



Unveiling the Complexities of Gun Control, Hate Crimes, and Rehabilitation

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Abstract

This paper examines the effectiveness of gun control measures in reducing hate crimes and violence, focusing on the National Firearms Agreement (NFA) implemented in Australia and New Zealand. Despite initial expectations, research suggests that the NFA had limited impact on reducing violent crimes, such as homicides and mass shootings. However, the NFA did show some potential in reducing firearm suicides. Furthermore, hate crime rates in Australia remained high both before and after the implementation of the NFA. There was also a prominent complex relationship between gun control measures and hate crimes, indicating that the prevalence of firearms may not directly affect the occurrence of hate crimes. Instead, factors such as economic stability and social rehabilitation programs play a significant role in preventing violence and hate crimes. Drawing on the rehabilitative programs in Norway, which have resulted in a low recidivism rate, the paper suggests that a comprehensive approach focusing on economic stability and social rehabilitation may be a more effective solution to address mass shootings, offences, and hate crimes without infringing on citizens' right to bear arms.

Subject Areas

Sociology

Keywords

Gun Control, National Firearms Agreement, Mass Shootings, Hate Crimes, Firearms, Recidivism, Norwegian Rehabilitation, Australia, New Zealand

1. Introduction

According to the United States Department of Justice, more than 10,300 people become victims of hate crimes involving firearms each year (Masucci & Langton,

2017) [1]. Consequently, the endeavour to develop legislative measures that effectively combat hate crimes and violence remains a persistent subject of debate. Considerable research has consequently delved into examining the consequences of implementing gun reform policies, with special emphasis on the experiences of Australia and New Zealand.

1.1. Unveiling the Complexities of the National Firearms Agreement

In 1996, both the Federal Parliaments of Australia and New Zealand entered into a momentous agreement known as the National Firearms Agreement (NFA), a comprehensive framework slated for full enactment by 1997. The NFA sought to impose stringent restrictions, particularly the prohibition of semiautomatic rifles and pump-action shotguns, leading to the subsequent destruction of an astounding 640,000 firearms by law enforcement agencies. As an incentive, participants in the buyback program were duly compensated for their firearms (Lee & Suardi, 2010) [2]. Furthermore, the NFA introduced an array of stringent measures, heavily regulating the licensing and possession of firearms.

1.2. The Overarching Objective of the NFA

Former Prime Minister John Howard espoused the overarching objective of the 1996 NFA, which was to foster greater safety and security, thereby curbing the proliferation of guns within Australian and New Zealand communities. Soon after its inception, the NFA garnered praise from the Attorney-General, who hinted at a significant reduction in firearms and the subsequent decline in firearm-related fatalities (Baker & McPhedran, 2007) [3]. However, subsequent research has cast doubt upon the realisation of these intended outcomes. Although some studies indicate the potential success of the NFA in curbing firearm suicides, its effectiveness in curbing other major offenses appears comparatively feeble. Hence, the analysis of the NFA's impact on hate crimes and violence in Australia and New Zealand inevitably leads to a crucial question: to what extent could similar gun control measures, like those witnessed in Australia and New Zealand, prevent offences and mitigate the prevalence of hate crimes in the United States?

2. Materials and Methods

This study employed a comparative retrospective analysis to evaluate the efficacy of the gun buyback program in New Zealand and Australia. The analysis focused on examining broader trends surrounding the program's implementation and its impact on offences, specifically rates of gun violence, before and after the period initiation from 1996 to 1997.

2.1. Data Sourcing

Data for the study were collected from various official government sources. Gun

violence data, including firearm-related crimes such as homicides, assaults, robberies, and firearm-related injuries, were obtained from law enforcement agencies, crime statistics databases, and public safety reports. Information regarding the implementation of the gun buyback program, such as initiation dates, duration, and specific policies, was gathered from official government reports, legislative records, and public announcements.

2.2. Data Analysis

The study period encompassed a pre-implementation phase and a post-implementation phase of the gun buyback program. The duration of the pre-implementation phase was determined based on the availability of historical gun violence data, while the post-implementation phase extended from the initiation of the program until the most recent data available at the time of analysis.

To analyse the data, the rates of gun violence in New Zealand and Australia were examined during the pre-implementation period, being before the period of 1996 to 1997, as a baseline to establish existing trends and patterns. The rates of gun violence after the initiation of the gun buyback program were then compared to the pre-implementation period. Statistical techniques, such as trend analysis, time series analysis, and regression modelling, were employed to assess any changes in gun violence rates following the implementation of the program.

