Serious Firearm Offending in New Zealand — Issues for Gun Controls and Public Safety

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Reducing or preventing the misuse of firearms (whether criminal, suicidal or accidental) is central to gun controls policy. In June 1997 the New Zealand Government received the recommendations of the Review of Firearms Control, an independent inquiry commissioned by the Minister of Police and chaired by Sir Thomas Thorp. The Review comprehensively examined several firearm-related issues, including the nature and extent of serious firearm offending in New Zealand. The research presented in this article was commissioned by the Review. Based on a population of 709 offences for the 12 months ending 30 June 1996, this study provides an analysis of serious firearm offending in New Zealand and discusses the implications of these findings for gun controls policy.

The regulation of firearms has recently received significant international attention. In May 1997, The United Nations' Economic and Social Council passed a resolution urging all member states to increase controls on the regulation and exportation of firearms (Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, 1997). Moreover, countries including Canada, Australia, England and Wales have all passed legislation implementing a range of gun controls (Chapman, 1996; Thorp, 1997).

In New Zealand, the Review of Firearms Control, chaired by retired High Court Judge Sir Thomas Thorp, submitted its 281-page report in June 1997. It recommended, *inter alia*, banning military-style semi-automatic firearms (MSSA's), mandatory registration of all firearms, giving health professionals power to report patients to police who present 'at risk' behaviours, increasing the minimum standards of firearms security in homes and dealers' outlets, and tightening the vetting and disqualification processes of licensees (Thorp, 1997).

The Thorp Report provides a valuable contribution to an under-researched area in the field of criminal justice. In New Zealand firearm research has been confined to homicide and suicide, accidental injuries caused by firearm negligence or firearm theft (see Gardiner et al. 1995; Alpers & Morgan, 1995; Walters & Alpers, 1998). The research presented in this article examines the nature and extent of serious firearm offending in New Zealand (that is, firearm offences defined by the Crimes

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Act), as well as raising questions about police investigation and recording practices and discussing changes to existing firearm regulations in New Zealand.[1]

Methodology

This research was commissioned by the Independent Review of Firearms Controls. It examined a population of 709 reported firearm-related (Crimes Act) offences using the Police's Crime Trend Analysis (New Zealand's official police database for crime statistics) for the 12 months ending 30 June 1996. A time-series analysis of previous populations was not possible for budgetary reasons, nor was it possible to examine the Arms Act offences during the same period[1]. The population selected was the most recent available at the time of the research.

There were a number of methodological issues with this research, which were confounded by deficiencies and inaccuracies with police data. Using the Crime Trend Analysis (CTA) the research identified the police districts where firearm offences were reported to have occurred. District commanders were then requested to send in all files relating to the 709 offences taken from the CTA printout. Every single offence on the CTA has its own separate number, this number should (in theory) have correlated with the numerical reference on the police case file (the folder containing police evidence, witness reports etc). This, however, was often not the case.

A closer examination of the police files resulted in substantial alterations to the population of offences under review. A total of 208 offences were excluded from the analysis. They included 142 miscodes (20% of the total population). These included matters which appeared on the official crime count, as serious firearm offences yet upon closer inspection were totally unrelated to firearms. Moreover, there were 63 'no offence disclosed' (reported to police but upon investigation the police concluded that no offences had been committed), two offences were dated outside the twelve months under review and one offence was a mock case used for police training. The mock case was officially recorded as a murder (firearm) when it was a hypothetical case used for training recruits at the police academy. In sum, 29% of the total population appearing on the official crime trend analysis for the twelve months ending 30 June 1996 were either 'non-events' or miscoded offences.

Furthermore, the research was unable to access information on a total of 48 offences drawn from the CTA (mainly aggravated robberies and threaten to kill). In 36 of these cases police could not locate any details of the offence in question. A further 10 files were reportedly sent to the researchers (who were based at New Zealand Police Headquarters) but not received.

