compelling evidence is that there is no apparent connection between the availability of firearms and the extent of violence.

To adopt tougher firearms controls in the belief that doing so would solve the problem of increasing violence in Canadian society would be simply incorrect. But such an action would have unintended consequences. It might actually increase Canadians' exposure to violence since guns are frequently used to protect individuals from at-

tack by other individuals or by wild animals.

More importantly, a system of gun control of the kind proposed by the federal government would be so onerous that it would greatly reduce the resources available for policing. And with less policing, Canadians are likely to experience increased violence. In that sense, the policy is likely to have precisely the opposite consequence to that intended by its authors.

The author of this paper estimates that the most stringent form of gun control—a universal gun registration—would actually cost half a billion dollars, implying that there is a significant economic aspect to this policy. As the author himself concludes, given its likely ineffectiveness and the financial circumstances of the government, is this really a policy that should be pursued at this time?

This paper is the first of a number of studies that The Fraser Institute is undertaking that will consider the incentives and disincentives of different kinds of behaviour related to crime and justice. We will, over the course of the next several years, be pub-

lishing studies that examine: the costs of the justice system; how the costs of criminal activity appear to those who find criminal behaviour attractive; and the consequences, both for the administration of the justice sys-

tem and the containment of criminal behaviour, that follow from the established incentives.

The Fraser Institute has been very pleased to support the work of Professor Mauser, as re-

ported in this Critical Issues Bulletin. However, Professor Mauser has worked independently, and his views do not necessarily represent those of the members or the trustees of The Fraser Institute.

About the Author

Gary Mauser, Ph.D. is Professor in Business Administration and in the Institute for Canadian Urban Research Studies at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby, B.C. He has taught at SFU since 1975. His formal education includes a B.A. in Psychology from the University of California at Berkeley and a Ph.D. in Psychology from the University of California at Irvine.

Professor Mauser's publications include two books and over 30 published papers in criminology, political science, marketing, and research methodology. For the past several years, Professor Mauser has been researching issues related to firearms and firearm legislation. He has published two articles comparing Canadian and American attitudes towards firearms and firearm legislation and another examining the

treatment of polls and gun control by the mass media. He has published an econometric analysis of the effects of the 1977 Canadian firearms legislation on homicide, and he is currently working on a parallel evaluation of this same law's effect on armed robbery.

Professor Mauser is a gun owner and a certified Canadian Firearms Safety Course Instructor.

Gun Control is not Crime Control

Crime increasingly dominates the news and the public is quite concerned about criminal violence. Naturally, the government wants to be seen as doing something. Unfortunately, few options promise a quick fix.

Any real solution to criminal violence is likely to be complex and expensive, so the government is attracted to waging a symbolic campaign to win votes. Since it is currently fashionable to equate firearms with violence, and there is an emotional crusade against firearms, the government sees a political opportunity. Gun control promises an easy victory. Polls show that the public is both afraid of firearms and ignorant of the current firearms legislation. Even if the new laws don't work, the public won't know, and the government can always call for more "gun control" laws in a few years.

Unfortunately, the track record of "gun control" actually reducing criminal violence is not good. No government in the world can boast that the introduction of stricter firearms laws has actually reduced criminal violence. Firearms have been

banned in Jamaica, Hong Kong, New York City, and Washington, DC, without leading to decreases in homicides. Consequently, governments that impose stricter gun controls frequently find themselves calling for another round of yet stricter firearms laws just a few years after introducing the original gun laws.

The federal government's current proposals for stricter gun control would, if introduced, not only fail to reduce crime, but would vastly increase the size of the federal bureaucracy. It is even possible that the gun control proposals would increase violent crime. The government's proposals naively assume that all gun owners are identical. Reality is quite different. There are at least two basic types of firearms owners: the ordinary person (e.g., the hunter or target shooter) and the violent offender. The problems posed to public safety by these two groups differ considerably. Legislation already in place is more than adequate for regulating the average person (e.g., the Firearms Acquisition Certificate, hunting regulations, handgun registration,

regulations for storing, handling, and transporting firearms). However, the violent offender poses a significant threat to public safety, and greater efforts must be focused here. It is a truism that laws only apply to the law-abiding.

The present laws are so complex that not even the police, who must enforce them, adequately understand them. The Auditor General of Canada, in his 1993 report, pointed out that the most recent Canadian firearms legislation (Bill C-17, which became law in 1991 and has been phased in over the past three years) has been poorly researched and requires a critical reevaluation to see what its consequences are.¹ Before any further legislation is enacted, it makes sense to conduct a thorough evaluation as requested by the Auditor General.

Gun control laws are a boon to the bureaucracy. Bill C-17 cost at least \$50 million in its first few years and has had no measurable effect on firearms deaths.² Universal firearms registration, which is presently being considered by the government, would

1 *Report of the Auditor General, 1993, Queen's Printer, Ottawa, pp. 647-655.*

cost a minimum of \$500 million to introduce and would be no more effective.

It is not rational to fear firearms owners. Neither internationally nor within Canada is there a demonstrable link between firearms availability and violence. On an international level, Canada, along with Israel, Norway, and Switzerland, has a relatively large number of firearms per capita, but these countries, including Canada, exhibit some of the lowest homicide rates in the world. Within Canada, those regions with more firearms—the rural areas—tend to have lower homicide rates, while the urban areas, where there are fewer firearms, have higher homicide rates.³ The contrast between Newfoundland, where many families have firearms for hunting, and Toronto, where few people have legal firearms, is striking.⁴

To understand why firearms legislation cannot reduce violent crime, the first part of this paper reviews the available statistics pertaining to Canadian firearms owners and firearms accidents. Next, it shows that

firearms ownership is not linked with criminal violence, and that firearms legislation has a dismal track record in reducing crime or violence. Then it examines how often Canadians report using firearms to defend themselves or their families. The final section evaluates two specific proposals that were recently introduced in Parliament by the government—full firearms registration and banning small handguns.

Canadian firearms owners

Firearms ownership is a significant part of modern Canadian life. Many Canadians own firearms for hunting or target-shooting purposes; this has been true for hundreds of years. With reasonable care and attention, firearms do not pose a significant threat to the public in the hands of the ordinary person. Owners of long-guns (rifles and shotguns) tend to be hunters; handgun owners tend to be target-shooters or collectors.

Canada has some of the strictest firearms laws in the world.⁵ Anyone wishing to purchase a

firearm must hold a valid Firearms Acquisition Certificate (FAC). To obtain an FAC, the applicant must pay \$50, subject him or herself to a full character investigation by the police, pass a 3-hour firearms safety exam or course costing between \$100 and \$180, and wait a minimum of 28 days. In practice, the wait is often closer to 3 months. First-time applicants often must wait 6 months or more. Prospective hunters must also obtain a provincial hunting licence, which involves passing a second exam or course costing at least \$75.

The purchase of a handgun, or any other firearm classified as a “restricted weapon,” requires further permits and police checks. Canadians have required permits to purchase handguns since 1913, and handguns have been registered since 1934. For the past 20 years, the police have required all purchasers of restricted weapons to undergo police checks and to join a gun club. All restricted firearms are registered, and a police permit is required to transport a restricted firearm to and from the owner’s home or

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- 2 Gary Mauser, “Canadian Gun Laws: Peace, Order, and Good Government?” presented to the American Society of Criminology, New Orleans, November 4-7, 1992. It is very difficult to estimate the cost of bill C-17 because the costs are divided among several departments.
- 3 Robert Silverman and Leslie Kennedy, *Deedly Deeds: Murder in Canada*, Ontario: Nelson Canada, 1993, pp. 211-216; Philip Stenning, “Homicide in Canada,” presentation at Simon Fraser University, 1994.
- 4 The situation in the West, where firearms ownership is high, is more complex. The higher homicide rate for the aboriginal population distorts the rural population’s average. Unfortunately, native Indians have a higher homicide rate than other Canadians, whether they live in rural or urban areas.
- 5 Firearms are covered in the federal criminal law. Part III of the Criminal Code, Sections 84 through 117, is devoted entirely to firearms regulations. Provincial hunting regulations also cover firearms use. In addition to federal and provincial legislation, there are hundreds of pages of regulations that specify how these laws are to be interpreted.

Table 1: Percentage of Canadian Population That Reports Owning Firearms

Region	Percentage of households owning firearms
Canada	23%
B.C.	24%
Alberta	39%
Saskatchewan	35%
Manitoba	25%
Ontario	15%
Quebec	23%
Atlantic	32%
Territories	67%

Sources: Angus Reid, *Firearms Ownership in Canada*, March 1991. Funded by Department of Justice Canada.

place of business. In order to shoot the handgun or restricted rifle, the owner must apply annually for a carrying permit which will allow him or her to take the restricted firearm to an approved shooting range. This permit requires another thorough police check each year.

According to survey estimates, at least one household in four in Canada has firearms. A recent survey by Angus Reid found that 23 percent of households had firearms in 1991.⁶ There are 10 million households in Canada, which means that 2.2 mil-

lion households have firearms (see table 1). This may be a low estimate as another recent survey found 34 percent of households had firearms, which would mean that 3.4 million households own firearms.⁷ Thus, there are between 2.2 and 3.4 million Canadian households with firearms. Since there may be more than one firearms owner in a household, these are minimum estimates of the number of individual firearms owners in Canada. As well, an unknown percentage of people have firearms but have not reported them to the interviewer. Consequently, the best estimate is that approximately one-third of Canadian households have one or more firearms. This means that, in 1993, there were between 3 million and 7 million in-

dividual firearms owners out of a total population of 29 million.

Conservatively, there are at least 6 million firearms in Canada—5 million of these being long arms (that is, rifles and shotguns) and 1 million handguns.⁸ These firearms are owned by Canadian hunters and target shooters. This estimate may be low. A survey conducted in 1993, funded by the United Nations, estimated that there were 7 million firearms (6 million of which were rifles and shotguns) in Canada. Estimates based on import/export figures are much higher: as many as 25 million firearms.

As tables 2 and 3 show, Canadians own firearms primarily for hunting. Due to the differences

Table 2: Percentage of Firearms-Owning Households that Own Firearms of Each Type

Region	Rifle (%)	Shotgun (%)	Handgun (%)
Canada	71	64	12
B.C.	81	51	16
Alberta	85	58	11
Saskatchewan	87	61	13
Manitoba	64	61	13
Ontario	69	67	12
Quebec	55	77	7
Atlantic	70	66	8
Territories	75	70	10

Source: Angus Reid, *Firearms Ownership in Canada*, March 1991. Funded by Department of Justice Canada.

6 Angus Reid, *Firearms Ownership in Canada*, TR1991-8a, March 1991. Funded by the Department of Justice Canada.

7 Gary Mauser and Michael Margolis, "The Politics of Gun Control: Comparing Canadian and American Patterns," *Government and Policy*, 1992 vol. 10, pp. 189-209. Another national survey found that 28 percent of Canadian households owned firearms. Mauser, unpublished report, Simon Fraser University, 1995.

