

The Firearms Review threatens to walk back gains in public safety

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ABSTRACT

Gun control is a pressing issue in Aotearoa New Zealand that has garnered the attention of policymakers and the general public. Given the physical and social harms that guns potentiate, healthcare workers in Aotearoa New Zealand have a critical role in analysing and advocating for evidence-based legislation to ensure low levels of gun-related harm.

We reviewed the historical and contemporary circumstances that have created the societal and legislative landscape of gun culture in Aotearoa New Zealand. The current Coalition Government is undertaking a review of the *Arms Act*, which could lead to weakening of current gun legislation.

We, as healthcare providers, advocate for an evidence-based approach in relation to gun laws in Aotearoa New Zealand. Ongoing monitoring, evaluation and adaptation of gun control regulation is essential to ensure effectiveness and responsiveness to evolving challenges.

Gun control is a pressing issue in New Zealand that has garnered the attention of policymakers and the general public. The tragic mass shooting in Christchurch in March 2019, resulting in the loss of 51 lives and numerous injuries, underscored the devastating impact of gun violence in the country.¹ Given the physical and social harms that guns potentiate, healthcare workers in Aotearoa New Zealand have a critical role in analysing and advocating for evidence-based legislation to ensure low levels of gun-related harm.

Aotearoa New Zealand's approach to gun control has historically been comparatively relaxed. Although there have been regulations requiring gun owners to obtain licences and register their firearms, these have been somewhat less stringent than in other comparable countries like Australia and the United Kingdom (UK).¹ These regulatory settings have fostered a culture of gun ownership in Aotearoa New Zealand, with more than 1.2 million firearms in circulation among a population of just over 5 million people.² Gun ownership in Aotearoa New Zealand is 50% higher per capita than Australia (Aotearoa New Zealand 22.6/100 vs Australia 15/100 residents). There have been a number of attempts over the last 30 years to produce more stringent gun control legislation; ultimately, these all failed.³

Following the 1996 Port Arthur massacre, the Australian Government rapidly changed legislation on gun control that reduced the annual harm from firearms from 2.9/100,000 in 1996 to 0.88/100,000

in 2018. Following 1996, there were no further mass shootings for the next 22 years. This legislation change was also associated with 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, firearm homicides and firearm suicides.⁴

Likewise, following the Christchurch shooting, then Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern took decisive action to tighten gun laws swiftly, essentially introducing the broadly bipartisan recommendations of a select committee in 2017, recommendations that were predominately rejected by the then minister of police.^{1,5} Legislation was enacted for a near-total ban on military-style semi-automatics (MSSA) weapons and high-capacity magazines, a buyback scheme was introduced to encourage gun owners to surrender their firearms for compensation and Te Tari Pūreke (Firearms Safety Authority), along with a Firearms Registry, was established. These measures garnered widespread public support as essential steps to prevent future tragedies.¹

However, the issue of gun-related harm in Aotearoa New Zealand is complex and multifaceted, presenting several challenges that need addressing to ensure public safety. With a well-publicised *Arms Act* review being undertaken, it is important to note the nuances and complexities that must be taken into consideration when designing regulatory settings to reduce gun-related harm

in Aotearoa New Zealand. The evidence shows that countries that prioritise collective safety over individual gun rights have reduced rates of gun-related harm.^{6,7} To strengthen gun control measures and prevent future tragedies, a comprehensive and evidence-based approach is necessary.

A key concern is the prevalence of illegal firearms, which constitute a significant portion of guns in circulation and are impossible to regulate effectively. A significant proportion of gun-related crime is committed by unlicensed gun owners.⁸ The understanding of the scale of illegal firearms in Aotearoa New Zealand is poor, with broad estimates of their numbers and a lack of clarity in their origin.⁴ This creates a challenging cohort of lethal weapons beyond the reach of the law that may potentially cause harm. Investigations have suggested that the majority of illegal guns are obtained through retail diversion, whereby guns are bought legally and on-sold on the unregulated market, as well as burglary of licensed gun-owners, and on grey weapons, where licence holders let licences lapse without disposing of their guns.^{5,9} Further evidence is required to establish this information further. The introduction of a Firearms Registry allows the prospective registration of guns to improve visibility of legal and unlicensed guns in Aotearoa New Zealand, and this will result in targeted interventions to reduce access to unlicensed guns.

