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MAKING THE CASE FOR GUN

Australia's gun law reforms have had a profound impact on gun-related death rates. Perhaps New Zealand could learn from the Australian experience.

By Amanda Ruler

The gun death rates in New Zealand from suicide and homicide are considerably higher than in Australia. In 2005, these gun death rates per 100,000 people were .91 in Australia^{1,2,3} and 1.3 in New Zealand.⁴ Are the higher death rates in New Zealand a result of your country's relatively relaxed laws in relation to gun ownership? Apart from exceptions such as pistols, military-style semi automatic firearms and restricted weapons, New Zealand legislation does not require firearms to be registered.

In Australia in 2005, 15 percent of homicide victims were killed with firearms. Of firearms that were used, 90 percent were unregistered, and only 13 percent of offenders were licensed to use the firearm. Over one third of the solved firearm homicides occurred between friends and acquaintances (35 percent) and a further 26 percent between intimate partners. Family members were responsible for 15 percent of firearm homicides, while fewer than seven percent involved strangers. Overall, women are more likely to be killed by an intimate partner (48 percent) or a family member (23 percent). Of these, 19 percent of female victims were more likely to be killed with a firearm by a male partner.¹ Similar findings have been described in New Zealand.⁵

Interpersonal violence is expensive. Economic losses are related to productivity. A single homicide was calculated to cost in 2004, on average, US\$602,000 in Australia, and US\$829,000 in New Zealand.⁶

Mass shootings

There were 13 mass shootings in the 18 years before the introduction of new gun control laws in 1996 in Australia. In response to the Port Arthur massacre in April 1996, which claimed 35 lives, the Australian government authorised the collection and destruction of categories of firearms designed to kill many times over,

ie semi-automatic and pump-action rifles and shotguns. In total, more than 700,000 guns were removed and destroyed from an adult population of about 12.3 million. Newly prohibited were semi-automatic and pump-action rifles and shotguns. Australia's revised gun laws also required all firearms to be individually registered to their licensed owners, prohibited private firearm sales, and required that each gun transfer through a licensed arms dealer be approved only after the police were satisfied of a genuine reason for ownership. Possession of firearms for self-defence in Australia is specifically prohibited and few civilians are licensed to possess handguns.⁷ All Australian governments have agreed that firearm possession is not a right but a conditional privilege. Genuine reason must be shown for owning a firearm and self-defence is not a recognised reason.

New Zealand has about one million guns among its population of four million people and the majority of these arms are claimed to be used for hunting and sporting purposes.⁸ While the category of firearms which must be registered in New Zealand does not extend to sporting rifles or shotguns, civilians wanting to possess these firearms must be 16 years of age and are subject to a vetting and licensing regime. Like the Australian government, the New Zealand High Court has declared that there is no general right to bear arms.^{8,9}

After the Aramoana massacre in New Zealand, in November 1990, the government substantially tightened gun laws generally. The laws were passed in 1992 and stipulated that: written permits were required to order guns or ammunition by mail-order; ammunition sales were restricted to firearms licence holders; photographs were added to firearms licences; licence holders were required to have secure storage for firearms at their homes; and all licence holders had to be re-vetted for new licences, valid for only 10

years. The law also created the new category of "military-style semi-automatic", which mainly covered the appearance rather than the functionality of the guns. These required a special endorsement, security and registration in the same manner as pistols.¹⁰

A study, which examined firearms legislation and reductions in firearm-related suicide deaths in New Zealand, looked at the impact of introducing more restrictive firearms legislation through the Amendment to the Arms Act (1992).¹¹ National suicide data was examined for eight years before and ten years after the introduction of the legislation. Results found that after legislation, the mean annual rate of firearm-related suicides decreased by 46 percent for the total population. Following the introduction of legislation restricting ownership and access to firearms, firearm-related suicides significantly decreased, particularly among youth.¹¹

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These findings are supported by another study which found that the proportion of firearm suicides decreased simultaneously with the proportion of households owning firearms.¹² These results are in line with the well-established association between availability of firearms at home and risk of firearm suicide, and tend to confirm the argument that removal of rapid-firing firearms may more substantially reduce the risk of suicide.