The researchers received a total of 453 files. An assessment of these files revealed a number of police recording deficiencies. For example, a large number of files revealed multiple firearm offences (second or third Crimes Act offences contained in the file but not recorded on the CTA). In addition, there were police files containing serious offences, which were sent to the researchers that had not been requested. In other words, the manual task of checking police files against computer records identified a large number of serious firearm offences (n = 294), which had never been recorded in the official statistics for the 12 months ending 30 June 1996 but should have been. Given the large number of these offences, and

that they were committed within the period under review, it was decided to include them in the final study, making a total sample of 747 offences.

Information from police files was coded using a schedule. A large number of police files did not contain information about the nature and origin of the firearm or profile details of both the offender and the victim/s. As a result the researchers phoned the informant for missing information. This was a time consuming process. Informants were often 'on leave' or on 'night duty' or had transferred to other districts (often unknown), many officers had left the police and many others had taken only a small part in the case and were not best placed to answer questions. It was also apparent that many police officers simply did not ask offenders certain questions, for example, the origin of the firearm used in the crime. As a result there were a large number of unknown values in the results.

Results

Types of Offences

The results reveal that 'Aggravated Robbery' (more commonly referred to as armed robbery in Australia) and 'Threaten to Kill/Do Grievous Bodily Harm (GBH)' were the most commonly reported offences. These two offences alone accounted for 79% of all offences in the study. Most other offences were reported in small numbers. Among these we see 'commission of crime with firearm' (3.6%), 'assault person with firearm/airgun' (1.7%) and 'use firearm against a law enforcement officer' (1.6%). There was a further twenty-five separate firearm offence categories, which in total comprised less than 5% of the overall sample. For example, murder (n = 3), attempted murder (n = 6) and wounding with intent to rob (n = 11). There were no reported rapes or sexual violations involving firearms for the 12-month period.

Aggravated Robbery(Firearm)

A closer examination of case files identified three distinct types of aggravated robbery — commercial, residential and street. Aggravated robberies on commercial premises were predominantly reported at dairies, small supermarkets, petrol stations, takeaway food outlets, hotels (bottleshops), bars and restaurants. Police summary sheets reveal that these offences were often committed by offenders aged 16–20 years; in company with peers and demonstrating little sophistication or planning. Other commercial aggravated robberies at banks, credit unions, pharmacies, video stores and gambling agencies demonstrated greater evidence of planning and involved older offenders aged 21–30 years.

Aggravated robberies on residential premises were largely drug-related. The victims were either known drug dealers or users, or were perceived by offenders to be so. Less than 4% of all aggravated robberies (n = 15) were reported to have occurred 'on the street'. Most often victims were not physically assaulted, although there was evidence of 'shoving', punching and kicking. Theft of property ranged from taking a baseball cap to $500 cash.

Threaten to Kill/Do Grievous Bodily Harm (GBH)(Firearm)

The second most frequently reported offence was Threaten to Kill/Do GBH (Firearm). This category is problematic for analysis. It is recorded as a serious

firearm offence in New Zealand and involves threatening a person with intent to kill or cause serious injury with a firearm. Such offences are considered more serious than those appearing under the Arms Act because the threat involved (to kill or cause GBH) is viewed as sufficiently serious to be included as an indictable offence. It is a problematic category for an examination of serious firearm offending because the offender is often not in possession of a firearm at the time of the offence. If an offender threatens a victim by expressing a desire to obtain a firearm and kill and/or serious injure, then the offence is recorded as a Crimes Act offence. Other offences involving less serious threats (for example, to property or household pets) are offences within the Arms Act. A total of 128 offenders were involved in 142 reported Threaten to Kill/Do GBH (Firearm) offences. These offences overwhelmingly comprised threats where 'no firearm' was present (79% of cases). In other words, offenders without a firearm visibly present, had threatened to obtain a firearm and return to kill or do grievous bodily harm.