8 Angus Reid, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

Table 3: Reasons Reported for Owning Firearms

	B.C.	Canada
Hunting	71%	71%
Target shooting	11%	5%
Collecting	13%	7%
Self protection	7%	4%

Source: Gary Mauser and Michael Margolis, national survey, April 1990. "The Politics of Gun Control," *Government and Policy*, 1992. Funded by the International Council for Canadian Studies, Canadian Embassy, Washington, DC.

in the nature of the game and predators across the country, Westerners tend to own more rifles than shotguns, while Central and Eastern Canadians tend to own more shotguns than rifles. A small number of households have handguns, almost always for target shooting. Even though self defense is legal, the police rarely allow self defense as a reason for owning a firearm. A 1987 survey by the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) provides corroborating evidence. It found that approximately 8.4 percent of the population 15 years of age or older hunt each year. The CWS estimated that a total of 1.7 million people hunt each year in Canada and that 23 percent of the population 15 years of age or older have hunted at some time in their life—a total of 3.7 million people.⁹

Canadian hunters contribute significantly to the economy; they spend \$1.1 billion on hunting annually.¹⁰ The bulk of this

Table 4: Comparison of Profiles of Canadian Firearms Owners and Overall Population, 18 years old and over

	Firearms Owners (%)	Overall Population (%)
Gender		
Male	86	49
Female	14	51
Age		
18-34	31	38
35-54	46	35
55+	22	27
Education		
Less than High School	26	22
High School	29	25
Some Post-Secondary	28	30
Completed University	15	23
Unknown	2	
Income		
Under \$20,000	11	17
\$20,000 - \$39,999	32	33
\$40,000 - \$59,999	25	24
\$60,000 +	20	19
Unknown	10	7
Employment status		
Full-time	66	47
Part-time	6	12
Unemployed	14	17
Retired	3	7
At home	3	7
Student	3	9
Occupation		
Owner	13	15
Professional	18	34
Clerical	8	10
Sales/Service	18	23
Blue collar	33	14
Farming	8	3

Source: Angus Reid, March 1991 survey, and Census data from Statistics Canada.

money is spent in small towns where it provides an important part of the local income. In addition to what they spend on hunting, Canadian hunters

spend another \$900 million on wildlife-related activities, primarily donations for improving or purchasing natural areas for wildlife. In total, they spend an

Table 5: Household Firearm Safety Instruction (Firearms-owning households in which at least one person has received firearms safety training during the past five years)

Region	%
Canada	49
B.C.	43
Alberta	46
Saskatchewan	47
Manitoba	48
Ontario	53
Quebec	48
Atlantic	48
Yukon/NWT	60

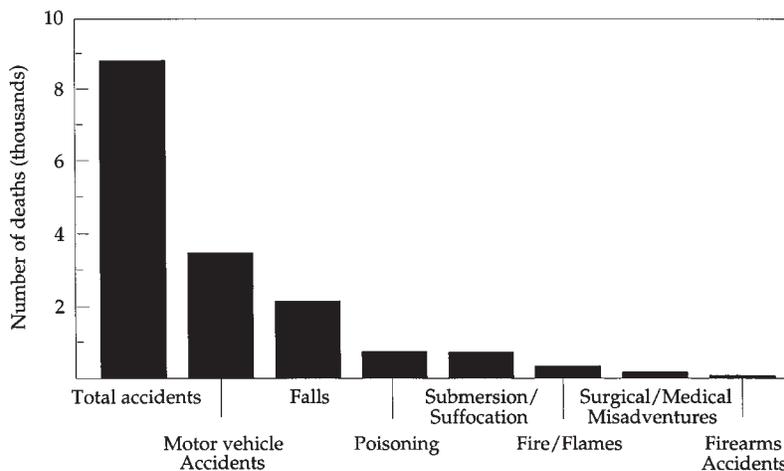
Type of firearm	
Rifle	48
Shotgun	52
Handgun	67
Other	55

Reason for Ownership	
Target shooting	60
Hunting	50
Collecting	38
Employment	75
Self-protection	52

Used in past year	
Yes	60
No	37

Source: Angus Reid, *Firearms Ownership in Canada*, March 1991. Funded by Department of Justice Canada.

Figure 1: Causes of Accidental Death in Canada, 1992



Source: Table 6.

estimated \$2 billion annually on wildlife related activities. Canadians spend a total of \$5.1 billion annually on wildlife tourism and conservation combined. Approximately 40 percent of this total is spent by hunters, who, by one definition, constitute less than 10 percent of the population.¹¹

Target shooters, though less numerous, also contribute to the Canadian economy. There have been no published studies of their economic impact, but thousands of competitive target shooters travel around Canada each year to participate in various matches and competitions.

Unpublished estimates are that competitive target shooters spend between \$40 and \$100 million on tourism annually.

Target shooters make a more subjective contribution as well. Four Canadian shooters have won gold medals in the Olympic Games. The winners in the past decade have been women: Linda Thom who won gold with a handgun at Los Angeles in 1984; and Myriam Bedard who won two gold medals in the biathlon in Norway in 1994, and was subsequently named the top female athlete of 1994 by the Canadian Press. In the 1994 Commonwealth Games held in

9 Fern L. Fillion, et al., Canadian Wildlife Service, *The Importance of Wildlife to Canadians in 1987: The Economic Significance of Wildlife-related Recreational Activities*, and *The Importance of Wildlife to Canadians in 1987: The Highlights of a National Survey*, Ottawa: Environment Canada, 1989.

10 Canadian Wildlife Service, *The Importance of Wildlife to Canadians in 1987: The Highlights of a National Survey*, Ottawa: Environment Canada, 1989, p. 23.

11 Approximately 8 percent of the total population actually go hunting in any given year, but approximately 23 percent of the population have had at least one hunting experience. *Op cit.*, pp. 16, 20, 22-23, 33-34.

Victoria, Canadians won 22 medals in the shooting sports, more medals than were won by Canadians in any other sport. Eight of these medals were gold, seven were silver, and seven were bronze. The shooting sports made a significant contribution to Canada's standings at the games.

Table 4 shows that firearms owners tend to be predominantly male, a bit older than average, slightly less well educated, but with a higher than average income. Hunters are more likely to be blue collar workers or farmers, while handgun shooters tend to be white collar professionals.

As table 5 shows, a large number of firearms owners have taken classes in firearms safety. These relatively high percentages are primarily due to pro-

vincial courses in hunter training. Since the 1960s, all Canadian provinces have required new hunters to pass a course or exam in hunting and firearms safety. This is an unqualified success story. Firearms accidents, and in fact all accidental deaths related to hunting, have been on the decline since then. Starting in 1994, the federal government began requiring all FAC applicants to pass a firearms safety exam as well. These firearms safety courses are offered by a large number of fish and game clubs across Canada.

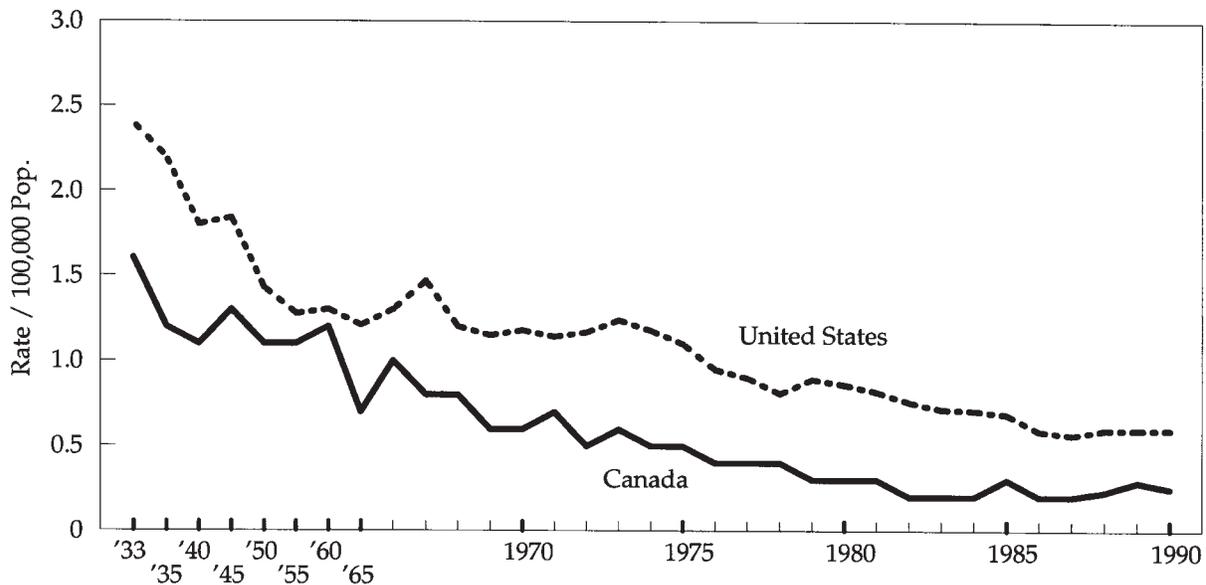
Very few people die in firearms accidents, as table 6 illustrates. In 1992, firearms accidents claimed 66 people (0.8 percent) out of the 8,801 accidental deaths in Canada. That same year, motor vehicles were involved in 3,462 deaths, while

Table 6: Causes of Death in Canada, 1992

Total population	28,753,000
Total of all causes of death	196,535
Total accidents	8,801
Motor vehicle accidents	3,462
Falls	2,138
Poisoning	726
Submersion/suffocation	706
Fire/flames	328
Surgical/Medical misadventures	154
Firearms accidents	66
Suicides	3,709
Homicide (including justifiable homicide)	732

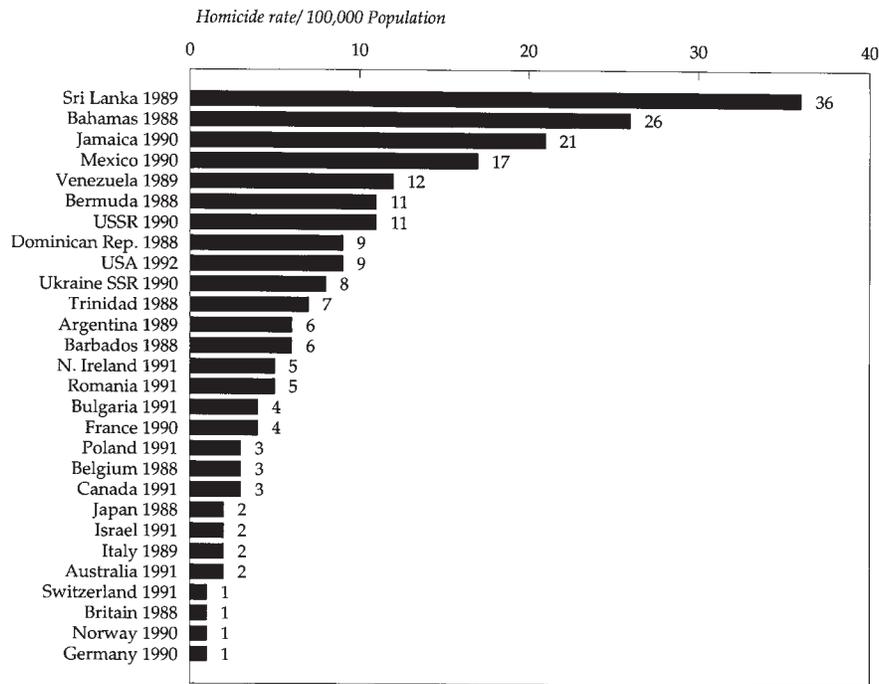
Sources: Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Health Information, *Causes of Death, 1992, 1994*; Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, "Homicide in Canada 1992," *Juristat*, vol. 14, no. 4, January 1993, p. 18.

