
Long Gun Registration: A Poorly Aimed Longshot

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Like so much of the discussion around gun control during the last 40 years in Canada, the recent debate over the gun registry has been plagued by misinformation, misrepresentations, and some rather outlandish claims. The discussion might be returned to a more reasonable footing if some of these could be put to rest, but I doubt it; support for and opposition to gun control has tended to be based on strongly held convictions rather than on solid evidence, and that is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, it can do no harm to at least try to sort out myths from facts in this highly contentious policy arena.

One such myth is that having a gun registry is something new for Canada. In fact, Canada has had a gun registry for years (since the 1930s), although for most of that time only handguns and certain other "restricted" firearms (including some long guns) have required registration.¹ However, not even the attempt to register all "ordinary" long guns (hunting rifles and shotguns) is new here; a 1940 amendment to the Defence of Canada Regulations required all such guns to be registered with the RCMP.² It remained in force until the war ended in 1945. What is new about the 1995 legislative requirements, then, is not the creation of a gun registry but the requirement, for the first time in peacetime in Canada, for all long guns to be registered. Of course, it is difficult to draw from the experience of universal registration of firearms during wartime any persuasive conclusions about the likely effectiveness of such registration in preventing or reducing firearms abuses 50 years later in peacetime.³ The issue, however, is not whether we should retain a gun registry but whether we should require registration of ordinary long guns rather than just requiring long gun owners to be licensed, as was the case prior to 1996.

One of the reasons advanced for universal long gun registration has been that it will help police in investigating crimes and in taking pre-

cautions when responding, for instance, to domestic violence, hostage-taking, or other "gun calls" (see Canada, Department of Justice 1994: 14). In support of this rationale, proponents of long gun registration have recently begun to cite statistics concerning the number of times the police have requested information from the new registry.⁴ These statistics are not, by themselves, very informative, however, since we have not been told (a) how frequently the police made such requests before long guns were included in the registry, (b) what proportion of current police requests concern long guns rather than other kinds of firearms that are required to be registered, or (c) what proportion of them concerned gun registration as opposed to gun owner licensing information, also included in the registry.⁵ We would need all three pieces of information before we could draw any conclusions about how much more helpful, if at all, the registry has become to the police as a result of the introduction of registration of long guns. In this regard, Toronto Police Chief Julian Fantino's recent assertion that the registry has proved to be of no significant additional assistance to his police service (one of the largest in the country) in investigating firearms-related crimes should perhaps not be lightly dismissed as simply the aberrant opinion of one police chief.⁶ Indeed, it is very doubtful whether even the requirement for handgun registration as such (as opposed to the requirement for those who own or possess handguns to obtain permits or licences) has ever had much impact on handgun use in crime or on any other kind of handgun abuse, although there is no clear Canadian evidence on this.

The focus on crime prevention and reduction as the principal justification for universal registration of "ordinary" long guns, however, is one of the more inexplicable quirks of the gun control debate, since, by any criteria that I can think of, long gun use in crime is not by any means the most serious of the problems that controls on long gun possession should be designed to address. It is no secret that the major social harm attributable to long gun abuse is firearms suicide.⁷ During the period from 1995 to 1999, for instance, 4,225 Canadians were recorded as having committed suicide with firearms, the great majority of these with "ordinary" long guns.⁸ During the same period, 758 Canadians were recorded as victims of firearms homicides,⁹ and consistently only about half of these crimes were committed with ordinary long guns.¹⁰ Thus, ordinary long guns accounted for 10 or 11 times as many suicides as homicides during this five-year period.

In December 2002, in defence of the gun registry, Health Minister Allan Rock (who, as Justice Minister, had introduced the legislation

establishing universal registration of long guns in 1995) claimed that the “gun control measures” had already saved 300 lives a year, and would therefore have saved 1,240 lives by the time \$1 billion had been spent setting up the gun registry. Referring to this cost of implementing the registry, he was reported as having said, “You have to ask yourself, what are 1,240 lives worth?” (Matas 2002: A8).

Leaving aside the fact that the registry was still not fully operational at the time, the figures cited by the Health Minister are totally unsupported by the evidence. Between 1996 and 2001, the annual number of firearms homicides dropped by 41 (from 212 in 1996 to 171 in 2001), a considerably smaller reduction (of 19%) than had occurred between 1991 and 1995 (35%), before long gun registration was introduced by legislation (see Dauvergne 2002: 9). This makes it highly unlikely that long gun registration itself has (at least so far) been responsible for any lives saved from firearms homicides. In fact, it seems more likely that the decline in firearms homicides during the latter half of the 1990s was a reflection of generally declining crime rates in Canada during those years, rather than a result of any particular impact of the 1995 gun control amendments.