In 81% of aggravated robberies the offender was a stranger to the victim. This was not the case for Threaten to Kill/Do GBH. A total of 22.5% of victims were either the present or past partner of the offender, a further 27% of victims were acquaintances of the offender and 10% were family members. Case file analyses of all 142 Threaten to Kill/Do GBH offences reveals four common types of offending. First, domestic (threats made against current or ex-partners), neighbours (neighbourly disputes sparked by access and/or damage to property, noise levels or animals). Thirdly, family (brothers, parents and cousins involved in family arguments). Finally, stranger (which account for 30% of all threats) — these involved threats to 'bouncers' who refused entry to nightclubs, to police, welfare organisations and insurance companies.

Type of Firearm Used

Military style semi-automatic (MSSA) firearms often attract the greatest public attention and political debate when guns are linked to public safety and crime. Yet this research shows that no offence involved a MSSA. Handguns were the most frequently reported weapons involved in Crimes Act offences. Furthermore, they were reportedly used in the most serious offences including murders, attempted murders, kidnapping and aggravated robberies. Although it is concluded that the handgun results are inflated due to incorrect reporting (discussed later).

Figure 1 shows the proportion of guns used in all serious firearm offences (n = 747). The figures shown are greater than the total count of offences as they include multiple firearms reported within a single offence.

The majority of firearms were not 'sawn off' or 'sawn down'. The large 'unknown' value reflects cases where the offender/s were unapprehended and/or witnesses were unable to recall whether or not the firearm was 'sawn down', or else police officers did not record this information.

Origin of Firearms

The origin of the firearm was often unknown. Arresting officers would generally not ask questions about the firearm's origin. Information relating to firearm origin, type of firearm, the length of time that the firearm had been in the offender's

