

GUN CONTROL: WILL IT WORK?

H. Taylor Buckner

The following article is an address given by Dr. H. Taylor Buckner, Associate Professor of Sociology at Concordia University, to the 98th Session of the St. James Literary Society, on October 17, 1995. In the speech, Dr. Buckner summarizes the results of recent research regarding Canadian attitudes towards firearms and firearms control. The research suggests that much of the motivation for gun control may be hostility to the ownership of firearms, rather than a rational expectation that gun misuse will decrease. Much of Dr. Buckner's research about gun policy, including the book on which this speech is based, is available at <http://teapot.usask.ca/cdn-firearms/buckner/>.

When people ask if gun control will work, the answer depends on what is meant by gun control and what is meant by working. There is much confusion and dissent over the meaning of "Gun Control," and considerable disagreement over what might be taken as evidence of it "working," or "not working." It appears to me that much of this confusion arises from the fact that the discussion simultaneously involves questions of fundamental values and questions of practicality, with the two not being clearly distinguished. Indeed, sometimes fundamental value assumptions are not acknowledged, sometimes even denied, and the debate over practicalities becomes chaotic, and full of accusations of bad faith.

My interest in "Gun Control" started thirty years ago when I was a police officer. It has continued throughout my academic career. Though I did a bit of shooting as a young man, as a soldier, and as a police officer, during the twenty years I lived in downtown Montreal I was not involved in the shooting sports. Since moving to a rural area seven years ago I have taken up target shooting, and have started a small collection of old and unusual firearms. All of my firearms, both those that must be

registered and those that under current law are not subject to registration, are listed with the police. My wife and I shoot together, and we are instructors for the federally-mandated Canadian Firearms Safety Course. I tell you this because occasionally people object to a speaker who owns a gun speaking about firearms control. Curiously, people rarely object when a speaker proudly unfamiliar with guns speaks about firearms controls.

In January, Professor Gary Mauser of Simon Fraser University and I, developed, and carried out, the most comprehensive survey on attitudes towards gun control ever undertaken in Canada. The questionnaire was administered by phone by professional interviewers from the firm Canadian Facts, to a sample of 1,505 Canadian adults. We are currently preparing a book based on the results of this survey. I would like to share with you tonight some of our findings.

In the course of analyzing our survey data a number of things became clear. First, only seven percent of our sample overall, and only 18 percent of gun owners, had even a minimal level of knowledge of the current gun control laws. Second, some people, because of their basic values, support universal registration and the confiscation of handguns even when they do not think stricter gun control will be effective. Third, many people have impossibly high expectations about the effectiveness of stricter gun control.

KNOWLEDGE

The lack of knowledge is not surprising, many other surveys have found low levels of knowledge about justice matters (Roberts 1994). One effect of not knowing that there is already an extremely comprehensive and strict law on the books is that people continually think there must be a need for more laws. Even when a new law is passed most will not learn of it, and as long as murders continue to take place there will always be a demand for more laws.

The lack of knowledge among gun owners is worrisome, as they are presumed, in law, to know the law. I suspect most gun

owners in Canada are not certain whether or not they are obeying the current law completely. The present law is so complex (it has more than 17,000 words), and has changed so often, that only a few dedicated professionals can claim to really know it.

Did you know, for example, that to buy a handgun for target shooting in Québec that, amongst other things, you have to take two safety courses, be investigated by the police on three separate occasions, and produce 12 letters of reference? It takes about a year to complete the process.

BASIC VALUES

We asked two questions that go to basic values, first: Do you agree or disagree that Canadian Citizens should have the right to own a firearm? Note that our question is not the American “Right to Keep and Bear Arms,” but just whether a citizen should or should not have the right to own a firearm. Overall, 56 percent agreed that Canadians should have the right, 40 percent disagreed, and 4 percent were undecided.

Second, we asked: Do you generally favour or oppose hunting? Overall, 51 percent favoured hunting, 43 percent opposed, and 6 percent were undecided.

Attitudes on these two basic values drive the gun control debate, but are rarely mentioned. One of the rules of discourse in our rational society is that our proposals have to be justified on utilitarian grounds. If someone was to say, “I am for gun control because I don’t like guns and no one should have them,” or, “I am against gun control because I like guns and want to keep mine,” no further discussion would be fruitful.

