

Gun control and homicide in Canada

Legislation has mixed results

by Antoon A. Leenaars

Single-factor prevention efforts have rarely been shown to impact the homicide rate, since many factors can lead to the behaviour. Gun control has been proposed as an important component of society's response.

The most popular method for committing a homicide differs by country but firearms are preferred in some, including Canada and the United States. Most of the research on gun control's impact on homicide has been conducted in the US. It's a controversial issue there, especially since the right to bear arms is enshrined in the American Constitution.

The situation is quite different in Canada, which has a long history of gun legislation. Bill C-51, enforced from 1978 onwards, offers an opportunity to study the effects of gun control laws on homicide rates. The act required acquisition certificates for all firearms, restricted the availability of some types to certain individuals, set up procedures for handling and storing, required those selling guns to get permits and increased the sentences for firearm offences.

Early commentators on its impact (Mundt, 1990) noted that it had little perceptible impact on homicides, but Mundt provided only a few charts and numbers and didn't test their statistical significance.

Leenaars and Lester (1994) used a complex statistical package. Their results suggested that fewer firearms were used for homicide after the law was passed, but they also found evidence some individuals may have used other means to murder, since the homicide rate using all other methods increased. They sug-



gested that even if this phenomenon, which criminologists call 'displacement,' occurred, there might still be significant effects in subpopulations (e.g., age, sex).

A 1997 study by the same authors examined the impact of gun control on different ages and found that, while displacement occurred for young adult victims, it did not for old adult victims. Their study the previous year showed that firearm homicides decreased for female victims, with no evidence of a switch to another method, but displacement appeared to occur for males.

Leenaars and Lester (2001) showed a further positive impact of the law for older and female victims, even if one controlled for some socio-economic variables (i.e. unemployment rate, median family income, birth, marriage and divorce rates, percentage of young males in the population).

Social changes other than those considered, of course, may also have caused the homicide rate changes and using a different set of social indicators (such as drug use) might have changed the estimates of the law's impact, however appropriate data on such in-

dicators are not presently available. For example, alcohol and drug consumption data in Canada have only been available since 1985.

Canada's Department of Justice (1996) also isolated a few other social variables that may be associated to homicide, i.e., data on foreign-borns, which is only gathered every five years and education levels, which doesn't lend itself to similar analysis.

It would also be useful to explore the impact of Bill C-51 on murder rates broken down by offender characteristics; for example, did it have an impact on murders committed by males versus females or 15 to 24 year olds versus those of other ages? Unfortunately, not all murders are solved and data on offenders by sex and age for each year are not available.

While controlling access to lethal means for murder has been proposed as a sound tactic for prevention (e.g., Lester, 1984), others strongly disagree (e.g., Kleck, 1991). The studies on the impact of gun control laws in Canada suggests that controlling access to lethal means for murder may be an effective tactic for some vulnerable targets.

Although the main conclusion is in support of the prediction that one can reduce homicide incidents by controlling the environment, more research is needed to strengthen the conclusion that gun control laws have significantly impacted homicide. For example, since Bill C-51 involved both additional regulations and additional punishments, it might be worthwhile to address which part of the bill may have been effective and why.

Since C-51, there have been two additional gun control laws in Canada (C-17 in 1991 and C-68 in 1995). The first strengthened the

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screening provision for firearms acquisition (FAC), requiring more complete search of applicants' personal and criminal records and longer waiting periods (28 days). Bridges (2004), using the statistical methods of Leenaars and Lester's work, showed that this new bill probably reduced homicides.

The Canadian Firearms Act (C-68) was passed in 1995 and called for the registry of all shotguns and rifles. It took effect in 1998, but its licensing and registration provisions were introduced in stages and there was opposition, mounting internal problems and further delays. It was implemented July 1, 2003 and it will be interesting to see if its impact is similar to its predecessors.

It is more problematic to study, however and as a lead researcher in gun control, I must confess that I really question whether we can ever show its impact. Much of the discussions to date have been simple charts and numbers, regressing back to the days of Mundt in 1980's. This is no more acceptable in science as it would be in law enforcement!

Of course, homicide is multi-determined and gun control is only one tactic to reduce it. The Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics report, *Homicide in Canada 2003*, addressed the question of why Canada's homicide rate has declined. They cite my studies on gun control, but also other factors, such as new advances and improvements in medical technology.

They also cite one of my new studies (Leenaars & Lester, 2004), which shows demographics, specifically the declining proportion of youth (age 15 to 24 years), even if one controls for other socio-economic variables, reduced the rate of homicide. There are further possible factors, such as improvements in policing, but no Canadian data.

Further research is required, but support for it, even for homicide, is at an all time low in Canada, so it is unlikely to occur.

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House robbers report grow op in Alberta

Police in Alberta had a mystery on their hands when a group of youths showed up at an RCMP detachment in January to confess to a break-and-enter.

The mystery was that no robbery had been reported and the Mounties couldn't figure out why the youths were so eager to confess. The answer became clear, however, when police learned the youths had broken into a marijuana grow operation the previous day and feared retribution from the owners for stealing some of the crop.

Police said one of the youths had already been visited by the homeowners, who allegedly

brought five friends to beat him with bats, fists and boots. At one point, the youth claimed the female homeowner grabbed his testicles and ordered one of the others to fetch a knife.

Fortunately for the youth, the visit ended there, but he said the group promised to return for money to pay for damage that had been done to their back door. Police obtained search warrants and raided the grow-op, arresting the male homeowner at gunpoint as he attempted to drive away. A large quantity of marijuana was found in the car and a marijuana grow operation was found inside a hidden room inside the house.



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