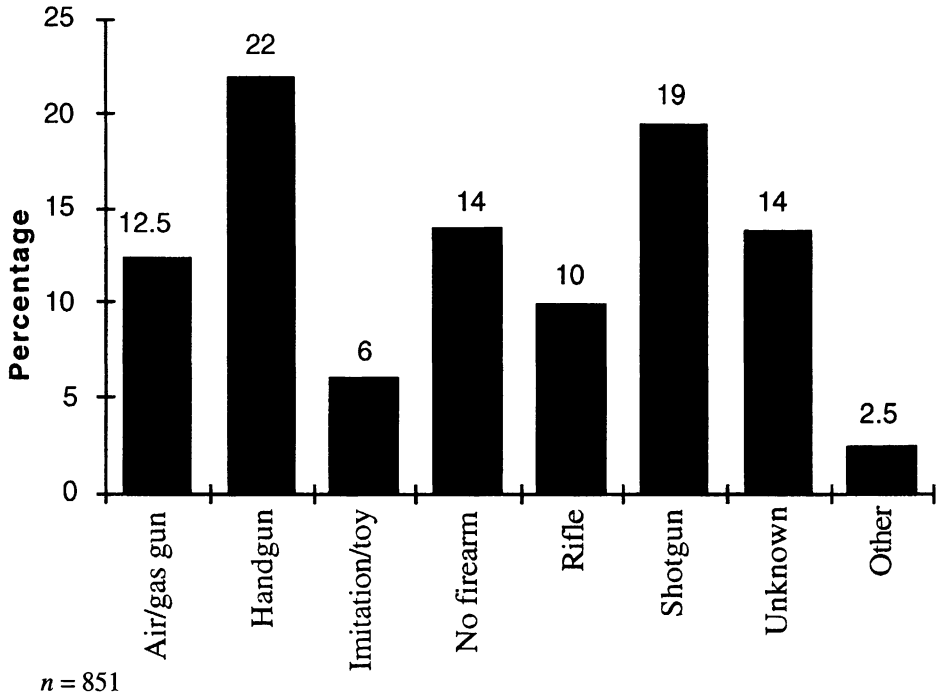

FIGURE 1

Guns used in Serious Firearm Offences

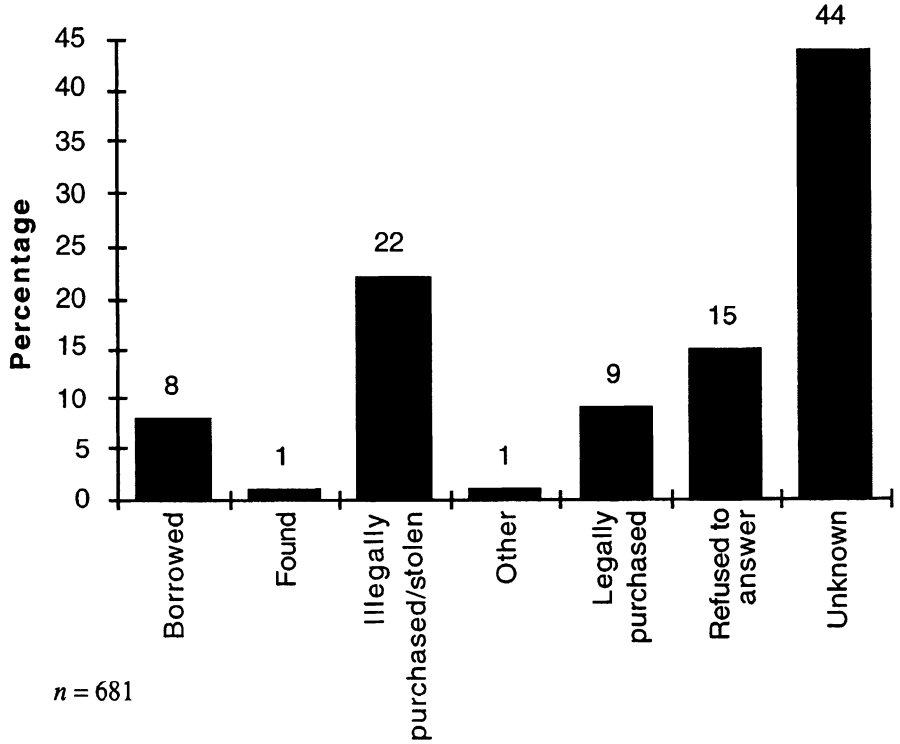

FIGURE 2

Origin of Firearm

possession, and if stolen the location of the theft — were issues not pursued by police or were unknown due to unapprehended offenders. Arresting police officers gathered specific information — noticeably details most likely to result in conviction. The 'bigger picture' or context in which serious firearm offending occurs is often not addressed. Questions relating to firearm origin are often seen by arresting officers as unconnected to the events surrounding the crime. If the offender refused to answer questions relating to the firearm, police officers would in most instances, choose not to pursue these inquiries arguing that "it's not relevant for securing a successful result".

If we remove the 'unknown' and 'refused to answer' responses we see that stolen and illegally purchased firearms increase to 52.4%. Two categories have been collapsed into one, namely 'illegally purchased' and 'stolen'. In most cases where the firearm was illegally purchased it had been originally stolen and later sold to the offender. The large number of unknown responses creates difficulties when interpreting the likely target or site of a firearm theft. However, recent New Zealand research on firearms theft (Alpers and Walters, 1998) concludes that 88% of stolen guns are long-guns (shotguns and rifles) which are taken in most instances (83% of the time) from urban or rural dwellings. Concluding that insecurely stored long-guns in the home are the most likely targets of firearms theft (Alpers and Walters, 1998).

When we examine the type of illegally purchased or stolen firearm used in Crimes Act offences (n = 148) we see that handguns were more commonly used (48%). Separating out the stolen firearms (n = 56) from those illegally purchased (n = 92) reveals a different result. The overwhelming majority of illegally purchased firearms were handguns. This could potentially indicate a growing 'underground' handgun economy, however, it is more likely that those weapons identified as 'handguns' were indeed air guns or sawn off shot guns (discussed later).

Profiles of Offenders

There were 633 offenders reported to be involved in the 747 firearm (Crimes Act) offences. The overwhelming majority of offenders were male (93%) and half were aged under 30 years. We see that 30% of offenders were identified as Maori and 28% as Caucasian. However, results for ethnicity must be treated with caution. Existing police recording practices are likely to inflate certain ethnicity categories. For example, there are no separate categories for offenders who identify as both Maori and Caucasian, information contained in police files was based on perceived ethnicity. Likewise 'perceptions' of ethnicity from witnesses (when offenders were unapprehended) were recorded as fact and entered into the official crime data.