Public proponents of additional gun controls are frequently heard to say, “We don’t want to confiscate your hunting guns, or stop legitimate gun use.” But is this really true? Could it be they are denying their basic values?

An indication that they may be concealing their basic values comes when it is suggested that controls will be costly and ineffective. Proponents of new controls then say, “it is about the kind of society we want twenty years from now,” without always

specifying that this is a society in which no one but government agents will have guns. A society in which the gun culture, wherein parents teach their children how to shoot and hunt, is apparently to be extinguished.

Probably a majority of Canadians are now second or third generation urbanites. Many urbanites think hunting is barbaric. Their conception of hunting and hunters is sometimes quite fantastic. Among people I have questioned in other surveys a frequently mentioned image is of a drunken hunter killing animals for the joy of killing, and leaving the bodies to rot in the field. Few think of the lower income family man purchasing a permit, hunting under strict regulations designed for wildlife management, in the hope of feeding his family better for the winter.

While the two values, right and hunting, both influence opinions on gun control, the two combined make for a better delineation of the value conflict in the gun control debate. We grouped responses in three categories: those who think Canadians should have the right to own a firearm and who favour hunting (35 percent), those whose responses were mixed (41 percent), and those who oppose the right to own a firearm and oppose hunting (24 percent). These basic values are strongly influenced by three background characteristics. Those from large cities, Québec, and females, tend to be in the “No Right No Hunt” category. Those from rural areas, the Prairie provinces, and males, tend to be in the “Right and Hunt” category.

EFFECTIVENESS OF GUN CONTROL

Expectations about the effectiveness of stricter gun control were measured by six questions: If there were stricter regulations for authorized firearms owners, would you say that the violent crime rate would increase, decrease or stay the same? Do you agree or disagree that gun control laws affect only law-abiding citizens as criminals will always be able to get firearms? Do you agree or disagree that stricter gun control would greatly reduce the level of violence against women in Canada? How

effective do you think stricter regulations would be in reducing suicides? Reducing homicides? Reducing accidents?

While a slight majority felt that stricter regulations for gun owners would not affect the violent crime rate, and three-quarters felt that criminals would still be able to get guns, opinion was about evenly divided on whether violence against women would be reduced.

On the other hand, 44 percent thought stricter regulations would be effective in reducing suicides, 68 percent in reducing homicides, 74 percent in reducing accidents. These answers have to be characterized as wishful thinking. Very few of our respondents know what the current regulations are, probably fewer still know much about the dynamics of firearms homicide, suicide and accidents.

I often find people are astonished when they discover that there are only about 60 fatal firearms accidents a year in Canada, that firearms are used in only about a third of suicides and homicides, that over 90 percent of those who die from a gunshot are males, and that last year in all of Canada there was a total of 21 women killed by a domestic partner using a firearm. If all firearms were to magically disappear, including those held by the police, the army, and the criminal population, people determined to kill themselves would mostly find other means, violent husbands would mostly use knives or blunt objects, and, obviously, there would be no gun accidents.

Realistically, if there were no firearms at all, probably far fewer than 100 lives a year would be saved. A great portion of these would be in the police and army where the accident and firearms suicide rates are high. No amount of regulation and enforcement acceptable in a democratic society will produce anything like this reduction. Though the accuracy of our respondents' perceptions may be in doubt, the answers to these questions give us a guide to what people hope will be the outcome of stricter gun control.

We combined the answers to all six questions into an index of perceived effectiveness. In this index 27 percent thought gun

control ineffective, 42 percent had mixed responses, and 31 percent thought gun control effective.

In general, those who think gun control effective are more likely than those who think it ineffective to support universal registration and confiscation of handguns. There are, however, some people who favour registration and confiscation whether or not they think gun control is effective. These people provide the clue to the values/practicality confusion in the debate over the effectiveness of gun control.