Figure 2: Accidental Death by Firearm in Canada and the United States, 1933-1990



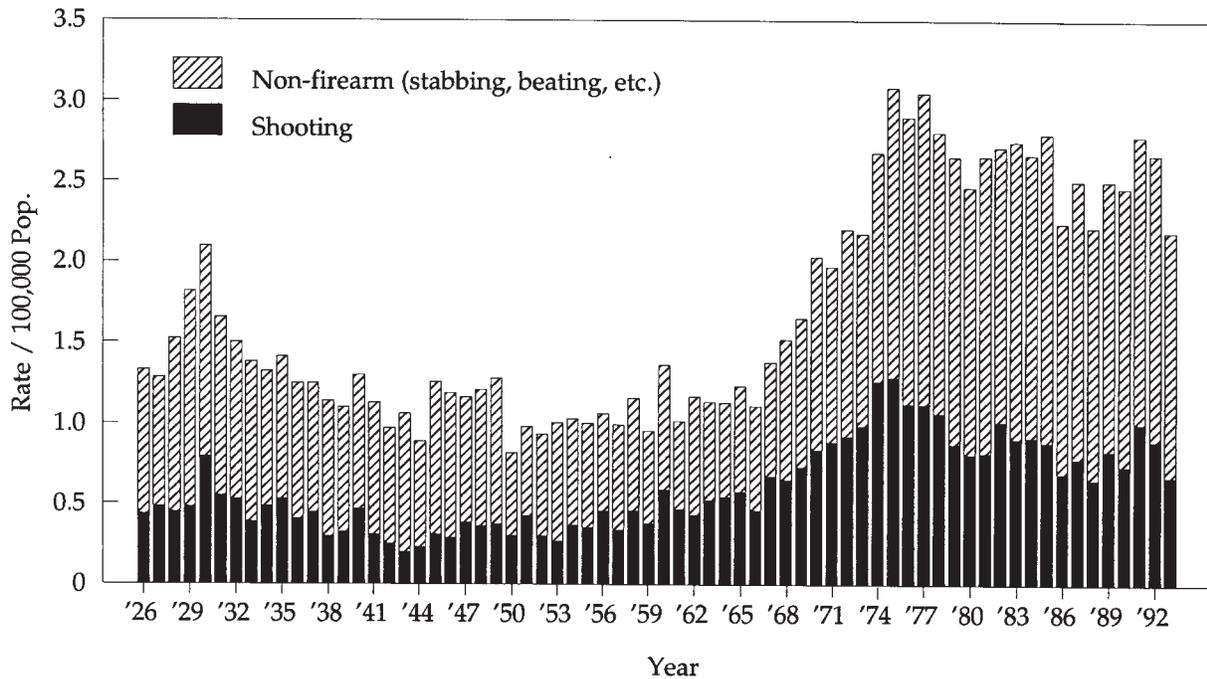
Canadian Sources: Dominion Bureau of Statistics, and the Canadian Centre for Health Information.
 U.S. Source: Gary Kleck, *Point Blank: Guns and Violence in America*, 1991, p. 306.

Figure 3: Homicide—An International Perspective



Note: Swiss gun laws are liberal in comparison to those in Canada, the U.S., and most of Europe. Japan prohibits handguns. Sources: Interpol and W.H.O.

Figure 4: Homicide in Canada, 1926-1993



Note: Capital punishment was abolished in 1976. Restrictive gun control legislation was introduced in 1978 and 1991. Sources: Dominion Bureau of Statistics, and the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics.

Figure 5: Previous Criminal History of Accused Murderers in Canada, 1991



Note: "No Recorded Criminal History" includes previous criminal charges either dismissed or plea-bargained away.
 Source: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, *Homicide in Canada*, Oct. 1992, p. 15.

2,138 people were killed in falls, 726 people were poisoned, and 706 people died by drowning (submersion/suffocation). More than twice as many people (154) died at the hands of their doctors, through "surgical or medical misadventures," than were involved in fatal firearms accidents.

Firearms and criminal violence

It is a myth that the typical firearms owner poses a threat to public safety. Firearms may kill a small number of people each year, but they save lives as well. Firearms are used about three

times as often in self defense as they are in criminal violence. Over the past decade, firearms have been involved in approximately one-third of all homicides, one-third of all suicides, and less than one percent of all accidental deaths. Since firearms are in approximately one-third of the nation's households, the presence of a firearm does not appear to make one's home any less safe than any other.¹²

Homicide

On an international scale, Canada has a relatively low homicide rate. In 1993, 630 homicides were reported in Canada, or 2.2

homicides per 100,000 population. As illustrated in figure 3, in 1990 the homicide rate for the Bahamas was 26 homicides for every 100,000 people, for Jamaica it was 21 homicides per 100,000, and the USA had 9 homicides per 100,000. On the other hand, a few countries have even lower homicide rates than Canada: Israel and Australia have 2 homicides per 100,000, while England, Japan, Switzerland, and Norway all have only 1 homicide per 100,000 population.

Historically, the Canadian homicide rate has declined slightly from the all-time peak reached in the late 1970s (see figure 4). Current homicide rates are 27 percent lower than they were during the late 1970s and 14 percent lower than they were during 1992.

Murderers are not typical people. They are distinctly different

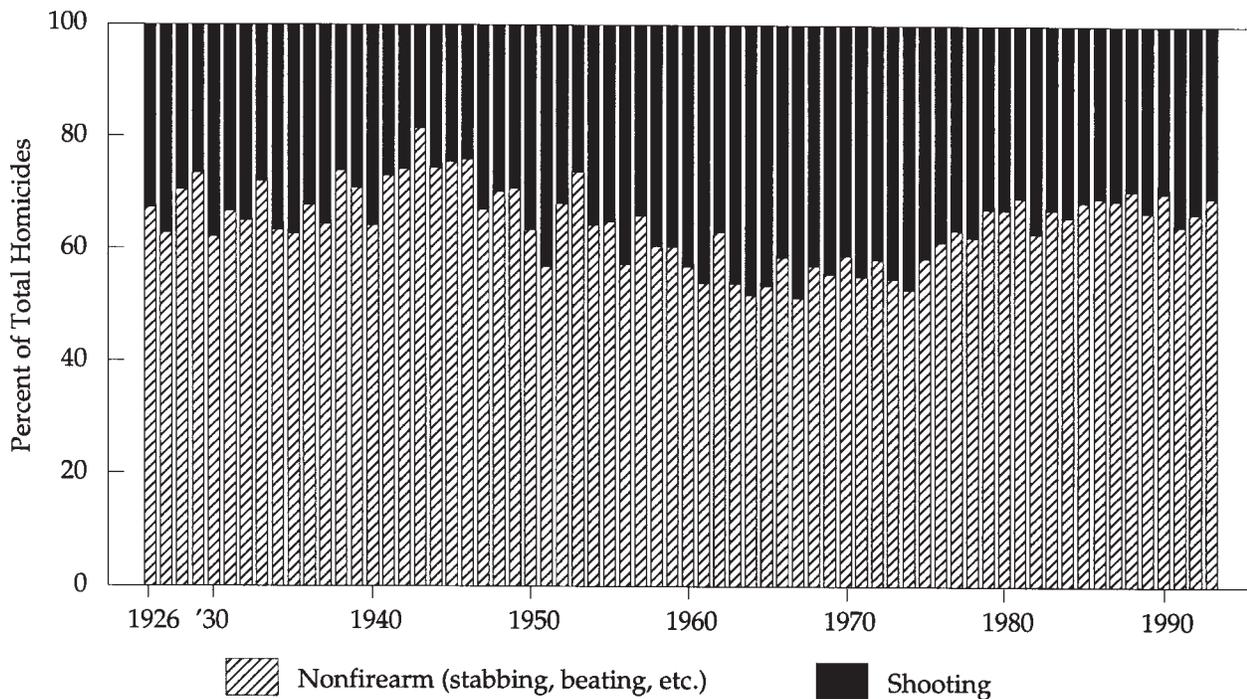
Table 7: Methods Used in Homicide

	1993	1974 to 1987
Firearms	31%	33%
Stabbings	31%	25%
Beatings	19%	20%
Other	19%	22%
	100%	100%

Source: "Homicide in Canada, 1993," *Juristat*, Vol. 12, No. 18 and "Homicide in Canada, 1989," *Juristat*, Vol. 10, No. 14.

12 Gary Mauser, "Firearms and Self Defense: The Canadian Case," presented to the American Society of Criminology, October 27, 1993.

Figure 6: Method of Committing Homicide in Canada, 1926-1993



Note: Capital punishment was abolished in 1976. Restrictive gun control legislation was enacted in 1978 and 1991. Sources: Dominion Bureau of Statistics, and the Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics.

from the general population. Murderers tend to be young males with a history of criminal violence who abuse drugs or alcohol.¹³ In 1991, *Juristat* reported that two-thirds of accused were known to have previous criminal records¹⁴ (see figure 5). Unfortunately, Statistics Canada did not report the criminal records of either accused or victims in 1992 or 1993, although it plans to do so again in the future.

Homicide is largely a crime by men against other men. In 1993, 87 percent accused of homicide were male, as were two-thirds (67 percent) of the victims. Almost one-half (48 percent) of the accused were between 18 and 29 years of age, as were 56 percent of the victims. More than one-half (56 percent) of the accused had consumed alcohol, drugs, or both at the time of the offence, as had 40 percent of the victims.¹⁵

One-third (33 percent) of homicides occurred during the course of another offence. Two-thirds of these were committed during the commission of a violent offence (e.g., robbery or rape) while another third (33 percent) were committed during the course of a property offence (e.g., theft) or a drug offence.¹⁶

There are few statistics available on ethnic differences in crime

13 Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, "Homicide in Canada—1993," *Juristat*, vol. 14, issue 15, pp. 16-18. These are quite similar to the American percentages. See James Wright and Peter Rossi, *Armed and Considered Dangerous*, New York: Aldine, 1986.

14 Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, "Homicide in Canada—1991," *Juristat*, vol. 12, issue 18, pp. 14-15.

15 Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, "Homicide in Canada—1993," p. 16.

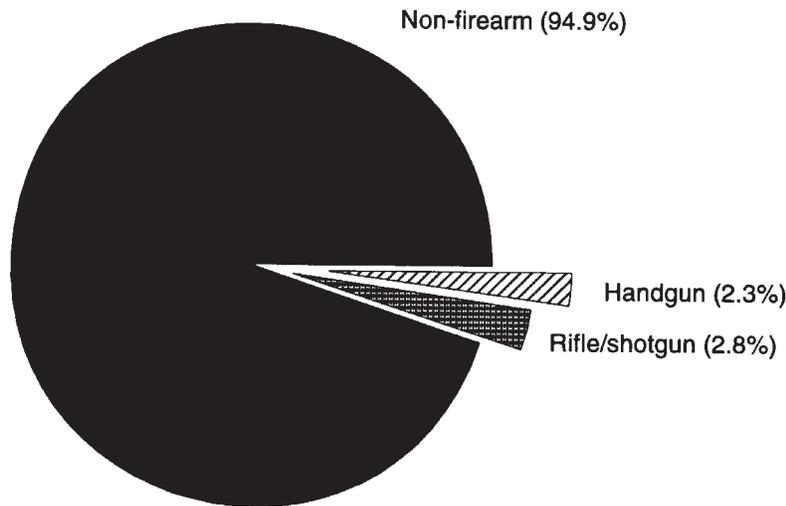
16 Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, "Homicide in Canada—1993," p. 18.