The majority of offenders (67%) committed only one firearm offence each. A further 9% (n = 57) committed more than 5 offences. Only a small number (n = 3) or 1% were reported to have committed more than 10 offences each.

A total of 57% of the apprehended offenders (n = 224) had known criminal histories. These offences in order of prevalence included dishonesty, violence and drugs. A total of 13% had prior firearm offences. When we examine the criminal histories of those offenders with previous firearm offences (n = 30) we see that violent offending substantially increases (87% had previous convictions for at least one offence). In fact those offenders with previous firearm histories are more likely

to be more active across a range of offence categories but particularly those offences involving violence, dishonesty and drug offences.

The majority of firearms used by juveniles (68%) were air/gas guns and/or imitation guns (toys). Yet a significant number (18%) of juveniles were reported to have used handguns, it is more likely, however, that these weapons were imitation firearms incorrectly reported as handguns.

Profiles of Victims

Police files often contained little information about victims. Even when substantial information about the offender was available, questions relating to the victim's age, ethnicity, relationship to the offender etc., were either not known or not included in police reports.

In total there were 571 victims. Males comprised 60% of all victims and females 36% (4% were unknown). Victim ethnicity was largely unknown (62%), with 18.5% reported as Caucasian and a noticeably smaller number of Maori victims (5%) than reported Maori offenders (30%). When we compare the age of offenders to the age of victims we see that offenders aged 31–99 years total 18.5% of all offenders. Yet this same age group represented 35% of all victims. The statistics are best explained by the nature of the offending. Likewise offenders aged 10–20 years comprised 28% of all offenders yet only 13.5% of known victims. As mentioned, the majority of reported serious firearm offences were aggravated robberies — where commercial premises were the most popular targets. Younger offenders committed these offences, in the main, where you would expect that victims (proprietors, managers) would be in the older age groups.

Overall, the majority of offenders were unknown to their victims (62%). At the time of the offence a total of 15 offenders were cohabiting with their victim. These offenders were reported to have committed a total of 47 (6.2%) serious firearm offences, the majority involving Threaten to Kill/Do GBH (firearm).

In the case of juvenile offenders, 81% of victims were unknown to the juvenile offender. These figures reveal as much about police recording and investigative practices than aid explanations for serious firearm offending. Questions relating to the victim's age, ethnicity, relationship to the offender were often not pursued and/or not perceived to be relevant by the arresting police officer/s.

General Discussion

A statistical analysis of reported firearm (Crimes Act) offences in New Zealand reveals marginal increases for the past six years. As a proportion of all reported violent offences, serious firearm offences have remained static. The limitations of official crime statistics are, however, well documented (see Mayhew & Maung, 1992; Maguire, 1994; Bottomley & Moynihan, 1996) and this research reveals that official police statistics must continue to be viewed with caution. This is particularly the case with offences involving Threaten to Kill/Do GBH where no firearm was used. This category is clearly anomalous and conveys an inflated message about the extent to which firearms are used in Crimes Act offences.

This study has also revealed an unacceptable level of police inaccuracy when recording information. It is of significant concern that 20% of the original CTA population for this study were miscodes — offences that were totally unrelated to firearms, often involving crimes such as burglary, motor vehicle theft and fraud.

This research concludes that handguns were the most preferred guns in serious firearm offences (22%). However the accuracy of this finding must be challenged. According to Thorp (1997), handguns are sold on the black market in New Zealand for NZ$750–$2000, as opposed to a shotgun which range between NZ$100–200 (Thorp, 1997, p. 133). Given the price of handguns and the ease at which an imitation pistol can be mistakenly identified as a handgun, it is more likely that witnesses as well as police have inflated handgun reports through incorrect identification. Identifying the difference between an imitation pistol and a handgun can be very difficult. Recently, 50 Wellington police officers were asked to identify the difference between a Glock pistol (notably the make and model that the New Zealand police carry) and its equivalent imitation. In total, 94% of police officers could not tell the difference (by simply looking) between the authentic and imitation pistols (The Dominion, 9 December 1997). Moreover, this research shows that 18% of all firearms used by juvenile offenders were reportedly handguns, the majority of which were reported to be 'illegally purchased'. Again, given the price of such guns on the black market it is unlikely that teenagers are purchasing them, especially when an imitation at $NZ75 is equally effective during an aggravated robbery.