3. Results

3.1. Unveiling the Efficacy of Gun Buyback Programs

3.1.1. The Historical Trends of Mass Shootings

Notably, during the period from 1980 to 1989 in New Zealand, there were no recorded instances of mass murders involving firearms, and even earlier data suggests only one Australian mass shooting incident occurred between 1970 and 1979. Similarly, New Zealand experienced another mass shooting only in 1941. In the 1980s, Australia had a mean rate of incidence of 0.0042 per 100,000 population, while New Zealand had a rate of 0.0050 per 100,000 population (McPhedran & Baker, 2012) [4]. Interestingly, despite the relatively low incidence rates, there appeared to be a correlation between the stringency of gun legislation and the occurrence of mass shootings. For instance, despite having comparatively restrictive legislation on legal firearms ownership, New South Wales witnessed the highest number of mass shootings from 1980 to 1996 (Baker & McPhedran, 2007) [3].

1) The Notable Flaw in the NFA

Furthermore, the absence of mass shootings in New Zealand for a thirteen-year period after the legislative changes implemented in 1996 and 1997 cannot be easily explained. A similar pattern emerged in Australia, where a significant number of prohibited firearms were not surrendered during the buyback program (Baker & McPhedran, 2007) [3]. Consequently, the absence of mass shootings in

Australia occurred despite the continued presence of prohibited firearms.

2) The Homicidal Trends in Relation to the NFA

Additionally, when examining general crime rates before and after the buy-back program in Australia, a discernible pattern emerges between the rate of crime and the implementation of the gun buyback. According to the Australian Institute of Criminology, there was a spike in the number of homicides, from 300 in 1997 to 350 in 1998, just a year after the program's full implementation. The number would reach an all-time high in 2001, with a total of 400 homicide victims (Bricknell, 2008) [5]. However, despite this temporary increase, the overall trend in homicide victims had been declining since 1990. Assault and sexual assault rates also continued to rise despite the implementation of the National Firearms Agreement (NFA) (Bricknell, 2008) [5]. Wang-Sheng Lee and Sandy Suardi, researchers from the Contemporary Economic Policy and the U.S. Department of Justice, concluded that the NFA had little effect on reducing firearm homicide or suicide rates, as individuals intent on committing such acts tended to seek alternative methods when faced with restricted access to firearms (Lee & Suardi, 2008) [2].

3.1.2. The Complex Impact of the NFA on Firearm Suicide

While most researchers agree that the NFA had minimal impact on violent crimes or mass shootings, Jeanine Baker and Samara McPhedran, researchers from the British Journal of Criminology, found that the NFA appeared to influence firearm suicide rates, although the decrease is likely attributable to broader societal factors (Baker & McPhedran, 2007) [3]. Consequently, a consensus emerges that the NFA had no significant effect on the rate of homicide and mass shootings, but no definitive conclusion can be drawn regarding its impact on firearm suicide.

3.2. Beyond the Numbers: Unveiling the Paradoxical Trends of Hate Crimes

Despite the relatively stable rates of suicide, mass shootings, and homicide in Australia and New Zealand, the landscape of hate crime rates presents a complex and contradictory picture.

3.2.1. Hate Crimes Present before the NFA's Implementation

The Australian Government Publishing Service report of the national inquiry into racist violence in Australia conducted by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission sheds light on the prevalence of hate crimes prior to the implementation of the NFA. Disturbing incidents, such as racist attacks on Aboriginal Land Council officers involving shotguns in December 1989, anti-Muslim arson attacks causing significant damages in 1990, and a series of anti-Semitic arson attacks on synagogues and other Jewish establishments in 1991, highlight the alarming reality of hate crimes in the country (Australian Human Rights Commission, 1991) [6]. A comprehensive survey conducted in 1988 reveals the extent of hate crimes against various groups, with shocking findings indicating

that 11 percent of Asian individuals experienced physical violence due to their ethnicity. Additionally, interviews with families from different ethnic backgrounds revealed that 47 percent of adults and 36 percent of students experienced racist abuse and hate crimes. In Campbelltown, 50 percent of household interviews reported racially motivated attacks on their homes (Australian Human Rights Commission, 1991) [6].

3.2.2. An Analysis of Hate Crime Rates after the NFA's Implementation

Despite the implementation of the NFA, high rates of violent hate crimes persisted or even increased. Analysis of hate crime incidence percentages provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicates that the regions of New South Wales, Queensland, Southern Australia, and the Northern Territory experienced a combined incidence rate of approximately 76.786 percent for both assault and sexual assault against indigenous or minority groups in 2010 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2022) [7]. Even before the implementation of the NFA, the rate of violent hate crimes against indigenous Australian minorities of all ages was 44.33 percent in 1988, which is nearly 32.45 percent lower than the rate observed after the NFA was implemented.