Table 8: Percentage of Canadian Population Who Report Owning Firearms Compared With the 1992 Homicide Rates

	Percentage of Households Owning Firearms	Homicide Rate (per 100,000 population)
Canada	23%	2.7
B.C.	24%	3.7
Alberta	39%	3.6
Saskatchewan	35%	3.2
Manitoba	25%	2.6
Ontario	15%	2.4
Quebec	23%	2.4
Atlantic	32%	1.4
Territories	67%	17.8

Source: Angus Reid, *Firearms Ownership in Canada*, March 1991. Funded by Department of Justice Canada. N = 2,341 households.

Figure 7: Firearms and Violent Crime in Canada, 1988-1991



Note: "Non-firearm" includes knives, blunt instruments, physical force, etc.
 Source: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, *Weapons and Violent Crime*, Aug. 1991, p. 2, pp. 10-13.

rates in Canada, unlike those available for the United States. The sole exception is for native peoples who are vastly over-represented in homicide statistics. Natives make up 3 percent of the total population, but constitute 19 percent of all suspects and 15 percent of all victims. With regard to domestic homicides, these percentages increase to 23 percent of suspects and 22 percent of victims.¹⁷

As table 7 shows, firearms are typically involved in less than one-third of all homicides. This percentage has not changed appreciably over the past 20 years (see figure 6). There are between 2.2 and 3.4 million Canadian households with firearms, but in any given year, fewer than 250 homicides involve firearms.¹⁸

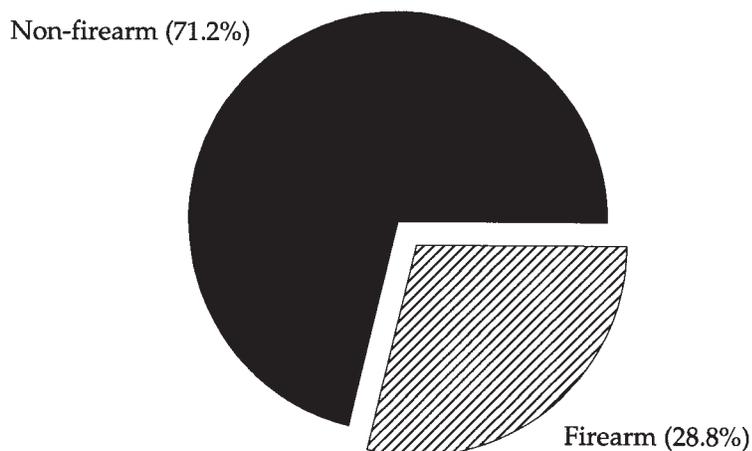
Between 1961 and 1990, Statistics Canada reported an average of 130 homicides with handguns per year. Of these handguns, fewer than four per year were known to be registered. The rest were either owned illegally by the accused, or the police had not determined the status of the handgun.¹⁹ Due to the unreliability of the registration system, after 1991 Statistics Canada discontinued recording whether restricted weapons were registered or not.

17 Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, "Homicide in the Family," *Juristat*, vol. 9, no. 1.

18 Gary Mauser and Richard Holmes, "An Evaluation of the 1977 Canadian Firearms Legislation," *Evaluation Review*, vol. 16, pp. 603-617.

19 Compiled at the request of Professor Taylor Buckner, Concordia University by Statistics Canada. Presented to Canadian Law Society meetings, Calgary, Alberta, 1994.

Figure 8: Firearms in Canadian Robbery
(Total Robberies, 1981-1991 = 280,906)



Note: "Non-firearm" includes knives, blunt instruments, physical force, etc.
Source: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, *Weapons and Violent Crime*, Aug. 1991, p. 2, pp. 10-13.

There is no direct link between the availability of firearms and homicide in Canada. Homicide rates are more closely linked with the native population and with the proportion of young men between 15 and 24 years old in a province than they are with the availability of firearms.²⁰ Table 8 compares the provincial homicide rates with the distribution of gun ownership. Firearms ownership is high in both Western and Eastern Canada, but the homicide rate is only high in those areas

where there also is a high proportion of native Indians. In the Maritimes, where firearms ownership is as high as it is on the Prairies, the homicide rates are the lowest in the country. When the native homicides are factored out of the Western data, the homicide rates for the non-native population fall to that of the Maritimes.²¹

Other violent crimes

Firearms are involved in an extremely small percentage of vio-

lent crimes in Canada (see figure 7). Even in the unlikely event that all firearms were to disappear overnight, this would not significantly reduce violent crime.²² Many sociologists and criminologists believe that violent crime is more closely linked with social breakdown than with firearms legislation.²³

Out of all violent crimes, firearms are most likely to be used in robbery, and even here, firearms are involved in fewer than 30 percent of all robberies (see figure 8). Figure 9 shows that while robberies have increased considerably since 1976, the incidence of firearms use is still about as frequent now as it was in the late 1970s.

Suicide

Suicide is quite different from violent crimes like homicide and robbery, but it must be discussed here because three-quarters of all firearms deaths are due to suicide. Suicide is not an impulsive act. Given the ready availability of the means of self destruction, it is difficult to imagine how stricter gun laws could reduce suicide rates.²⁴

20 Gary Mauser and Richard Holmes, *op cit.*, p. 612.

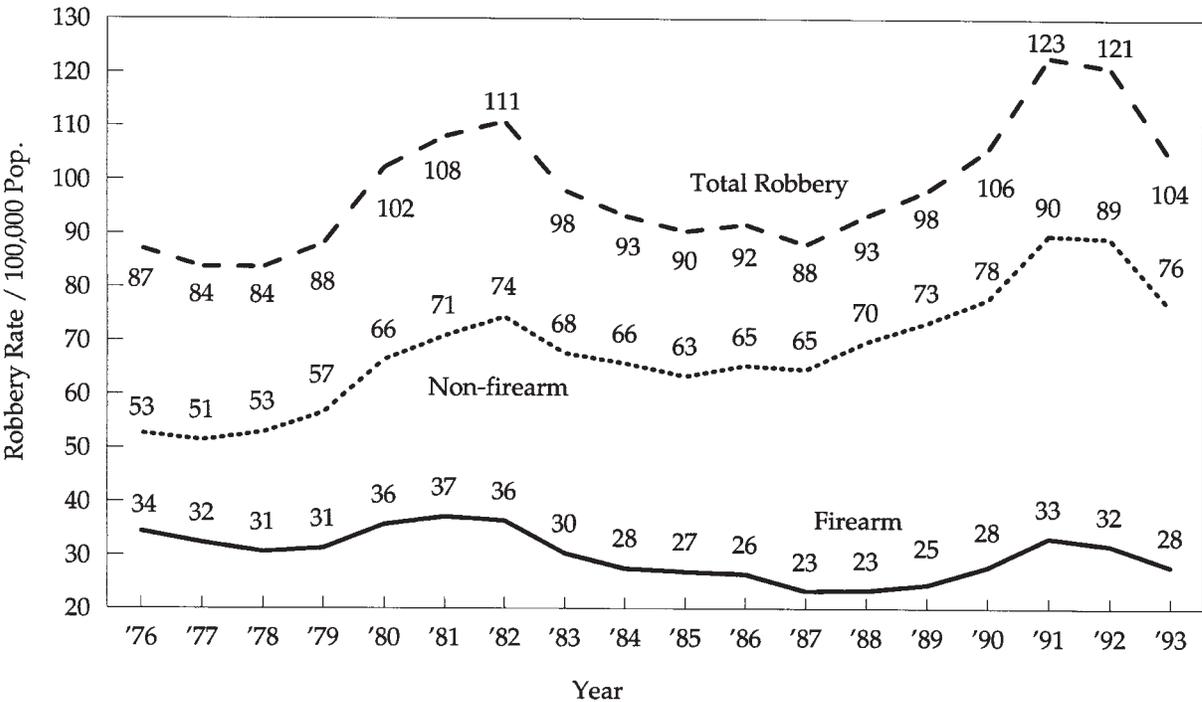
21 Philip Stenning, *op cit.*; Robert Silverman and Leslie Kennedy, *op cit.*, pp. 213-214.

22 Violent crime is defined by Statistics Canada as including: homicide, attempted murder, robbery, aggravated assault, common assault, and sexual assault.

23 Ted R. Gurr, "Historical Trends in Violent Crime: Europe and the United States," in *Violence in America*, edited by Ted R. Gurr, Newbury Park: Sage, 1989, pp. 21-54; Gary Kleck, *Point Blank: Guns and Violence in America*, New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1991; Roger Lane, *Violent Death in the City*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979; James Q. Wilson and Richard Herrnstein, *Crime and Human Nature*, New York: Simon and Shuster, 1985.

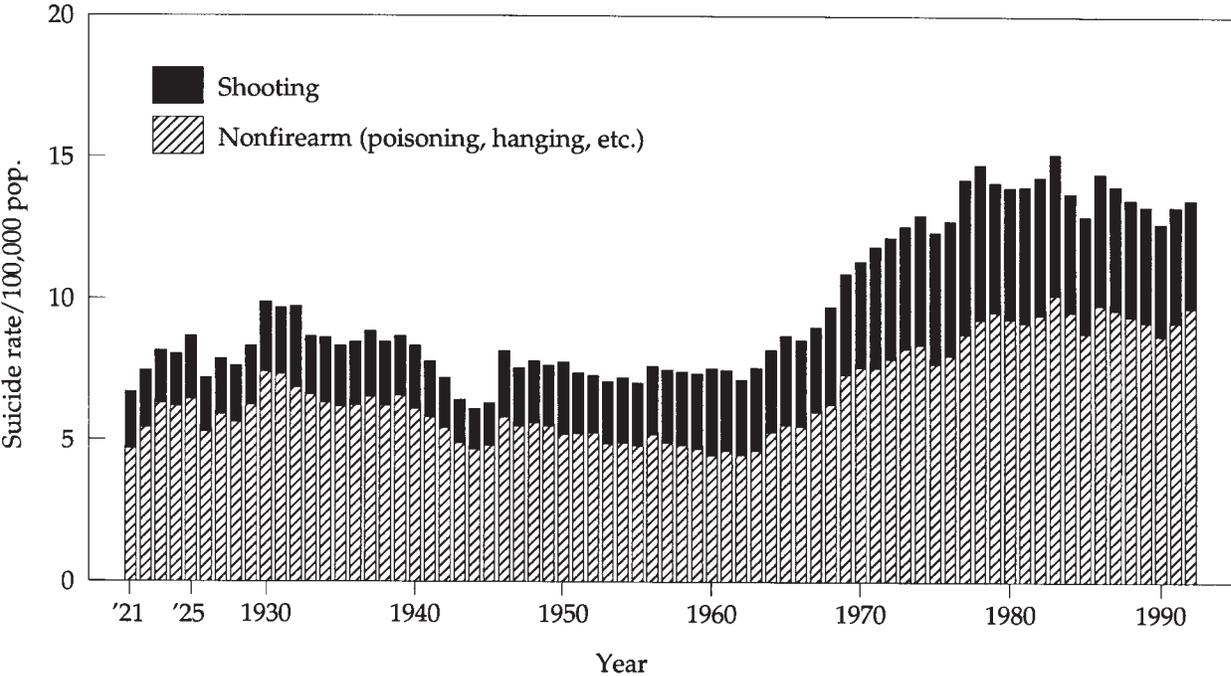
24 Gary Kleck, *Point Blank*, pp. 223- 255.

