

**California State Assembly
Select Committee on Gun Violence**

Firearm Registration and Owner Licensing – the International Experience

Testimony of Philip Alpers, gun policy researcher
Glendale, California, 1 December 1999

Mr Chairman, committee members, ladies & gentlemen.

Thank you for inviting me here to speak today. My field of research is the international regulation of firearms. I work with police unions, government agencies and universities in North America, New Zealand and Europe – currently with the World Council of Churches Project on Violence in Geneva, Switzerland. I hold accreditation to the United Nations Commission on Crime Prevention & Criminal Justice, and for several years I have spoken at the Crime Commission and similar forums, mainly on the licensing and registration of firearms.

Around the world, handgun registration and owner-licensing are acknowledged as the most effective way to minimise handgun-related death and trauma.

In almost every democracy, police see handgun registration as an essential crime-busting tool which puts criminals behind bars every day.

There's nothing new in this. For more than sixty years, registration and owner licensing have been the accepted norm in two of the most established fields of crime and injury prevention – road safety and gun safety.

In both of these, two parallel systems of accountability – that is, licensing the owner, and then registering the gun or the automobile – are closely linked and interdependent. It's the experience of many countries that neither measure works well without the other.

If we list the democracies which have most in common with the United States, the line-up looks like this.

Handgun Registration and Owner Licensing Around the World

| Country | Owner Licensing | Handgun Registration |
|-----------|-----------------|----------------------|
| Australia | Yes | Yes |
| Austria | Yes | Yes |
| Belgium | Yes | Yes |
| Brazil | Yes | Yes |
| Canada | Yes | Yes |
| Finland | Yes | Yes |
| France | Yes | Yes |
| Germany | Yes | Yes |

| | | |
|------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Great Britain | Yes | Yes |
| Greece | Yes | Yes |
| Hong Kong | Yes | Yes |
| India | Yes | Yes |
| Ireland | Yes | Yes |
| Israel | Yes | Yes |
| Italy | Yes | Yes |
| Japan | Yes | Yes |
| Malaysia | Yes | Yes |
| Mexico | Yes | Yes |
| Netherlands | Yes | Yes |
| New Zealand | Yes | Yes |
| Northern Ireland | Yes | Yes |
| Norway | Yes | Yes |
| Philippines | Yes | Yes |
| Portugal | Yes | Yes |
| Russia | Yes | Yes |
| Singapore | Yes | Yes |
| Slovakia | Yes | Yes |
| Spain | Yes | Yes |
| Sweden | Yes | Yes |
| Switzerland | Yes | Yes |
| United States | No (MA, HI, CT, IL, NJ, CA)* | No (MA, HI, CA, CT, NJ)* |

In descending order of stringency the states of Massachusetts, Hawaii, Connecticut, Illinois, New Jersey and California have enacted various components of handgun registration and handgun-owner licensing. New York City, Chicago and the District of Columbia impose their own restrictions. By the standards of similarly developed nations, these local laws range from moderately restrictive to permissive.