With respect to firearms suicides, the annual number dropped by 79 (from 881 to 802 – a reduction of 9%) between 1996 and 1999 – the last year for which such data had been published when Mr Rock made his statement – and the percentage of all suicides that were committed by firearms was reduced from 22.4% (881 out of 3,941) in 1996 to 19.7% (802 out of 4,074) in 1999. As with firearms homicides, however, the reductions in firearms suicides were considerably greater during the five years before the introduction of legislation requiring long gun registration than during the three years following it. The absolute numbers each year were reduced from 1,108 in 1991 to 911 in 1995 (- 18%), and the percentage of all suicides that were committed by firearms declined from 30.8% in 1991 to 22.9% in 1995, again making it implausible that any of the post-1995 reductions were attributable to the introduction of a requirement for long gun registration. Equally significantly, the total number of suicides (by all means) did not decline between 1996 and 1999 (3,941 in 1996; 4,074 in 1999),¹¹ which, of course, raises a serious question as to whether any lives can be considered to have been “saved” from suicide during that period.

The fact that both firearms homicides and firearms suicides began their decline long before the requirement for long gun registration was introduced suggests strongly that if this decline was influenced by gun

control measures at all, it is most likely to have been influenced by measures other than long gun registration, such as long gun owner licensing, safe storage requirements, and introduction of enhanced firearms training requirements.

Mr Rock's flawed attempt to justify the high cost of universal gun registration by the number of lives saved, however, raises a much more fundamental question about the debate over gun control in general, and the universal registration of long guns in particular. The problem here is that the right questions have typically not even been asked, let alone answered. For the right question in this case, as for other intervention strategies, is not simply whether the intervention will achieve the desired results but whether investment of public funds in that intervention will achieve *better results* than investment of such funds in other possible interventions. Given that suicide is by far the most serious social harm arising from long gun abuse, and that no one has come up with any evidence that other forms of long gun abuse are likely to be significantly reduced as a result of long gun registration, this is a very pertinent and necessary question. This is especially true because funding for the long gun registry has, of necessity, apparently been at the expense of funding for other federal government interventions (such as its more general initiatives with respect to domestic violence, child care, sexual abuse, and shelters for abused spouses and children) that might also be expected to have some positive impact on homicide and suicide rates.

The Auditor General has estimated that by 2005, implementation of the gun control program (not just the gun registry) established by the 1995 legislation will have cost close to \$1 billion in federal funds, and that the gun registry will account for a substantial portion of that cost. Since this estimate includes only direct costs to the federal treasury, and not indirect federal and provincial costs resulting from the legislation (such as prosecutorial and correctional costs), we can be certain that it is an underestimate of the total costs of implementation.¹² Even taking this estimate at face value, however, one may legitimately ask whether investing so much of this money in a long gun registry is likely to be the best possible investment to reduce the harms caused by long gun abuse. Of course, this is not an easy question to answer, but the absence so far of any very persuasive evidence that long gun registration is likely to achieve any significant reductions of those harms makes it all the more important to ask it.

In this respect, and while conceding that such comparisons are fraught

with difficulty, it may well be worth considering the experiences of long gun registration in other countries. New Zealand merits particular attention in this regard.

New Zealand introduced universal long gun registration in 1920, subsequently relaxed registration requirements for shotguns, and finally abandoned long gun registration in favour of owner licensing in 1983 at the request of the police, who were responsible for administering the registry. Reasons given for this recommendation included that long gun registration was too costly, that it involved too much police time and too many recording errors, and that there appeared to be no evidence that it was having a significant impact on firearms abuses.¹³ Although, of course, the technology for implementing a firearms registry was certainly not as good in 1983 as it is today, it must also be recognized that conditions for implementing universal long gun registration without great complexity or excessive cost have been much more favourable in New Zealand than they are in Canada. Unlike Canada, which is a large country with a complex federal system of government and policing, as well as an increasingly strong "gun lobby," New Zealand is a relatively small country (269,000 km², compared with Canada's almost 10 million km²) with a small population (just under 4 million, compared with Canada's 31 million), a unitary system of government, and a single police service. Its rate of household gun ownership is roughly comparable to Canada's.

What is most revealing, however, is the experience of firearms abuse that New Zealand has had since abandoning its long gun registry. Specifically, while its average annual firearm death rate went up from 2.69 per 100,000 population during the 1970s (when universal long gun registration was in effect) to 2.86 in the 1980s (after it was abandoned), during the 1990s it went down to 2.51 (i.e., lower than in the 1970s).¹⁴ This fact, of course, suggests strongly that the New Zealand Police were right in their claim that long gun registration was not a significant factor influencing the rate of firearms deaths in the country and that the expense and trouble of maintaining it were not justified by its impact.¹⁵ Very similar arguments had been made a decade or so earlier by Colin Greenwood, himself a police officer at the time, in his seminal research on gun control (including long gun registration) in England and Wales.¹⁶

In fact, there is no evidence anywhere in the world to support the proposition that universal long gun registration can achieve significant objectives that cannot be equally well achieved through other less

expensive gun control measures, such as licensing of long gun owners and safe storage requirements, such as to justify its great expense. And there are many reasons to suspect that the money it costs to implement and maintain a long gun registry could be much more productively invested in other ways to reduce and prevent long gun abuses and the harms they cause. It's time such alternatives were seriously explored.