Figure 9: Robbery Methods in Canada, 1976-1993



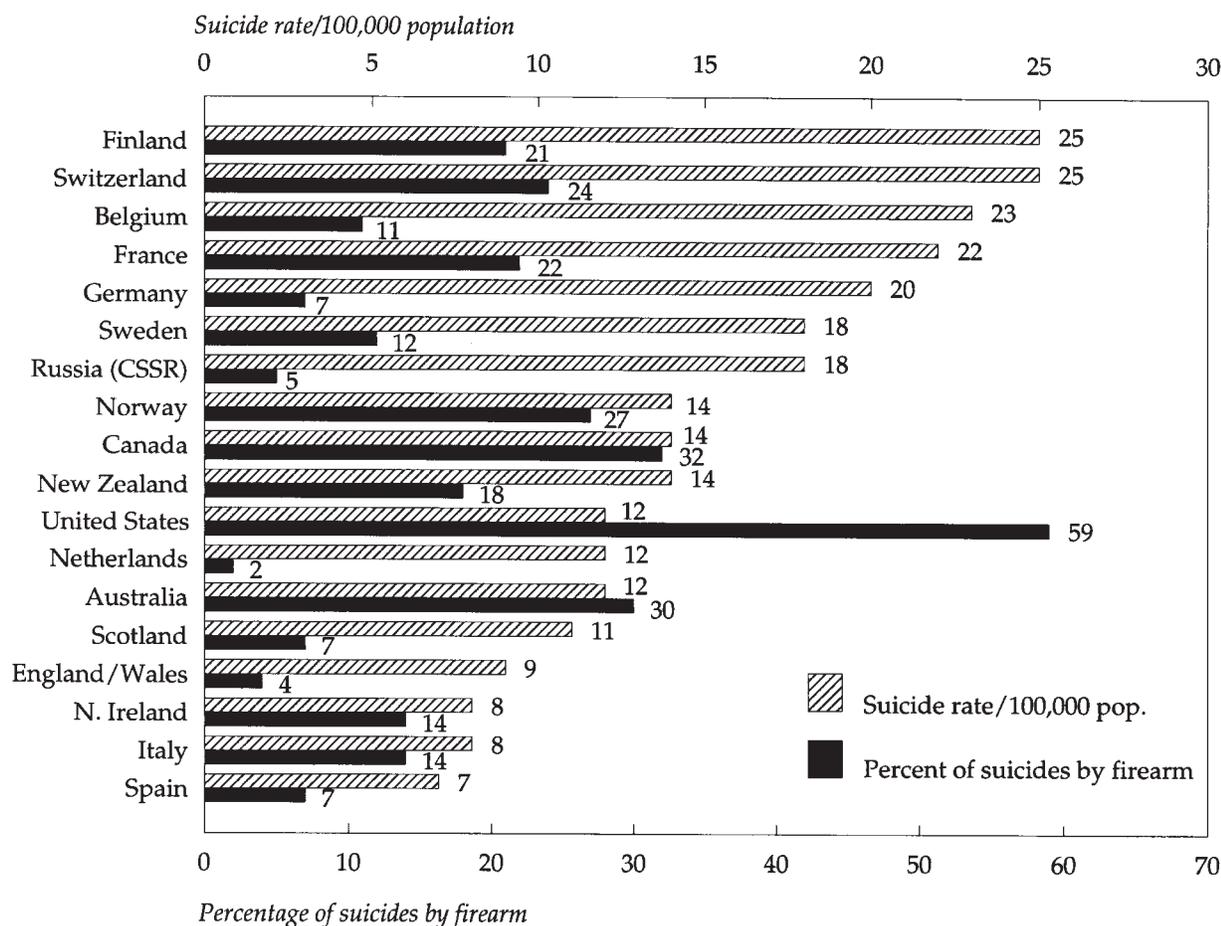
Note: "Firearm" includes replicas and air guns. "Non-firearm" includes knives, blunt instruments, physical force.
 Source: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, *Weapons and Violent Crime*, Aug. 1991.

Figure 10: Method of Committing Suicide in Canada, 1926-1992



Note: Gun control legislation was introduced in 1978 and 1991.
 Sources: Dominion Bureau of Statistics, and the Canadian Centre for Health Information.

Figure 11: Suicides—Annual Averages, 1983-1986



Source: United Nations, *Publication No. 49*, Aug. 1993, pp. 292-293.

Most suicides are committed by methods other than firearms. Less than one-third of the 3,700 people who commit suicide each year in Canada use a firearm. In 1991, 1,108 people (31 percent) used a firearm to commit suicide out of the total of 3,593 suicides. As figure 10 shows, the Canadian suicide rate increased considerably in the 1970s but has been relatively

stable throughout the 1980s and early 1990s.

The choice of a suicide method is indicative of the resolve of the decision maker. People who choose to use firearms to commit suicide, like those who choose to jump off tall buildings or in front of subway cars, have made up their minds they wish to die. People who choose

slower, less certain methods are more likely to be asking for help, rather than choosing to die.²⁵ Firearm suicides tend to be older men and police officers. In 1991, men used firearms to commit suicide 15 times more often than did women.²⁶

Suicide rates are primarily affected by culture, not by the availability of firearms.²⁷ Figure

25 Alan Marks and Thomas Abernathy, "Toward a Sociocultural Perspective on Means of Self-Destruction," *Life-threatening Behaviour*, 1974, Vol. 4, pp. 3-17.

26 Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Health Information, *Causes of Death*, 1991, 1993.

27 Norman L. Farberow, ed., *Suicide in Different Cultures*, Baltimore: University Park Press, 1975.

11 compares the suicide rates per 100,000 with the percentage of suicides by firearm for a wide variety of countries. As the figure reveals, Canada has a higher suicide rate than does the United States, even though the U.S. has twice as many firearms per capita. Firearms are involved in about one-third of Canadian suicides, but two-thirds of suicides in the United States involve a firearm. Suicide rates are highest in both Finland, where firearms are very difficult to obtain, and Switzerland, where all citizens are required to have firearms. In addition, Japan, with essentially no firearms, has a higher suicide rate (16 per 100,000) than either Canada or the United States. Not surprisingly, firearms are involved in less than 2 percent of suicides in Japan.²⁸

How effective is firearms legislation?

Firearms legislation does not have an impressive record of success. Internationally, there is no correlation between firearms laws and the homicide rate.²⁹ As figure 3 shows, Sri Lanka, Jamaica, Mexico, and the former USSR all have high homicide rates, and all of these countries make the legal ownership of firearms extremely difficult, if

not impossible. Conversely, Switzerland, Israel, and Norway enjoy exceptionally low homicide rates. All three of these countries strongly encourage firearms ownership among their citizens. Additionally, two countries not listed here, Hong Kong and Singapore, both prohibit civilian ownership of firearms, but Hong Kong has a large and growing problem with criminal violence while Singapore does not.

How does Canada compare with the United States? It is common to contrast the strict firearms legislation in Canada with the firearms laws in the United States and attribute the much lower homicide rate in Canada to this difference. For example, an often-mentioned study compared Vancouver, B.C. with Seattle, Washington and claimed that the differences in firearms legislation explained the lower homicide rate in Vancouver.³⁰ However, B.C. and Canada had a lower homicide rate *before* the introduction of the present firearms legislation. Therefore, it is hard to imagine how the present laws could have caused this history of lower homicide rates. This study ignored important differences between these two cities, such as ethnicity, that might also be explanatory factors.

Table 9: Homicide Rates for Adjacent Provinces and States, 1992 (per 100,000 population)

B.C.	3.7
Washington	5.0
Alberta	3.6
Montana	2.9
Saskatchewan	3.2
North Dakota	1.9
Manitoba	2.6
Minnesota	3.3
Ontario	2.4
Michigan (without Detroit)	4.1
Michigan (including Detroit)	9.9
Quebec	2.4
New York (without NYC)	3.7
New York (including NYC)	13.2
Quebec	2.4
New Hampshire	1.6
New Brunswick	1.5
Maine	1.7
Territories	17.8
Alaska	7.5

Source: *Juristat*, "Homicide in 1992," Vol. 14, No. 4, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics; *Crime in the United States 1992*, FBI.

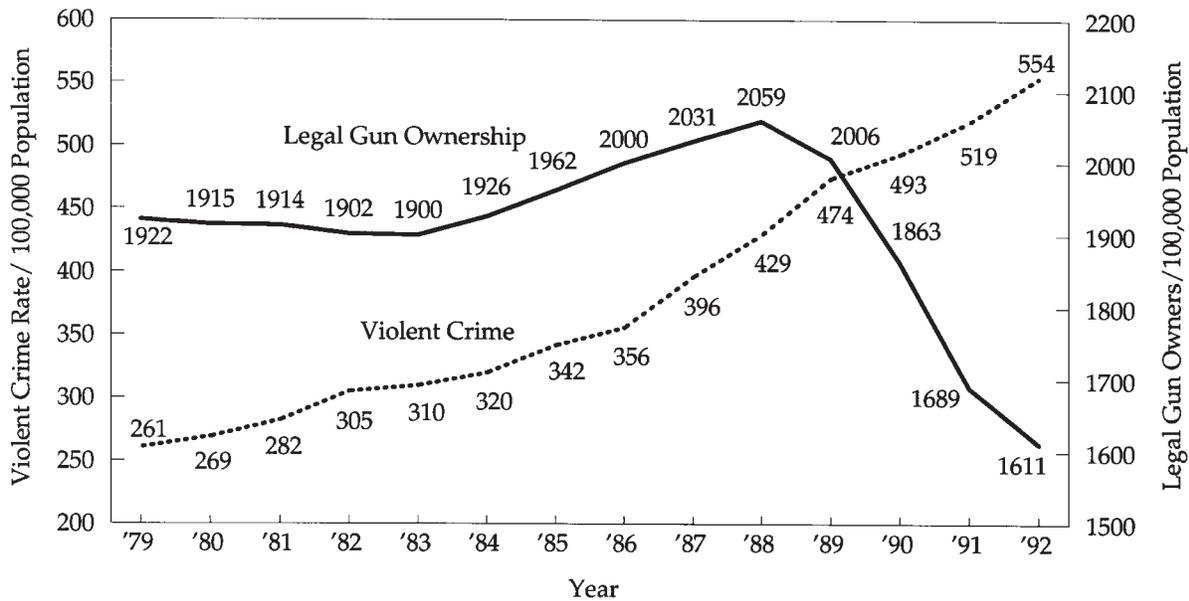
If Canadian gun control law were the principal factor driving the homicide rate, then all Canadian provinces should

28 World Health Organization, *World Health Statistics, 1984*, Geneva: WHO, 1984, pp. 183, 189; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the U.S., 1989*, Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1989, p. 820.

29 David B. Kopel, *The Samurai, the Mountie, and the Cowboy*, Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1992.

30 J.H. Sloan and A.L. Kellermann, et al., "Handgun Regulations, Crime, Assaults, and Homicide: A Tale of Two Cities," *New England Journal of Medicine*, 1988, vol. 319, pp. 1256-1262.