Enhancing gun licensing and registration requirements, closing loopholes facilitating illicit gun transactions and imposing stricter penalties for non-compliance could reduce the circulation of illegal firearms. Additionally, refining screening protocols for gun licence applicants and fostering collaboration among government agencies, healthcare providers and law enforcement are vital steps to prevent at-risk individuals from accessing firearms.

While enacting and enforcing evidence-based and efficient gun legislation is a critical component, it is only one element in reducing gun-related harm. Addressing underlying factors contributing to violence, such as poverty, inequality and social alienation, is also crucial. Gun-related harm disproportionately affects Māori, those of lower socio-economic demographics, those with mental health diagnoses and the young.^{3,10} By tackling these root causes of violent crime and supporting vulnerable individuals, Aotearoa New Zealand can mitigate the despair and hopelessness that may result in harm.

While progress has been made in tightening

gun control laws following the Christchurch shooting, concerns persist, and debates continue on the effectiveness. The *Arms Act* review, led by former gun advocate, now Associate Minister of Justice Nicole McKee, threatens to walk back a number of gun control mechanisms implemented to reduce gun-related harm. The claimed focus of ensuring safety of firearm users is critical but should not come at the cost of ensuring collective public safety. The suggested relaxation of legalisation of MSSA weapons only serves to increase the rates of gun crime and death, as evidenced by the United States of America's (USA) experience following the lapse of the Federal Assault Weapon Ban in 2004.¹¹

The minister's challenge of the Firearms Registry may have more weight. Firearms registries are designed to improve visibility of legal and illegal firearms. However, there is little evidence showing a reduction in gun-related harm following the introduction of gun registries worldwide, and they may come at significant expense.

Hon Nicole McKee notes the failure of the Canadian gun registry at the turn of the century as evidence that a similar registry is destined to fail in Aotearoa New Zealand. However, the minister omits to express the reasons the Canadian system failed. Canada's vast rurality, coupled with the inadequacies of the registry's computing system at the time, led to inefficiencies and spiraling costs. Furthermore, the geographic position of Canada bordering the USA allowed a significant flow of illegal weapons, which formed a majority of guns in firearm-related homicides.¹² A much more aligned comparison to Aotearoa New Zealand's circumstance is Australia, where the government have recently announced their intention to introduce a federal gun registry, similar to Aotearoa New Zealand's current registry, to broad political and public support.

Hon Nicole McKee notes concerns with the potential privacy risks associated with stored information. Given the personal nature of the information, the Firearms Safety Authority must ensure its security. The Authority documents their robust principles to ensure the safety of this respected information, with privacy assured by state and independent contractors. In fact, since its induction, public trust in the Firearms Safety Authority has significantly increased.¹³

Additional concerns relate to cost of the registry. The documented cost released by the Firearms Safety Authority has a running cost of NZ\$8.4 million annually.¹³ This number is vastly

lower than the number purported by the current government, though it is still a significant sum. As registries worldwide remain relatively untested, it is critical that the introduction of a full registry is regularly assessed to demonstrate reduction in gun-related harm.

Gun control remains a critical issue in Aotearoa New Zealand that demands sustained attention and collaborative efforts to safeguard public safety. Vigilance, collaboration and evidence-based policymaking are crucial to navigate the

complexities of gun control and prevent future tragedies from occurring. Any consideration of reintroduction of MSSA weapons cannot be supported by the medical community. By addressing illegal firearms, supporting measures enhancing mental health support and tackling underlying social issues, the country can progress towards a safer society for all citizens. Continued monitoring, evaluation and adaptation of gun control regulation is essential to ensure their effectiveness and responsiveness to evolving challenges.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Nil.

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