

Gun Laws and Sudden Death: Did the Australian Firearms Legislation of 1996 Make a Difference?

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Executive Summary:

Introduction

- After the 1996 mass killing of 35 people, Australia rapidly enacted gun controls that are considered among the most stringent in the developed world.
- Semi-automatic rifles and semi-automatic and pump action shotguns were prohibited.
- A government funded 'buyback' scheme compensated owners for handing in their firearms. Over 600 000 firearms were destroyed.
- The effects of the reform remain contentious, particularly regarding the usefulness of the buyback of 'low risk' firearms.
- This study evaluated the benefits of buying back legally held firearms and increasing restrictions on firearm owners using data spanning the years before the introduction of the 1996 legislation and eight years following the implementation of the legislation.

Method

- Suicide and homicide by methods other than firearm were included to provide a control against which the political, social, and economic culture into which additional legislative requirements for civilian firearm ownership occurred could be evaluated.
- Publicly available data spanning the period 1979-2004 were obtained from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Institute of Criminology, and National Injury Surveillance Unit.
- Figures were standardised to rates per 100 000 population.
- Observed rates of firearm suicide and firearm homicide were compared with predicted rates, based on projections of pre-existing downwards trends.

Key Findings

- The reforms did not affect rates of firearm homicide in Australia.
- The reforms could not be shown to alter rates of firearm suicide, because rates of suicide using other methods also began to decline in the late 1990's.
- It is likely that social changes including increased resource allocation for suicide prevention impacted on rates of suicide by all methods, including firearm.
- It must be concluded that the gun buyback and restrictive legislative changes had no influence on firearm homicide in Australia.
- It cannot be concluded that the reforms altered firearm suicide rates.
- There is insufficient evidence to support the premise that reducing the stockpile of legally held civilian firearms will result in a reduction in either firearm or overall sudden death rates.
- The lack of effect of a massive buyback and associated legislative changes in the requirements for obtaining a firearm licence or legally possessing a firearm has significant implications for public and justice policy, not only in Australia but internationally.