Figure 12: Legal Gun Ownership and Violent Crime in Great Britain, 1979-1992



Note: Extremely restrictive gun controls were enacted in 1988.
 Source: U.K. Home Office.

have lower homicide rates than do adjacent border states, because Canadian firearms laws are national in scope. An inspection of table 9 shows that this is not the case. While B.C., Ontario, Quebec, and New Brunswick do have lower homicide rates than the states adjacent to them, Alberta, Saskatchewan, and the Territories have *higher* homicide rates than do the abutting American states. Manitoba is anomalous; its homicide rate is lower than Minnesota's but higher than North Dakota's.³¹

It is interesting to note that the Prairie provinces have higher homicide rates than do the adjacent States, even though the private ownership of handguns is 3

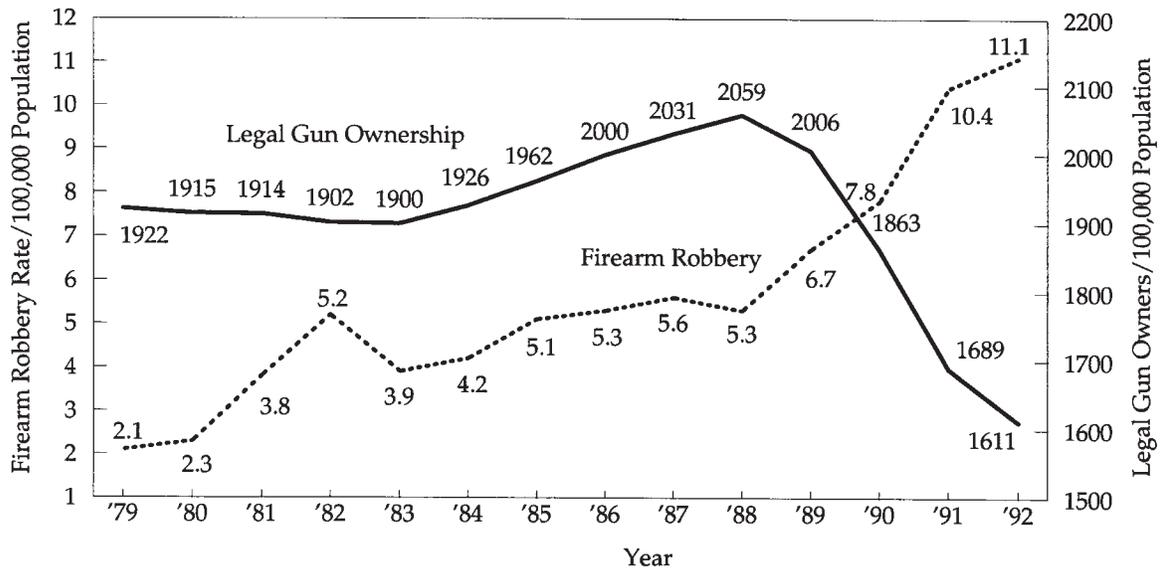
to 10 times greater in the U.S. As well, a few U.S. states (e.g., New York and Michigan) have firearms laws as strict or stricter than those in Canada, but still manage to have higher homicide rates than the adjacent Canadian provinces. It would appear that the difference in homicide rates is determined more by the sociology of the major urban centres in Canada and the U.S., than by firearms legislation or by the availability of firearms.

If the Canadian firearm laws acted to reduce violent crime, then there should be a noticeable change after the introduction of new legislation. Criminal violence should decrease, or at

the very least not continue to increase at the same rate. While it is still too early to be able to evaluate Bill C-17, which was passed by Parliament late in 1991 and phased in over the next three years, there is ample time to assess Bill C-51, which was passed in 1977 and introduced in 1978. The conclusion of three independent studies of the effect of the 1977 legislation is that it had little or no effect. Sproule and Kennett examined the impact of Bill C-51 on the homicide rate using an analysis of variance and found no significant effect.³² Mundt visually compared the trends across time in both Canada and the United States, before and after the 1977 legislation, on a variety of de-

31 This argument is developed at greater depth in Brandon Centerwall, "Homicide and the Prevalence of Handguns: Canada and the United States, 1976 to 1980," *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 1991, vol. 134, pp. 1245-1260.

Figure 13: Legal Gun Ownership and Firearm Robbery in Great Britain, 1979-1992



Note: Extremely restrictive gun controls were enacted in 1988.
 Source: U.K. Home Office.

pendent variables.³³ He, too, was unable to find support for any effect of this legislation on Canadian homicide rates, armed robbery, fatal firearms accidents, or suicide rates. Mauser and Holmes used a pooled regression model to examine the impact of the 1977 legislation, but did not find a statistically significant effect on the homicide rate.³⁴

The Mauser and Holmes model also evaluated the impact of the 1977 firearm law within the context of the changing social and economic conditions. In addition to the firearm law, their

model included the theoretically most important independent variables: a) unemployment rate, b) percentage of Status Indians, c) percentage of foreign immigrants, d) percentage of males between 15 and 24, and e) the percentage of cases successfully dealt with by the police. All variables were measured annually at the provincial level from 1968 to 1988. Every one of these independent variables were found to be statistically significant—except for the 1977 firearm legislation. The most important factors driving the provincial homicide rates were the percentage of Status

Indians and the percentage of young males in a province.

While it may be difficult to show the impact of firearms legislation upon violent crime, it is relatively easy to show how such legislation effects law-abiding firearms owners. Figures 12 and 13 show the recent experience of Great Britain. The Firearms Amendment Act introduced in Great Britain in 1988 has had no visible impact upon violent crime, or upon robberies committed with firearms. However, it has decimated the numbers of legal firearms owners.³⁵ These graphs also visibly show that

32 C.F. Sproule and D.J. Kennett, "The use of firearms in Canadian homicides 1972-1982: the need for gun control," *Canadian Journal of Criminology*, 1988, Vol. 30, pp. 31-37.

33 Robert Mundt, "Gun Control and the rates of firearms violence in Canada and the United States," *Canadian Journal of Criminology*, vol. 32, pp. 137-154.

34 Gary Mauser and Richard Holmes, *op cit*.

firearms violence is not directly related to the number of people who legally own firearms. Violent crime is increasing, even while the number of legal gun owners declines.

Firearms and self defence

Instead of saving lives, strict firearm legislation may actually have the perverse effect of costing lives. This might happen if legislation denies firearms to people who need them for self defense. Firearms are used to save human lives as well as to take them. This is particularly true in the Western provinces where bear attacks are relatively common, particularly during the summer and fall.³⁶

As surprising as it may be, based upon representative surveys, the author estimates that Canadians use firearms to defend themselves against human threats about 32,000 times annually and against animal threats about 36,000 times annually. If firearms actually saved human lives in only 5 percent of these situations, then the use of firearms in self defense would save more lives each year than are

Table 10: Comparison of Firearm Use for Self Protection in Canada and BC

	Canada ICCS (1990)	B.C. Mauser (1988)
Animal	1.5%	2%
Person	1.3%	1.5%
Both	0.3%	0.5%
Total	3.1%	4%

Source: Mauser, 1990; Mauser and Margolis, 1992.

lost through firearms misuse in Canada.

Public opinion surveys are the best data available to estimate the use of firearms in self defense because few relevant official records are readily available. As part of a larger study, a representative sample of the Canadian general public was drawn using stratified random sampling methods.³⁷ Random digit dialling methods were used to generate unlisted telephone numbers, and professional interviewers conducted all interviews. The sample included respondents in all Canadian provinces, but excluded the Territories.

Respondents were asked a series of questions to investigate their use of firearms in self defense. First, respondents were asked, "Aside from military service or police work, in the past five years, have you yourself, or a member of your household, ever used a gun for self-protection of property at home, at work, or elsewhere, even if it wasn't fired?" If the respondent answered, "yes," a follow up question was asked, "Was this to protect against an animal, or a person, or both?"

As table 10 shows, approximately 3.1 percent of the Canadian adult population report that someone in their household used a firearm, at least once, in self defense in the past 5 years. Over half of these incidents (1.8 percent) involved protection against animals—most likely bears; but almost as many (1.6 percent) involved the use of firearms to defend against other people. These estimates are consistent with the results of an earlier study the author conducted in British Columbia. Confidence in the results of the national sample is increased because the results of the B.C. study are so close.³⁸

35 David Kopel, *op cit.*, pp. 82-86; Cadmus, "Economic Factors," *Guns Review*, April 1994, pp. 276-78; "A Matter of Policy," *Guns Reivew*, August 1994, pp. 628-630.

36 No statistics are available about the total number of bear attacks, but fragmentary evidence suggests that wild animals do pose serious problems for people, at least in Western Canada. In B.C. alone, 2 people are killed annually by bears. The B.C. wildlife branch reports that there are about 7,000 complaints each year about problem bears from the public. These complaints result in about 1,000 bears being destroyed or relocated annually. In addition, there are hundreds of problem cougars reported each year, but it is rare for humans to be killed by cougars. For more information, see Garry Shelton, *Bear Encounter Survival Guide*, Pogany Productions, 1994.

37 Gary Mauser and Michael Margolis, "The Politics of Gun Control: Comparing Canadian and American Patterns," *Government and Policy*, 1992, vol. 10, pp. 189-209. This study was funded by the International Council for Canadian Studies, a program of the Canadian Embassy, Washington, DC.

Table 11: Frequency of Use of a Firearm in Self Protection in the Past 5 years in Canada

	Percentage	Number of households in past 5 years	Number of households per year	Per 100,000 persons per year
Animal	1.5%	151,192	30,238	140
Person	1.3%	131,033	26,207	121
Both	0.3%	30,238	6,048	28
Total	3.1%	312,463	62,493	289

Source: Survey of Canadian general public conducted in 1990 (Mauser and Margolis, 1992).

Notes: 1) The wording of the question asked was, "Aside from military service or police work, in the past 5 years, have you yourself, or a member of your household, ever used a gun for self-protection of property at home, at work, or elsewhere, even if it wasn't fired?"

2) There were 10,079,442 households in Canada in 1990 according to Statistics Canada.

3) The Canadian population age 15 or over was 21,604,305 in 1991, according to Statistics Canada.

Admittedly, these are small percentages. Nevertheless, with over 10 million households in Canada in 1990, these percentages imply that there were approximately 312,463 Canadian households where at least one person reported having used a firearm to protect themselves or their family between 1985 and 1990. Calculating the typical 5 percent confidence limits for a sample of this size yields an estimate ranging from 296,840 to 328,086 incidents. Divide these figures by 5 (years), and one finds that firearms were reported as having been used between 59,368 and 65,617 times a year, or an average of 62,493

times each year during this period. Approximately half of these incidents involved a defense against human threats. Thus, there were approximately 32,255 incidents each year between 1985 and 1990 in which a Canadian used a firearm to defend him or herself against a human threat, and 36,286 incidents annually where firearms were used against animal threats (see table 11).

Assume, conservatively, that only one person in a household used a firearm only once between 1985 and 1990 for self-defense purposes. Then, on average, there were 289 defen-

sive uses of firearms per 100,000 population during this period, and 149 of these involved threats from humans. There were over 180,000 reported uses of firearms for protection against animal attacks between 1985 and 1990 and over 160,000 uses of them against dangerous people. Although the survey was not designed to assess regional differences, the threat of animal attack is probably more significant in Western Canada (British Columbia and the Prairie provinces) than it is in central Canada (Ontario and Quebec). Limited confirmation for this hypothesis can be found in the results of an earlier study conducted in British Columbia.³⁹ This earlier study found, overall, slightly more defensive use of firearms and a much higher incidence of use against animals—2.5 percent for B.C. compared with 1.8 percent for all of Canada (see table 11).⁴⁰

Another way to put these results in perspective is to compare the frequency of defensive use of firearms with the frequency that firearms are misused. As table 12 indicates, in 1992 there were a total of 1,516 firearms deaths in Canada (1,186 of these being suicides) and an estimated total of 35,696 firearm crimes that did not in-

38 These results are described more fully in Gary Mauser, "Firearms and Self Defense: the Canadian Case," presented to the American Society of Criminology, October 27, 1993.