UNIVERSAL REGISTRATION

We asked six different questions on universal registration, first: "Do you agree or disagree that all firearms should be registered?" If the respondent agreed with registration they were then asked if they would still agree under five different sets of assumptions: If it would cost \$100 million; If it would cost \$500 million; If you knew it would increase your taxes; If you knew the police were opposed to registration; If registration would force the police to pull constables off the streets in order to deal with the paperwork involved. Support for registration fell considerably when people considered the costs. Fourteen percent were simply opposed to registration ("none"), 61 percent favoured it in general but found at least one of the scenarios too costly ("soft"), and 25 percent of the population favoured it regardless of the cost ("hard").

There is a strong and statistically significant relationship between thinking that gun control is effective, and wanting registration, for those with "Right and Hunt" values, and for those with "Mixed" values. For those who have "No Right No Hunt" values the relationship between effectiveness and "hard" support for registration is not statistically significant. In other words they support registration at any cost whether or not they think gun control will be effective. Perhaps they see registration as a step towards eliminating all guns.

CONFISCATION OF HANDGUNS

We also asked whether the handguns belonging to collectors, target shooters, and those who kept a handgun for self-defense, should be confiscated. Only 20 percent favoured confiscating collectors' guns, 24 percent target guns, and 47 percent self-defense guns. Interestingly, a majority of those who favoured confiscating self-defense handguns said they would personally use a gun to defend themselves.

Overall, 13 percent of the sample said that the handguns of all three types of users should be confiscated. This response was highly concentrated among the people in the "No Right No Hunt" value category.

There is a strong and statistically significant relation, among those who have the "Right and Hunt" values or the "Mixed" values, between feeling that gun control is effective and wanting to confiscate handguns. Among the "No Right No Hunt" respondents, support for confiscation is very high and not significantly related to their views on the effectiveness of gun control. As with registration, this group supports confiscation even when they do not think that gun control produces utilitarian benefits.

Returning to the title of the talk, "Gun Control: Will It Work?" I think that there are two definitions of working, a value definition and a utilitarian definition. Were it not for the confusion caused by the mixing of these two levels of discourse no one would have to ask if gun control will work, the answer would be obvious.

UTILITARIAN CONCERNS

From a utilitarian point of view the goal of gun control is to reduce the misuse of firearms resulting in a reduction of homicides, suicides and accidents.

Research in Canada and other countries has shown that stricter gun control has two effects: it reduces firearms robberies and it increases the burglary rate. We have already had both of these take place in Canada following the 1978 law. From 1975 to 1989 there was a 36 percent decrease in firearms robberies

rates, from 39 per 100,000 to 25 per 100,000 (Wolff 1991). Robberies with other offensive weapons increased (DuWors 1992). Canada's burglary rate, always before lower than that of the United States, passed the U.S. rate in 1982 and still remains above it (Fedorowycz 1992). Stricter gun control laws will probably not offer much further reduction in the firearms robbery rate, but have a great potential, as British experience has shown, for increasing the burglary rate of occupied premises (Mayhew 1987).

There are countries that, for a variety of cultural reasons, have high or low rates of homicide and suicide, but changes in gun control do not appear to have any marked effect. In Canada the homicide rate was high when the baby-boomers were in the "killer years" of 15 to 30, in 1975. It has declined as this group aged, and a smaller portion of the population was in the 15 to 30 age group. A slightly larger decline took place in the United States, which did not have any new firearms legislation during this period.

In the United States, where guns are more easily accessible, about two-thirds of suicides are carried out with firearms, compared to about one-third in Canada. But the United States' suicide rate is lower than Canada's. In Japan, where essentially no one has guns, the suicide rate is higher than Canada's. Suicide rates are determined by cultural factors, not by the availability of a specific means.

While it is certainly true that if there were no guns there would be no gun suicides, registration will not produce this effect. The argument that because an owner is forced to register his gun he will be more likely to store it safely so that in a moment of depression he will not use it to kill himself applies to an incredibly small portion of suicides. Most suicides follow months or years of depression or illness, unlocking a gun takes at most a couple of minutes, and the vast majority of people who use guns for suicide are certain they want to die. Using a gun is not like taking a dozen pills and calling 9-1-1. Taking away guns from those people doctors and family members think are

depressed, already possible in the current law, might help in a few cases.