In the meantime, I suggest that advocates of long gun registration should be asked to answer the following five questions:

1. How much (to the nearest \$100,000 per year) will it cost to implement?
2. What *evidence* can you provide that it is actually likely to significantly reduce different kinds of firearms abuses, and as to *how* it will accomplish this?
3. Can you answer the previous question without using the words "maybe," "perhaps," or similar speculative terms?
4. (How) will the effectiveness of long gun registration be evaluated, and over what period of time?
5. What other options for spending this money to reduce or prevent firearms abuses have been seriously examined?

Notes

1. The RCMP were required to register all "revolvers and pistols" by section 121A(2) of the Criminal Code, which was inserted by section 3 of the *Criminal Code Amendment Act, 1934*, c. 47.
2. See section 37B, inserted as an amendment to the *Defence of Canada Regulations* by Order in Council on 29 July 1940 (*Journals of the House of Commons* 1940: 311).
3. It is worth noting, however, that the objective of long gun registration during the war was to ensure that sufficient weapons were available for the war effort (and were not in the hands of "enemy aliens"), rather than to curb long gun abuses.
4. E.g., in its editorial "A gun registry worth saving," the *Toronto Star* noted that "police are already using the system 1,500 times a day, proving its

utility" ("A gun registry" 2003: A18). This figure had also been cited by the Minister of Justice (see note 5 below). Three weeks later, in another editorial, the *Toronto Star* asserted that "police use the system 2,000 times a day to identify public safety threats" ("The gun registry" 2003: A26).

5. In defending the registry in a December 2002 press release, the Minister of Justice stated that "police agencies are accessing the on-line firearms registry an average of 1500 times a day. Since the beginning of the program 7,000 firearms licences have been refused or revoked. That is 50 times more license revocations from potentially dangerous individuals than occurred during the last five years of the old program. The number of persons prohibited from firearms ownership has also continued to increase by almost 50% - from 15,750 in 1998 to 29,280 in 2001. The number of lost, missing or stolen firearms has declined significantly" (Government of Canada 2002). This suggests that, as might be expected, much, if not most, police contact with the registry concerns information about firearms license holders and applicants rather than about long gun registrations.
6. On 3 January 2003 Fantino said, "We have an ongoing gun crisis including firearms-related homicides lately in Toronto, and a law registering firearms has neither deterred these crimes nor helped us solve any of them" (Canada NewsWire 2003).
7. I recognize that there are those who believe that firearms suicide is not a social harm comparable to the social harm of firearms use in crime, but I do not share that view. It is noteworthy that prevention of firearms suicide was not mentioned in the list of "The advantages of universal [long gun] registration" listed in the Department of Justice's 1994 document *The Government's Action Plan on Firearms Control* (Canada, Department of Justice 1994: 14-15).
8. In most cases, the type of firearm has not been recorded, but it is estimated that about 90% of all firearms suicides are committed with ordinary long guns: see Moyer and Carrington (1992: 39).
9. These figures are taken from the Annual *Causes of Death* reports (Canada, Statistics Canada Annual), which are based on information from death certificates. Police homicide statistics (based on offences recorded by police) usually vary somewhat from the *Causes of Death* homicide statistics, for a variety of reasons. For instance, the police recorded only 721 firearms homicides for the years 1996-1999 (Dauvergne 2002: 9).
10. Based on the police homicide statistics, 267 (37%) of the 721 firearms

homicides recorded for the years 1996–1999 were committed with ordinary rifles or shotguns, while another 46 (6%) were committed with sawn-off long guns (Dauvergne 2002: 9).

11. See Canada, Statistics Canada, Annual, for the source of these data.
12. In her report to Parliament on the matter, the Auditor General commented that, “in our view, the financial information provided for audit by the Department [of Justice] does not fairly present the cost of the [Canadian Firearms] Program to the government” (Canada, Department of Justice 2002: para. 10.48). Raymond Hession’s subsequent review of the costs does not seem to have detracted from that conclusion (2003).
13. For an account of gun control in New Zealand, see Kopel (1992: ch. 6).
14. These data are derived from New Zealand, Health Information Service (Annual).
15. It should be mentioned that there has recently been an interest in re-instituting universal firearm registration in New Zealand, and that a Bill to effect this (the *Arms Amendment Bill (No. 2)*) is currently stalled in the New Zealand Parliament. A recent report on this Bill states, “One of the main components of the proposed Bill was the universal registration of firearms – which is based on an arms control strategy used in Canada. But because Canada has faced big difficulties in putting this strategy in place, and also because of potential difficulties in NZ when trying to access information (due to the Privacy Act 1993), the [Law and Order] Committee [of Parliament] thinks the proposed Bill, in its current form, is not the best way forward. It recommends the Government establish a working group to look at issues raised by the Bill, before putting any planned arms control strategy in place” (New Zealand, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry 2001). The government has now indicated that the Bill will not proceed and that a new *Arms Amendment Bill* will be introduced later this year that may not include long gun registration (COLFO 2003).
16. Greenwood (1971). For a summary account of gun control in Britain, see Kopel (1992: ch. 3).

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