Despite these reforms, New Zealand's gun-related death rate remains much higher than Australia's, so the question must be asked whether the reforms go far enough. Using an observational study of official statistics, researchers carried out a study of changes in firearm death rates and compared trends in pre- and post-gun law reform firearm-related mass killings in Australia between 1979 and 2003.⁷ The main outcome measures were changes in trends of total firearm death rates, mass fatal shooting incidents, rates of firearm homicide, suicide and unintentional firearm deaths, and of total homicides and suicides per 100,000 of the population. The rates per

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100,000 of the population's total firearm deaths, firearm homicides and firearm suicides all at least doubled their existing rates of decline, after the revised gun laws. In conclusion, Australia's 1996 gun law reforms were followed by more than a decade free of fatal mass shootings, and accelerated declines in firearm deaths, particularly suicides. Total homicide rates followed the same pattern. Removing large numbers of rapid-firing firearms from civilians may be an effective way of reducing mass shootings, and firearm homicides and suicides.⁷

Should New Zealand follow Australia's lead and ban semi-automatic and pump-action rifles and shotguns in order to further reduce the impact of gun-related deaths?

A study into the criminal use of firearms in New Zealand was based on a survey of 51 New Zealand prison inmates and focused on the acquisition and use of illegal firearms, in order to obtain information about patterns of firearms ownership within the criminal community.¹³ Findings confirmed the existence of a large pool of illegally held firearms in New Zealand and that people could relatively easily obtain firearms of almost any type from within the criminal community.

A New Zealand report by former judge Thomas Thorp called for many new restrictions on legal gun ownership, including banning various features, and, particularly unpopular among firearm owners, that all guns be registered.⁷ The National Government in 1999, its last year in office, introduced an Arms Amendment (No 2) Bill to implement the recommendations but the Bill was withdrawn due to the opposition. The government then introduced a much-reduced Arms Amendment (No 3) Bill, which increased penalties for distribution, manufacture and use of illegal weapons. It has been in the Select Committee since 2005, and while there has been much debate about proceeding with it, the gov-



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ernment has not initiated any firm steps.¹⁰

Internationally, the situation regarding gun-related deaths is grim. Former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, has stated: "*Small arms have damaged development prospects and imperilled human security in every way. Indeed, there is probably no single tool of conflict so widespread, so easily available and so difficult to restrict as small arms.*"¹⁴

There are about 600 million small arms and light weapons (SALW) worldwide. These weapons kill an estimated 1000 people per day, the majority of whom are civilians. The global trade in small arms is estimated to be worth about US\$4 billion, of which a quarter is considered illicit or is not recorded, as required by law.¹⁵

The programme of action devised by the United Nations, which was agreed in July 2001, provides a non-legally binding framework for members to adopt various measures to combat the illicit trade in small arms and light weapons nationally, regionally and internationally. The Firearms Protocol criminalises the illicit trafficking in and manufacture of firearms, and requires measures such as the marking and tracing of firearms to be put in place. A politically binding instrument to enable states to identify and trace illicit SALW was adopted by the United

Nations in 2005.^{15,16}

An initiative that is currently being discussed internationally is a possible arms treaty. Such a treaty would cover the trade not only of small arms, but also of all conventional weapons, eg tanks and fighter aircraft. Its purpose would be to prevent weapons from being transferred to countries where they may be used to violate international law and human rights.¹⁵

Gun control is an issue of national and international importance as it profoundly affects the security and health and well-being of all people, thus it is also an important issue for all health professionals. All weapons, whether they are small arms or more conventional tanks and missiles, are lethal, and alternatives to violent conflict must be sought and developed to ensure a more peaceful, safe and secure world. •

* More information on MWAP is available at www.mapw.org.au. Nurses interested in joining can contact the author at amanda.ruler@mapw.org.au.

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