One-third of all reported offences were 'not cleared' by the police. When offenders were apprehended they were male, having never possessed a firearm licence, and in 57% of cases were already known to police. Prior offending consisted mainly of dishonesty, violence, drugs and anti-social offences. From the 224 offenders with a prior criminal history, 13% had previous firearm offences. These offenders show greater previous involvement in crimes of violence than offenders with no record for previous firearm offending. Thorp (1997) has recommended a prohibition on serious violent offenders from obtaining a firearm license for five years and three years for those offenders who threaten with a firearm (Thorp, 1997, p. 241). These recommendations are consistent with gun control policies in Australia which attempt to reduce firearm availability and restrict access, and thereby aim to reduce violence (Carcach & Grabosky, 1997; Mukherjee, 1997). However, the extent to which these recommendations will significantly reduce serious offending must be challenged. This research shows that serious firearm offenders with previous convictions for violence are able to obtain their guns from illegal sources, prohibiting such individuals the right to legally obtain a firearms licence will have little effect in their criminal involvement.

It is also important to note that males under the age of 30 years committed the overwhelming majority (93%) of serious firearm offences. Males comprise 80% of all reported offending in New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 1996; New Zealand Police, 1998), yet men feature more prominently in crimes involving firearms. How can we explain this? In New Zealand there are 204,610 firearm licensees (Thorp, 1997, p. 35), over 92% are male and 99% of licensees in possession of military style semi-automatic firearms are men (Agnew, 1997). Shooting and hunting in New Zealand (like Australia) have traditionally been male pastimes. Moreover, firearm

sports are usually not leisure activities which adults pursue when choosing a new form of recreation but rather a cultural phenomenon among certain families or groups. Males are more likely to be attracted to guns and noticeably the more high powered firearms. They are also the targets of much firearm advertising. In order to understand firearm offending we need to examine issues of masculinity and culture where firearms may arguably play a role in creating certain male identities (Jefferson, 1997).

Case studies in this research show that firearm use was often a proportionate response by the offender to the perceived threat or challenge. For example, arguments that commenced as neighbourly disputes, or verbal exchanges outside hotels, or disagreements at Social Welfare, escalated into a firearm offence. As the perceived challenge intensified, so did the reciprocation. In these cases we see that male offenders were either threatening female victims in domestic situations or threatening other men in what has come to be known as 'honour contests' (Polk, 1994, 1997). How does such information inform gun control policy? The issue is complex and the policy solutions may not be specifically or solely related to firearms. The important point to note here is that discourses in firearms should be linked to broader analyses of gender, power and patriarchy. It is with and through these areas that we must explore the contexts in which firearm violence occurs and thereby assess the policy responses that should follow.

The origin of a firearm was often unknown (an issue not pursued by police) yet 22% of guns reported to be used in serious firearm offences were either stolen or illegally purchased. As discussed earlier, the number of stolen or illegally purchased firearms increased to 52.4% of all guns when the 'unknown' values were removed from the analysis. The links between insecure storage, firearm theft and subsequent acts of violence and injury have been cited elsewhere (see Walters & Alpers, 1998; Kellerman & Westphal, 1995; Corkery, 1994) and this research reinforces the need to educate firearm owners to secure their weaponry and to enforce breaches of security laws. Insecurely stored firearms (notably long-guns) are easy targets for burglary and this research confirms that stolen guns are frequently used in serious firearm offences. The Thorp Report has quite rightly recommended policies which aim to increase personal responsibility for firearms, including more options than present for police when enforcing safety requirements, practical training for shooters and publicity and educational initiatives which emphasise responsible firearm use (Thorp, 1997, p. 240).