39 Gary Mauser, "A Comparison of Canadian and American Attitudes Towards Firearms," *Canadian Journal of Criminology*, 1990, vol. 32, pp. 573-589.

40 Further confirmation of these estimates is provided by the close agreement between this approach in estimating the frequency with which firearms are used in self defense in the United States and Gary Kleck's earlier findings. This comparison is described more fully in Mauser, 1993, op cit., pp. 8-9.

Table 12: Firearms misuse in 1992

	U.S.		Canada	
	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency
Homicide with firearms	60%	16,157	34%	247
Suicide with firearms	60%	18,526	28%	1,186
Accidents with firearms	1.6%	1,441	<1%	83
Total firearms deaths		36,124		1,516
Armed robbery with firearms	40%	268,991	26%	8,726
Aggravated assault with firearms	25%	281,744	10% (est.)	23,395
Forcible Rape	6% (est.)	6,544	6% (est.)	2,061
Total violent crimes		1,932,274		307,491
Total firearms crimes	31%	593,403	12%	35,698

Source: *Uniform Crime Reports for the United States*, FBI, 1992; *Vital Statistics of the United States*, 1992; *Canadian Crime Statistics*, Statistics Canada, 1992; *Vital Statistics*, Vol. 3, Statistics Canada, 1992.

Notes: 1) 1992 is the most recent year that all of the violent crime, accidental death, and suicide statistics are available for both countries.

2) The percentages allocated to firearms in each category are estimated from totals smaller than the total frequencies because of missing information.

3) The percentage of rapes involving firearms was estimated from Gary Kleck's study, *Point Blank*, *op. cit.*, p. 173.

2) Despite the use of the Uniform Crime Report system by both Canada and the United States, it is very difficult to compare Canadian and American crime statistics. The data here are based on reports by local police departments. Both countries, for the most part, use the same definitions for violent crimes. Unfortunately, there are a few notable exceptions. Murder and non-negligent manslaughter are equivalent to "homicide." "Violent crime" in the United States includes murder, non-negligent manslaughter, forcible rape, robbery, and aggravated assault but does not include "abduction," or "other sexual offenses," as does the Canadian category of "violent crime." A few other terms are only used in the U.S. To approximate "aggravated assault," the author aggregated all categories of "assaults" with "attempted murder," but excluded "assault level 1" and the "sexual assaults." To approximate the "forcible rape" category in the U.S., the author aggregated all Canadian sexual assaults.

involve death.⁴¹ Canadians report using firearms defensively more than 68,000 times annually; therefore, firearms are used about twice as often in self defense as they are in criminal violence. If the use of firearms results in saving human lives in only 5 percent of these defensive situations, then firearm use saves many more lives each year than are lost through firearms misuse.

Evaluating the proposed firearms laws

Bill C-68, introduced in Parliament on February 14, 1995, will, if implemented, introduce universal firearms registration and prohibit and confiscate over 50 percent of all handguns that are now registered, as well as radically rewriting all firearms laws. Both of these proposals rest upon the canards that additional

regulations are needed to protect the public from the typical firearms owner and that such regulations can be effective.

Before examining the specific proposals, it might be worthwhile first to ask why further firearms laws are necessary and second, to conduct a thorough evaluation of the present firearm control legislation in order to decide what, if anything, needs to be done. This is precisely what the Auditor General of Canada requested.⁴² How-

41 This year was selected as it was the most recent year for which all of these statistics were available for both countries at the time of this study. No fundamental changes have taken place since 1987 in any of these statistics.

ever, the Justice Minister has not presented any compelling justification for additional legislation. In 1991, prior to their defeat in 1993, the Conservatives introduced sweeping changes in the firearms legislation (Bill C-17). Have these changes done any good? Nobody knows. How much have they cost? Nobody knows. It is reasonable to ask why the Justice Minister is ignoring the recommendation of the Auditor General of Canada.

Universal firearms registration

Universal registration may seem reasonable at first glance, but a closer look shows that it would be unworkable, ineffective, and outrageously expensive.

The Justice Minister has suggested a variety of justifications for registering all firearms. He proposes to register all long arms, i.e., rifles and shotguns, for the first time, although handguns have been required to be registered since 1934. Perhaps the most important arguments are: first, that firearms registration is supposed to expedite police investigations; second, that firearms registration would provide police with

a way to know if a suspect has firearms in his residence; third, that in the case of seizure orders, courts would know how many firearms to seize from the suspect. Finally, it is claimed that registration would encourage firearms owners to store their firearms more securely, because the owners would be liable to face criminal charges for unsafe storage if their firearms were stolen. Each of these arguments is specious.

First, universal firearms registration would be *ineffective* because it cannot reduce firearms deaths, cannot help police to solve crimes, nor can it let police know who has what firearms. There is no factual support for the claim that firearms registration can help the police solve crimes. The police in the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand have worked with firearms registration for a number of years, but in none of these countries have the police found full firearms registration to be cost-effective. The police in two Australian states recommended the termination of universal firearms registration.⁴³ The New Zealand government decided to discontinue firearms registration in 1983 after the New Zealand National Police

recommended its termination since they had not found it useful.⁴⁴ A secret police report from the United Kingdom admits that their extensive firearms database has not been useful in solving crimes in that country either. Police forces find that registration diverts police resources away from more important duties.

Furthermore, unless the registration list were substantially complete, police would neither be able to use it to know which houses had firearms, let alone what types, nor be able to track stolen firearms or those in criminal hands. There is every likelihood that the registration list would be far less than complete. Since neither rifles nor shotguns have ever been registered before in Canada, it is very probable that a substantial portion of firearms owners would not comply with the new legislation.⁴⁵ Even with extensive publicity, many firearms owners may not learn about the new law—a problem which is the bane of every public information campaign. Even after heavy media coverage, large segments of the general public fail to hear of the campaign. Other owners may refuse to participate on principle. Many firearms own-

42 Report of the Auditor General, *op cit.*, 1993.

43 *Report of the Victoria Police on the Firearms Registration System*, February 26, 1987; *Report of the South Australian Deregulation Task Force*, Adelaide, October, 1985.

44 Despite drastic increases in funding in the 1970s, the New Zealand National Police were actually falling further and further behind. They discovered that after several decades, their firearm registry hadn't proved useful in solving crimes and it was diverting scarce resources away from more important duties. "Background to the Introduction of Firearms User Licensing Instead of Rifle and Shotgun Registration Under the Arms Act 1983," New Zealand National Police, 1983.

ers believe that registration will lead to confiscation and cite many historical examples, both in Canada and internationally, where this has occurred. For example, in 1991, Bill C-17, introduced by the Mulroney government, confiscated (without compensation) previously-registered firearms. Bill C-68 will, if implemented, confiscate most currently registered handguns. The experience in Australia is that more than 40 percent of firearms have not been registered even after decades of requirements that they be so.⁴⁶

Even if only 25 percent of gun owners failed to register their firearms, the effectiveness of registration would be severely hampered. Even after registration, the police would not be able to trust the registration records to indicate if a suspect had firearms, nor would courts be able to know that prohibition orders were complete. The actual number of people who would refuse to register could be far higher than 25 percent. In 1991, Bill C-17 required that a number of semi-automatic firearms—so-called “assault weapons”—be registered. It is difficult to know how many people complied, but estimates are

that less than 10 percent of firearms that fall into this category were brought in for registration. In addition, a large number of people did not register their handguns in 1934 when handguns were first required to be registered in Canada.⁴⁷

It is difficult to believe that firearms registration would have any effect on the availability of firearms by hard-core criminals in Vancouver, Toronto, or Montreal. Handguns have been required to be registered since 1934, but that has not taken handguns out of the hands of those inclined to use them for criminal purposes. The government has not been able to stop the smuggling of cigarettes, alcohol, or cocaine. Why should anyone believe that it can stop the smuggling of firearms?⁴⁸

The Justice Minister has suggested that firearms registration would act to reduce firearm thefts, accidents, and suicides by motivating owners to pay more attention to their responsibilities. It is difficult to understand how registering firearms could do this. Automobiles are registered, and no one has ever suggested that registration helps to reduce drunk driving

and auto theft, or that it motivates owners to take better care of their cars. Some gun owners who know about the new legislation might well be motivated to lock up their firearms more securely. But surely the key here is education, not the threat of additional punishment. Bill C-17, which introduced strict standards of firearms safety training, including tougher rules for firearms storage and use, is just now beginning to be implemented. Perhaps it would be wise to evaluate its effectiveness before introducing any new legislation. New legislation may not be necessary.

While it is admirable to attempt to reduce firearms thefts, we should first assess the magnitude of the problem. Out of the more than 6 million firearms that are conservatively estimated to be legally owned in Canada, approximately 3,000 of these are stolen or lost annually. The statistics probably exaggerate the problem. No one knows how many of these 3,000 firearms were legally owned; many of these firearms may in fact have been abandoned because they had been used in a crime. In addition, many of the stolen

45 During World War II the Canadian Parliament introduced a program to register all firearms (Order in council #3506, 26 July 1940, *Canada Gazette*, August 3, 1940, pp. 353-354). Nevertheless, this program was never enforced, and after the war the idea was abandoned.

46 *Report of the Victoria Police*, February 26, 1987, p. 5.

47 Anonymous RCMP informant, 1994.

48 Recent studies by the Department of Justice found that most handguns in the possession of street criminals in Toronto had been smuggled. See Lee Axon and Sharon Moyer, “The Use of Firearms in Criminal Incidents in Toronto,” September 1994, and Andrew Dreschel, “Yankee heat,” *Hamilton Spectator*, Saturday, April 2, 1994, p. A9.

firearms have been stolen from the police and military.

Concerning firearms accidents, it is difficult to see how firearms registration would act to reduce accident rates. Firearms accidents are extremely rare in Canada and have been declining for decades. The key to lowering accident rates is firearms safety training, not increased penalties. Although the Justice Minister has not mentioned it, since the 1960s all Canadian provinces have required prospective hunters to take firearms safety training. Moreover, starting in January 1994, anyone who wishes to purchase a firearm must pass an exam or course in firearms safety.

Concerning firearm suicides, it seems improbable that registration could reduce the number of people who use firearms to commit suicide. People who use firearms to commit suicide do so because they want a method that will be effective. Firearms are involved in less than one-third of suicides in Canada. Those who wish to end their lives have the option of a wide variety of equally effective methods with which to do so. Restricting the availability of firearms has not reduced the overall suicide rate. This can be seen in the international statistics. There is no relationship be-

tween suicide rates and the availability of firearms. For example, Canada has a higher suicide rate than the U.S. even though the U.S. has almost twice as many firearms per capita as Canada. Japan has virtually banned firearms, but has one of the highest suicide rates in the world.