Still using a utilitarian point of view, it is hard to see how the involvement of thousands of police officers keeping track of the millions of households that have informed the police that they have guns, is an effective deployment of police resources. Of the eight million guns in Canada, only 1/20th of 1 percent will be misused in homicide, suicide, accidents or by being stolen in any given year. That is to say that 99.95 percent of the police effort will be wasted.

When I was a police officer I was told “you don’t find many criminals in church,” the point being, you look for criminals where they are, not where they are not. Registration will put the police, already declining in numbers, in the position of tracking church congregations and looking for minor sins, arresting people for not tithing, while diverting attention from crack houses and violent families.

An additional problem that our survey revealed is that about a quarter of gun owners do not intend to register all their guns. This resistance will produce around three-quarters of a million new criminals, some of whom will be prosecuted at great cost, and little social benefit.

VALUE CONCERNS

From the “No Right No Hunt” point of view the goal of gun control is to reduce the number of firearms in the country, to reduce firearms use, and to reduce hunting. If firearms and hunting could be eliminated from Canada, even better.

From this value point of view, gun control has already been extremely effective in reducing the participation of Canadians in the shooting sports and hunting. I asked 27 experts, representatives of wildlife and shooting federations from across Canada, to evaluate the effect on their sports of the last gun control law passed in 1991, with major provisions coming into effect in 1993.

These experts indicated that membership in the shooting clubs they knew about had declined by 14 percent. The turnout

for competitions involving pistol shooting declined by 23 percent, rifle competitions 14 percent, shotgun competitions (trap and skeet) by 25 percent. The number of hunting licenses issued declined by nearly 13 percent. The number of gun dealers declined by 21 percent. The political involvement of gun owners in the gun control debate increased by 50 percent during the same period. These figures are hardly definitive; they represent only the averaged educated guesses of people deeply involved in recreational firearms use. While the accuracy of the percentage declines may be questioned, the overall trend is clear.

The decline in hunting licenses has both direct and indirect costs for wildlife management. Much of wildlife management is paid for by hunting licenses, and if hunters can not be counted on to control excess populations many more animals will starve and crop damage will increase. There are also economic costs associated with the decline in other shooting sports. It appears that it is easy to discourage the law abiding Canadian from participating in a sport by simply increasing the regulations every year. For those with "No Right No Hunt" values these arguments are irrelevant, and a decline in hunting is a victory.

The R.C.M.P. reports a stunning drop in the issuance of new Firearms Acquisition Certificates, another success from the "No Right No Hunt" value point of view. If we take the rate of FACs issued from 1984 to 1990, about 600 per 100,000 as the normal rate there will probably be a rebound from the 1994 rate of 169 per 100,000, but with all the new regulations many will be discouraged from applying for the Firearms Possession Permit with acquisition rights.

Additionally, a number of firms have been forced out of business (at one meeting I attended in control advocates cheered when a sporting goods store owner said he was going bankrupt).

Bill C-68, presently before the Senate [and now law, ed.], will have little or no effect on homicides, suicides or accidents. Its proponents have not offered a single piece of evidence or research that it will reduce homicides, suicides or accidents, because there is no such evidence or research. It may well allow for an increase in violent crime as police efforts and funds are

diverted into bureaucracy. It will certainly increase the overall crime rate as almost every gun owner in Canada will inadvertently be in violation of one or another of its confusing provisions.

Bill C-68 will work extremely well at promoting the values of those who are in the "No Right No Hunt" camp. With its 39,000 words and mind-boggling complexity it will insure that almost no gun owner or police officer will be able to say for certain whether an act is criminal. It will allow the government to ban any firearm it wishes, regardless of whether it is commonly used in hunting or target shooting. It will add layer after layer of regulations for shooting clubs, create five kinds of Firearms Possession Permits and five categories of Prohibited weapons, some grandfathered, some not. It will discourage even more people from recreational firearms use through increasing costs and red tape.

So, will gun control work? Clearly it has not and will not from a utilitarian point of view, clearly it has and will from the "No Right No Hunt" value point of view. It depends entirely on what you mean by work; it depends entirely on your values.

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