Is serious firearm offending occurring in New Zealand at a greater rate than in like countries? Such questions are often fraught with methodological difficulties (Zedner, 1995; Nelken, 1997). Cross-national firearm research often identifies the differences rather than the similarities between crime across jurisdictions. Analyses of firearm crime in other jurisdictions are interesting, yet often have little homespun value (Lord Cullen, 1996; Thorp, 1997). Firearm-related offending is most often examined in terms of violence (usually homicide and suicide), arguably because some of the definition and legislative differences are less apparent and where data are more readily available. That said, serious firearm offending in New Zealand (at least statistically) is occurring at a lower rate than Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom (Thorp, 1997). The number of firearms in New Zealand is reportedly high. The civilian armoury in New Zealand has been estimated to be between

700,000–1,000,000 firearms (Thorp, 1997). Moreover, the United Nations lists New Zealand third highest in gun ownership from 49 participating countries (United Nations Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice, 1997), which supports earlier findings of Killias (1993) where New Zealand was ranked fourth behind the United States, Canada and Finland in long-gun ownership. Overall this high incidence of gun ownership has not produced a higher per capita serious firearm offending rate with like nations. New Zealand's firearm homicide ratio, for example, is less than Canada and Australia and one-third the rate of the United States.

New Zealand's comparatively moderate rate of firearm violence is demonstrated by a recent national victimisation survey conducted in 1996 which sampled 4500 individuals. Contained within the survey were questions regarding victimisation of violence within the past 12 months. A total of 763 respondents reported being the victim of at least one violent crime, where 17% of all reported acts of violence involved a 'weapon'. Of these, firearms were reportedly used in 17.6% of cases. The most commonly used weapons in acts of violence were reported to be 'sticks' and 'clubs' (28.9%) and 'bottles' and 'broken glasses' (23.3%). Young et al. (1997) concludes "The most noteworthy feature here is that a gun was rarely used in actual assaults or robberies. It was, however, the most commonly used weapon in threat offences" (Young et al. 1997, p. 77).

However, whilst New Zealand's rates of firearm violence are low for a country with a high number of firearms and one with a reported relaxed gun control policy (Walters & Alpers, 1998; Thorp, 1997) in relation to other western countries, the same cannot be said for its rate of suicide and accidental injury. Suicide by firearm accounts for 73% of all firearm deaths in New Zealand (Thorp, 1997; Beautrais, 1996). Thorp (1997) concludes "While substantially less than the United States, our firearm suicide rate is nearly twice as high as the average rate amongst United Nations Member States, and over seven times higher than the United Kingdom" (Thorp, 1997, p. 82). It is important to recognise, as Harding (1983), Killias (1993) and many others have pointed out, that firearm controls is as much about public health and safety as it crime prevention. As a result, the independent inquiry in New Zealand has made a variety of important recommendations which include improving requirements for firearm storage and security, reducing the risk of misuse by the mentally disordered, training of shooters, increased enforcement and sanctions for misuse, limiting the size of collections, controls over the sale of ammunition and restricting the availability of airguns and high-powered guns (Thorp, 1997, pp. 238–244).

At a more controversial level is the issue of banning MSSA's. Thorp (1997) recommended the banning of all military-style semi-automatic firearms. The current study found that a MSSA was not used in any of the 747 serious firearm offences and it would seem unjustifiable, at least empirically, to ban such weapons for crime prevention reasons. It would appear that decisions to ban MSSA's in New Zealand has been driven by isolated and high profile acts of murder and/or media generated questioning about the need for such high powered weaponry in the hands of a civilian population. There may be a predictive element to banning MSSA's, that is, a control policy which attempts to eliminate foreseeable dangers. Again, if this is the logic to be applied then it cannot be supported with empirical evidence. This

research confirms that long-guns, handguns and imitation pistols in New Zealand significantly outstretch MSSA's when assessing overall serious crime. It may be politically expedient or socially palatable to ban MSSA's, yet such measures are destined to have little effect for reducing the incidence of firearm related crime and injury. There is far more evidence to support the banning of long-guns, handguns and imitation pistols on the grounds of preventing crime and injury than MSSA's. This article has not explored the political contexts of gun control policies, yet it must be acknowledged that such discourses are central to understanding the nature and extent of firearm debates, regulations and enforcement procedures.