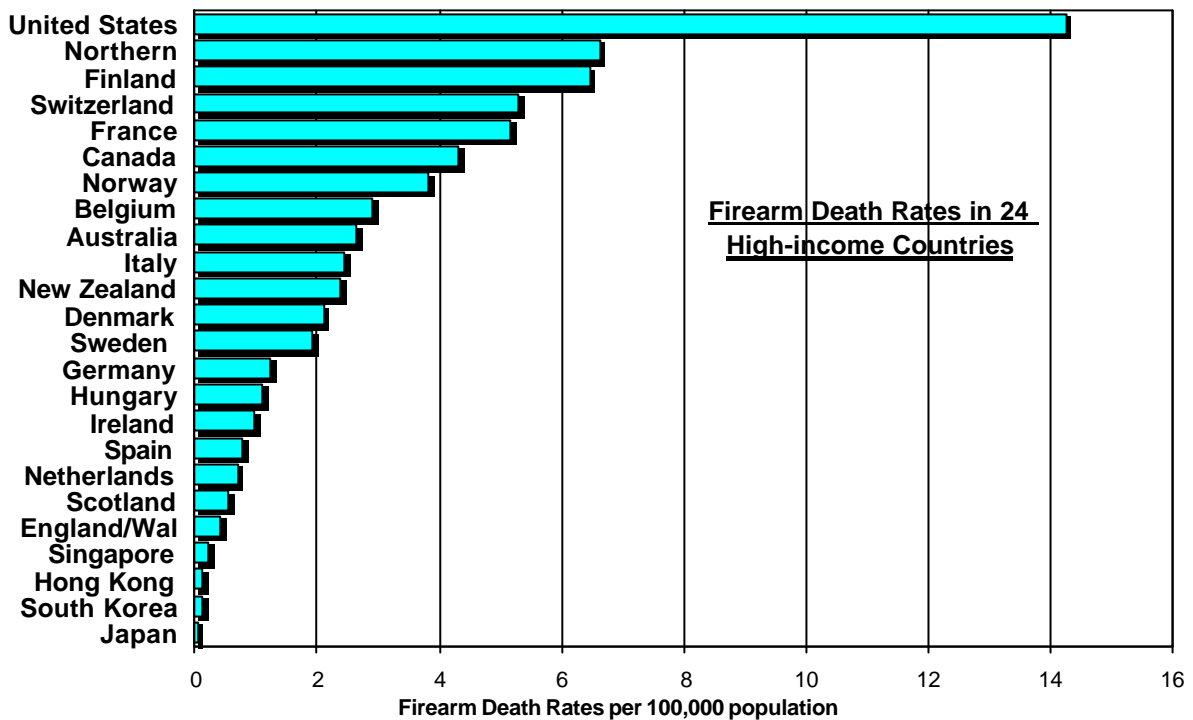
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Two comments on this table. First, you may have heard it said that Israel and Switzerland exemplify armed, but safe societies. Please note that in both countries, registration of firearms and owner licensing are long-established public safety measures.

Secondly, this table lists only those nations which register *handguns*. Almost every country on this list also goes one step further. They register all types of firearm, long or short.

Our countries also have different rates of gun-related death and injury. The next chart comes from the most recent comparative study from the Centres for Disease Control in Atlanta.

Firearm Death Rates in 24 High-income Countries



From: Krug E.G., Powell K.E., Dahlberg L.L. Firearm-related Deaths in the United States and 35 Other High- and Upper-middle-income Countries. *International Journal of Epidemiology* 1998; 27:214-221. Age-adjusted data for 1994 or most recent year available. Division of Violence Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Atlanta, GA. NB: More recent CDC data show a reduction in the U.S. rate from 14.24 (1994) to 12.1 (1997). Chart: Philip Alpers, gun policy researcher: alpers@ibm.net

You'll see that among the wealthier nations, the United States suffers the highest rate of firearm-related death. Even taking into account last month's update from the Centres for Disease Control in Atlanta, which showed a sharp decrease in firearm-related mortality, the American rate of gun death per head of population remains double that of Northern Ireland.

On the next line down, Finland has one of the highest rates of gun ownership among developed nations. Below that, Switzerland's rate of gun death is one of the highest in Western Europe.

So, how did our nations become so different?

There is one period in recent history which marked a watershed.

Sixty to seventy years ago, our nations took very different paths. In the 1930s, the United States decided to register all machine guns and licence their owners. As a result of that stringent registration, machine guns are now the firearms least used in violence. But at the same time, the 54 members of the British Commonwealth, the nations of Europe and many others went a significant step further. We registered not just machine guns, but also handguns.

In developed democracies outside the United States, six or seven decades of consistent firearm registration and owner licensing – in particular the registration of handguns – are recognised as the cornerstone of effective gun injury prevention.

Nobody's pretending that we foreigners are any less violent than Americans. We're not. The big difference is in our levels of *lethal* violence. The eminent Californian criminologist Franklin Zimring put it this way:

“You’re just as likely to get punched in the mouth in a bar in Sydney (Australia) as in a bar in Los Angeles. But you’re 20 times as likely to be killed in Los Angeles.”

Zimring goes on to suggest that the free availability of firearms – especially handguns in the United States – could have something to do with this disparity.

