

Mass shootings in Australia and New Zealand: A descriptive study of incidence

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Executive Summary

Introduction

- There is a growing amount of research into the impacts of regulatory reform upon firearm-related deaths in countries like Australia, where strict nationwide firearms regulations were introduced in 1996.
- Comparatively little scrutiny has been applied to the occurrence of a specific type of homicide - mass shootings.
- The current paper examines mass shootings in Australia and its near neighbour New Zealand.
- Australia and New Zealand differ in the relative availability of semi-automatic longarms and pump-action shotguns.
- Banning those firearms in Australia in 1996 has been credited with stopping mass shootings. If this is correct, it would be expected that mass shootings would continue to occur in New Zealand, where such firearms are still available.

Method

- Publicly available data from the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC), Statistics New Zealand, and New Zealand Police were used to detect the occurrence of mass shootings (defined as four or more people killed) from 1980-2009.
- Data were standardised to a rate per 100 000 people, to control for differences in population size between the countries.
- Mass shootings before and after 1996/1997 were compared between countries.

Key Findings

- In the period 1980-1996, both countries experienced mass shootings. The rate did not differ significantly between countries.
- Since 1996/1997, neither country has experienced a mass shooting event.
- The results do not support the view that prohibiting certain types of firearms explains the absence of mass shootings in Australia since 1996.
- Other factors may underlie the clustering of mass shooting events in the late 1980s and mid-1990s, followed by an absence of mass shooting events, in both countries.
- In the late 1980s and early 1990s, both Australia and New Zealand experienced high levels of unemployment, followed by a decade of relative economic stability and growth from the mid-1990s onward.
- The clustering of mass shootings around a period of economic downturn and high unemployment, followed by the absence of such events during a period of economic stability and relatively low unemployment, may reflect broader relationships between economic wellbeing and violence.