Conclusion

This research has examined a range of information about the nature of serious firearm offending in New Zealand. It reveals that aggravated robbery and Threaten to Kill/Do Grievous Bodily Harm are the most commonly reported firearm (Crimes Act) offences (79%). Imitation firearms are often not perceived as 'dangerous' and as a result are frequently overlooked in firearm debates. Yet this research suggests that imitation pistols are an effective weapon for completing an aggravated robbery or other serious offences and are furthermore capable of causing significant psychological harm to victims. As a result, imitation firearms require greater public and official scrutiny than they currently receive, particularly when debating firearm controls.

Furthermore, in many instances the origin of firearms used in (Crimes Act) offences was unknown (44%). When the origin was known, we see that a total of 52% were either stolen or illegally purchased. This raises important questions for both the secure storage of firearms and law enforcement for safety breaches. Unsecured firearms (in households both rural and urban as well as motor vehicles) are sites where firearms are stolen. Widespread education to the gun owning community regarding safe storage, and enforcement of existing Arms Act regulations (*vis a vis* secure storage) are important issues for crime prevention.

This research also identifies that a significant number of offenders aged 20 years and younger involved in serious firearm offending. Offenders under the age of 20 committed a total of 37% of aggravated robberies. Most of these offenders used air/gas guns and targeted dairies and petrol stations at night. This area of offending has risen in the past six years and is being committed by offenders using firearms (air/gas guns) which, as mentioned, often attracts little or no public attention when debating firearm crime.

The implementation of gun controls remains a highly sensitive and political area of policy development. New Zealand has recently witnessed repeated calls to ban military-style semi-automatic firearms, yet this research concludes that the greatest harm to New Zealand society caused by firearms, notably suicide and accidental injury, is a result of long-guns and not the high powered guns which often attract the greatest public attention.

This research also found that 57% of the total number of apprehended offenders were previously known to police — the majority for dishonesty, violence and drugs/anti-social offences. Repeat firearm offenders show greater prior offending for violence than 'first-detected' firearm offenders do. Moreover, we see that at least 93% of offenders were male. In order to understand and explain firearm offending,

it is suggested that we analyse firearm crime within broader contexts of violence, culture and masculinity's if we are to develop appropriate responses and policies.

Finally, a substantial amount of relevant firearm-related information is absent from police files. Often the information is genuinely 'unknown'. However, in most cases the police fail to pursue information, which is not seen to be directly relevant to securing a conviction. Time constraints placed upon officers may partially explain this fact. Yet it is apparent that many officers do not see the relevance of broader issues or contexts associated with firearm offending. As a result important information such as, type of firearm used, origin of firearm, the length of time the firearm has been in the offender's possession, offenders gang affiliations, relationship to the victim, victim details etc., are not routinely gathered and entered. This information would be useful for both interpretative and prevention purposes, as well as police investigation. Moreover, the limitations of official police statistics (discussed above) are confirmed by this research. Statistics relating to firearm (Crimes Act) offences in New Zealand are currently recorded with a concerning level of inaccuracy. A total of 29% of all officially recorded firearm (Crimes Act) offences for the 12 months ending 30 June 1996 were either miscodes or non-events. This is clearly inadequate and begs serious questions about the current processes of police recording practices in New Zealand.

Endnotes

1 This study has examined firearm (Crimes Act) offences only and not Arms Act offences. The Crimes Act offences are the more serious and include murder, robbery, threatens to kill, kidnapping etc. During the 12-month period under review there were 3652 Arms Act offences. These were divided into two categories, 1754 danger to life offences (such as reckless discharge, presenting a firearm, intoxicated while carry a firearm, discharge firearm in a built-up area etc.) and 1898 administrative offences (possess firearm without a licence, refuse inspection, fail to notify change of address etc).

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