3.2.3. The Paradoxical Nature of Gun Buybacks: Firearm Usage Analysis

Interestingly, when examining the specific weapons used in hate crimes against indigenous peoples in Australia from 1989 to 2000, only 5.7 percent of homicide hate crimes involved firearms. In contrast, approximately 21 percent of non-ethnically motivated homicides involved firearms (Mouzos, 2001) [8]. These statistics highlight that firearms are not the primary weapon of choice in hate crime-related homicides, both before and after the implementation of the NFA. In fact, approximately 38.8 percent of both ethnically and non-ethnically motivated homicides involved the use of a knife, making it the predominant weapon in homicides. Moreover, knives constituted 47.5 percent of specifically ethnically motivated crimes, indicating a significant increase of 17.4 percent compared to non-ethnically motivated crimes (Mouzos, 2001) [8]. The data suggests that the prevalence of firearms does not have a substantial impact on the occurrence of hate crimes or the choice of weapons. The fact that hate crimes involving homicide and violent offences predominantly employ weapons other than firearms both before and after the implementation of the NFA indicates that reducing the number of guns available does not correlate with a decrease in hate crimes or the propensity to resort to stabbing or other violent acts. These findings are particularly concerning in the context of the dramatic increase in the rate of violent crimes against indigenous peoples, especially when firearms are not the primary weapon used.

3.3. Unearthing the Role of Stability in Violence Patterns

The efficacy of the NFA in reducing the availability of guns to criminals and others is hindered by its relatively small scale, as evidenced by impact evalua-

tions of the program. However, while there appears to be no direct link between gun buyback programs and the prevalence of offences, a clear correlation exists between the availability of guns and the rate of hate crimes. Economic prosperity and employment emerge as significant factors contributing to this violence in Australia, according to McPhedran and Baker. Both Australia and New Zealand grapple with high levels of unemployment, and as economic stability and growth were achieved in the mid-1990s, mass shootings and violence experienced a steady decline (Baker & McPhedran, 2012) [4]. Samantha Bricknell further notes that the rate of homicide victims in Australia exceeded 350 per 100,000 people before the mid-1990s, but sharply decreased through 1997 and eventually levelled out in 1998, although a general downward trend was already observed in 1989 (Bricknell, 2008) [5]. However, this particular pattern may reflect the broader relationship between economic well-being and violence. While empirical evidence suggests that gun buybacks alone may not effectively reduce violence, it is essential to acknowledge that the NFA aims not only to curb gun violence but also to provide opportunities and mobilise communities, as highlighted by Anthony Braga, a Ph.D. and MPA researcher affiliated with UC Davis (Braga & Wintemute, 2013) [9]. Considering these multifaceted factors, particularly the significance of economic stability, Norway presents a compelling case.

4. The Norwegian Model and Its Implications for Crime Prevention

Unlocking Rehabilitation

The First Step Alliance, a non-profit organisation dedicated to improving the economic well-being of incarcerated individuals, reveals that in the 1990s, approximately 70 percent of Norwegian prisoners committed crimes within two years of release. In response to the high recidivism rate, Norway reformed its prison system to include a rehabilitative program, leading to the world's lowest recidivism rate with only 25 percent of individuals reoffending within five years after release (First Step Alliance, 2022). The success of the rehabilitative program in Norway can be attributed to its emphasis on emotional and moral rehabilitation, as well as job skills development, which plays a crucial role in preventing recidivism by providing economic stability, a major contributing factor to criminal reoffending. The program in Norway also offers educational opportunities and establishes normal routines that help inmates practise appropriate behaviours for reintegrating into society as law-abiding citizens, equipping them with the tools needed for a successful transition (First Step Alliance, 2022) [10]. By addressing moral, social, and economic rehabilitation, this approach has the potential to mitigate racially motivated crimes as well (Dahl & Mogstad, 2022) [11]. Implementing a similar system in the United States could effectively address the high rates of mass shootings, offences, and hate crimes without infringing on citizens' right to bear arms.

5. Conclusions

The examination of gun control measures, particularly the National Firearms Agreement (NFA) implemented in Australia and New Zealand, reveals complex findings regarding their effectiveness in reducing hate crimes and violence. While the NFA demonstrated limited impact on reducing violent crimes such as homicides and mass shootings, it did show some potential in reducing firearm suicides. However, hate crime rates remained high both before and after the implementation of the NFA, indicating a prominent complex relationship between gun control measures and hate crimes. Additionally, the prevalence of firearms was shown to not directly affect the occurrence of hate crimes, as hate crimes predominantly involve weapons other than firearms.

The analysis suggests that factors such as economic stability and social rehabilitation programs play a significant role in preventing violence and hate crimes. The case of Norway, with its low recidivism rate resulting from comprehensive rehabilitative programs, highlights the importance of addressing economic stability and providing opportunities for emotional and moral rehabilitation. By focusing on economic stability and social rehabilitation, a comprehensive approach can effectively address mass shootings, offences, and hate crimes without infringing on citizens' right to bear arms.

In light of these findings, it is evident that more comprehensive solutions are needed to combat hate crimes and violence. Merely restricting access to firearms through gun buyback programs may not be sufficient to address the underlying causes of these crimes. A holistic approach that encompasses economic stability, social rehabilitation, and community mobilisation is essential. By implementing rehabilitative programs similar to the successful model in Norway, societies can work towards reducing hate crimes, preventing mass shootings, and fostering safer communities while respecting citizens' rights. It is crucial to consider the multi-faceted nature of these issues and develop targeted strategies that tackle the root causes of violence and promote social well-being.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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