Second, full firearm registration would be *unworkable* because it would require a database of an estimated 6-10 million firearms and at least 3 million owners. An estimated 1 million firearms are sold every year in Canada. Even in the age of computers, it is very difficult to maintain an "clean" database of such magnitude. Moreover, registration requires unique serial numbers. Not only do many rifles lack serial numbers, but many others have identical numbers. These awkward facts stem from the relative lack of concern shown worldwide for the danger of firearms owned by law-abiding citizens during most of the past few centuries.

Introducing ineffective and unworkable legislation brings the law into disrespect. Many firearms owners oppose mandatory firearm registration on the grounds that they believe it would be an expensive failure. Moreover, if the registration system is not enforced equita-

bly, i.e., if native Indians are not required to register their firearms, then many gun-owning Canadians will lose even more respect for the law.⁴⁹

Third, full firearms registration would be *prohibitively expensive* because it would require countless person-years to introduce and operate. There are four different types of costs to consider: a) introduction costs, or the costs of purchasing new hardware, software, and training personnel in its use; b) operational costs, or the costs of registering a firearm once the system is in place; c) enforcement costs, or the costs of arresting and bringing reluctant firearms owners to court; and d) citizen costs, or the costs incurred by citizens in complying with the legislation. The government typically does not include costs to citizens in complying with its regulations, but such costs can be quite large.

The government typically does not consider those costs that citizens incur complying with its regulations, but such costs can be quite large. If it is assumed that firearms will have to be taken to the local police station to be registered, then full firearms registration would cost Canadians at least \$125 million in foregone wages and transportation costs. This calculation

49 The Justice Minister is caught in a dilemma with universal firearms registration and native people. In principle, Canadian criminal law applies to all Canadians—natives and non-natives alike. But many native groups view firearms registration as a violation of their aboriginal treaty rights, so if the government does attempt to enforce firearms registration, it will further aggravate an admittedly delicate situation. However, if the Justice Minister allows the natives to opt out of registering their firearms, he will anger many non-natives who would see his decision as violating the constitutional guarantees of equal treatment under the law for all Canadians.

assumes that each of the estimated 3 million firearms owners has to take time off work to make one three-hour trip during normal business hours to register his or her firearm. If more or longer trips are required, then these costs could easily be much higher.

To date, the Justice Minister has released very little information about how much it would cost to introduce this new computerized system. The cost of the hardware is expected to be much less than the software, and the cost of training police personnel across the country will be the most expensive of all.

The operational costs of registering a rifle or shotgun can be estimated from the time it currently takes to register a handgun. It may even take longer to register rifles and shotguns because of technical problems. For example, many rifles lack serial numbers. If the RCMP had to put serial numbers on hundreds of thousands of firearms, the costs of registration would be far higher than what is estimated in this paper.

The Department of Justice estimates that it now costs a little over \$82 to register each handgun.⁵⁰ Estimates are that it requires more than 2 person-

hours for the police to register a handgun in Canada. Clerks, both locally and in Ottawa, who do the data entry and processing, are paid approximately \$18 per hour, (\$25 including benefits) while RCMP constables, who do most of the processing in smaller, rural detachments, are paid \$22 per hour (\$30 including benefits). Of course, managerial personnel, who must supervise these activities, make more. A conservative estimate would be \$35 per hour (\$50 including benefits). If the present handgun registration system is to remain in place until the new universal firearms system is fully functional, the number of employees and managers must also increase. The proper registration of long arms could not take any less time.⁵¹

According to a 1991 survey of Canadian firearms owners by Angus Reid, there are approximately 6 million firearms in Canada—5 million long arms (that is, rifles and shotguns) and 1 million handguns. All of these firearms are owned by Canadian hunters and target shooters. This estimate may be low. A survey in 1993, funded by the United Nations, estimated that there were 7 million firearms (6 million of which were rifles and shotguns) in Canada. Estimates based upon import/export figures are even higher.

Assuming there are 5 million long arms to be registered in Canada, it would cost at least \$410 million to register all rifles and shotguns. If there are 6 million long arms, registration would cost at least \$492 million. These estimates are quite conservative because they do not include any funds for new computers, software, or training of personnel that would be required, nor do they include any enforcement costs.

The total cost could be close to a billion dollars if introduction costs and enforcement costs are included as well as operational costs for the first year. The total would be essentially the same whether or not firearms registration were phased in over a period of several years or attempted in a single year.

There are only three ways to pay for this program:

1. Taxpayers could pay an additional \$500 million to \$1 billion to register all of the long guns in Canada. (Given the current fiscal problems, either taxes must be increased or funding for other programs must be reduced.)
2. Firearms owners could pay to register their firearms. However, this may cause many people, even those

50 Department of Justice, *Cost Model, Registration of Restricted Weapons*, 1992, Consulting and Audit Canada, Project No. 560-0288. See also Terence Wade, *Review of Firearms Registration*, TR1994-9e, RES Policy Research Inc. pp 26-27.

51 Rock claims that, once the new system is in place, it should cost only about \$10 to register each firearm. This is an underestimate; it has ignored both the costs of physically checking each firearm and the provincial costs of enforcement.

who are typically law-abiding, not to comply. This problem is serious. Many Canadians feel they are overtaxed; some work in the underground economy to avoid the GST, and some buy smuggled cigarettes. If it is important to register all firearms, it might be wise not to charge for registration.

3. Police departments could register long arms, but their budgets would be frozen—in other words, they would be asked to “do more with less.” This appears to be what Justice Minister Rock means when he says that universal registration would not cost anything. In effect, this would pull constables off the street to process the additional paper work. Such a result could well have perverse consequences as it would force the police to spend more time on target shooters and hunters, and less on criminals.

Firearms registration is simply not practical. The money that registration would cost (between \$410 and \$500 million at a minimum) would be better spent on fighting crime more directly, by hiring more police, by improving the justice system, or by changing the Young Offenders Act. Alternatively, one might use this money to resolve some of the many social problems in Canada. Money spent

on social programs, such as alcohol and drug treatment programs, job-training for young people, or even language training for new immigrants, would be more effective in fighting crime than would be attempting to register rifles and shotguns.

To sum up, it is wasteful to spend money on universal firearms registration when Canada has serious social and fiscal problems. Firearms registration would only contribute to the growth of bureaucracy.

The prohibition of handguns

The government has introduced legislation in Parliament to prohibit all handguns that, in their view, are only useful for self defense. According to the Justice Minister, this would include all handguns with barrels 4" or shorter, as well as all .25 calibre and .32 calibre handguns. This is a curious definition, as it includes over 50 percent of all handguns legally owned and registered in Canada. Moreover, this definition also includes the handguns used by the Canadian Olympic shooting team. After introducing this bill, the Justice Minister proposed specifically exempting one of the target pistols used by Canadian Olympic shooters. Unfortunately, he still plans to prohibit other target pistols.

The prohibition of handguns is naive and misguided for several

reasons: 1) handguns do not pose a serious threat to Canadians; 2) handgun bans simply don't work; 3) such a ban violates our sense of due process by confiscating legally purchased private property; 4) the campaign to ban handguns is counterproductive as it draws attention away from truly effective ways to fight criminal violence. To the extent that prohibitions have any effect, they tend to cause people who would have used the prohibited firearm to substitute another weapon. One would expect that the prohibition of small handguns would cause criminals to move to larger, more deadly calibers of handguns and rifles.

It is important to note, first, that despite well-publicized atrocities, handguns do not pose a serious danger to Canadians. They are not widely misused in this country. Only about 0.1 percent of handgun owners have fatal accidents with them, or use their firearms to commit violent crimes or to commit suicide. There are an estimated 256,000 households with handguns in Canada.⁵² On average, handguns are involved in under 200 deaths annually including suicides. (In 1993, there were 125 handgun-related deaths: 90 homicides, 4 fatal accidents, and 31 suicides.) In fact, the favourite murder weapon in Canada is the knife. Over the past decade more homicides have been committed with knives than with

52 Angus Reid, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

firearms of any type. As for accidental deaths, drownings account for far more deaths than do handguns. Of the approximately 9,000 accidental deaths that occur annually in Canada, there are about 400 drownings (4 percent), and only about 50 firearms deaths (less than one-half of 1 percent); accidental handgun deaths are even rarer (about 5 per year). With respect to suicides, handguns are involved in fewer than 50 suicides out of the approximately 3,600 in Canada annually.

Second, despite decades of research, no solid empirical support has been found for a link between handgun availability and homicide rates.⁵³ Cultural, economic, and demographic factors are much more important. Nor is there any solid support for a link between firearms availability and overall suicide rates. Even more importantly, no empirical link has been found between the introduction of firearms bans and a decrease in criminal violence.⁵⁴

Many people are concerned about civil rights and liberties. All of us abhor police intrusion into people's lives. However, a handgun ban would be meaningless unless it was accompanied by house-to-house searches to confiscate newly prohibited firearms. How would that respect individual rights? But if the government does not confis-

cate handguns, then the ban does little if anything to improve public safety. The Justice Minister has said that the only reason he does not immediately confiscate the handguns now in private hands is that it would overburden the police. Perhaps the private ownership of handguns isn't as dangerous to the public as is claimed.

Fourth and finally, the push to ban handguns is counterproductive. It draws attention away from truly effective ways to fight violence. Four of every 10 homicides in Canada are due to family violence; this is too many. Society must redouble its efforts to seek ways to reduce the social problems that beset too many families. Such efforts would be far more effective than an emotional attack on the handgun as a symbol of violence.

Conclusions

Gun control is not crime control. The government's gun control proposals will not reduce violent crime, suicide, or firearms accidents. This pessimistic evaluation is supported by the failure of a variety of gun-control measures around the world to improve public safety. Even the Auditor General in 1993 doubted the value of further gun control legislation. Gun control is merely a prescription for rapid growth in the federal bureaucracy.

Specific proposals, such as universal firearm registration and the prohibition of handguns will have serious consequences for all Canadians, not just for firearms owners. The impact of these proposals on legal firearms owners is obvious. Draconian new laws will force a large number of previously law-abiding firearms owners to choose between violating the law or abandoning their chosen recreational activity. But there is also a serious impact on Canadians who do not own guns. These proposals will simply expand the federal bureaucracy while doing nothing to reduce violent crime. Crimes of violence might even increase, causing more Canadians to die needlessly. Moreover, because the number of hunters, both foreign and local, may well decline, these proposals will simultaneously increase poaching by local hunters, and decrease the income gained from foreign hunters who will no longer come to Canada.

It is difficult to assess the costs accurately because the bill tabled in the House of Commons is just enabling legislation. Many important details will only be known later. If the government requires the police to implement these proposals without a corresponding increase in their budget, the police will be forced to pull constables off the street, where they are now dealing with criminals, in

53 Gary Kleck, *op cit.*, pp. 202-03.

54 Gary Kleck, *op cit.*, pp. 406-08.

order to process the new paper work.

If firearms owners are required to pay for registering their firearms, (or worse still, for having their handguns confiscated) then even fewer people will be motivated to comply with the new legislation. If many owners

refuse to participate, this will not only guarantee the failure of the legislation, but will increase the cost of enforcement. If funds are diverted from other programs in order to pay for the newly-increased costs in policing, then all Canadians will be forced to do without the benefits of other, more worthwhile

social programs. Finally, it is also conceivable that the government will simply increase taxes or the deficit in order to pay for the increased size of the federal bureaucracy. Given the likely ineffectiveness of the measure, is tougher gun control really a sensible policy choice at this time?