Many countries have shown that a register of firearms acts to reduce the flow of guns from lawful owner to criminal. In Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand, the computerised firearm registry is consulted thousands of times each day as a crime-busting tool. Our senior law enforcement officers agree; the more guns we have on the register, the more crimes police can solve and the more trauma we can prevent.

In one survey, 67% of police who used the gun register in criminal cases said it helped them to solve a crime – often on several occasions.

When a policewoman was killed and a judge and other police were injured in a bombing in Melbourne, Australia, the handgun register proved crucial in tracing the offenders. When three people were found dead in a burnt-out Melbourne gun shop in 1993, police had no suspects. It was the handgun register alone which resulted in the killer being convicted for murder. Hundreds of similar cases are in the police files of Great Britain, Canada and New Zealand.

Tracing the gun is not merely a common Hollywood sub-plot. A gun registry works for real police every day of the week, helping to solve crimes from burglary to murder, from drug-dealing to terrorism.

The Australian Institute of Criminology found that a gun register aids policing, “even when it is administratively clumsy and reputedly operating at less than maximum efficiency.”

To quote the President of the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police:

“Without information about who owns guns, there is no effective gun control. Opponents of gun control argue that the registration of firearms will not reduce crime. In fact, it is the position of the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police that cost effective registration is a key component of the new proposed gun control legislation. Registration will help ensure that gun owners are held accountable for their firearms and do not sell [them] illegally or give them to individuals without appropriate authorisation. It will also help ensure that guns are safely stored. Claiming that gun registration will not prevent crime is akin to claiming that registering cars does not prevent accidents.”

Chief MacDonald repeats the single most obvious advantage of firearm registration – accountability.

Every mass-produced gun which is used in violence began its life as a legal firearm in the hands of a lawful owner. Many of these guns “leak out” to criminals, either by unlawful sale, by theft or neglect. By introducing accountability all the way down the chain, a well-designed gun registry can greatly reduce this lethal leakage from lawful gun owner to criminal.

Individual responsibility and accountability for each firearm in your possession was the theme which inspired one notable American to say:

“No honest man can object to [gun] registration, a procedure much simpler than the registration and licensing procedure applicable to automobiles. Show me the man who doesn’t want his gun registered, and I will show you a man who shouldn’t have a gun.”

That was US Attorney General Homer Cummings, advocating registration in 1936.

So, how do so many countries make registration work?

Here are some common components of registration and licensing in developed democracies.

- Gun Owner Vetting (criminal history, domestic violence and mental health safeguards)
- Gun Owner Training (public safety education as a condition of licensing)
- Genuine Reason (demonstrated need for each handgun; armed retaliation discouraged by law)
- Club Membership (regular attendance required at an approved pistol club)
- Spousal Interview (a private interview with the applicant’s current or most recent spouse or partner)
- Secure Storage (handguns stored without ammunition in a steel safe fixed to the building)
- Separate Ammunition Storage (specific prohibition on keeping firearms loaded ready to fire)
- Verification of Storage (physical inspection of private storage facilities for all handguns)
- Fraud-Resistant Licence (thumbprint, photograph, etc.)
- Ammunition-Specific Licences (ammunition can only be purchased for the type of firearm declared)
- Removal of Firearms (mandatory removal within 24 hours of a domestic protection order, etc.)
- Regular Re-Vetting (gun owners must re-apply and be interviewed again at regular intervals)

These are not the untried quirks of demagogues. These are mainstream, widely accepted measures. They’ve survived more than half a century of testing in democracies large and small, from libertarian to conservative.

To reduce the flow of guns to criminals, to prevent all forms of firearm-related trauma, these are the public safety measures which have worked for us.

And the public approves. In opinion polls, 70% to 90% of voters in Great Britain, Canada and New Zealand consistently support firearm registration. In Australia, where even 70% of *shooters* support registration, a major survey taken ten months after stringent new gun laws were introduced showed that gun control had scored for Prime Minister John Howard’s new government the highest approval rating in all 20 categories polled. To put it crudely, this is one public health measure which wins votes.

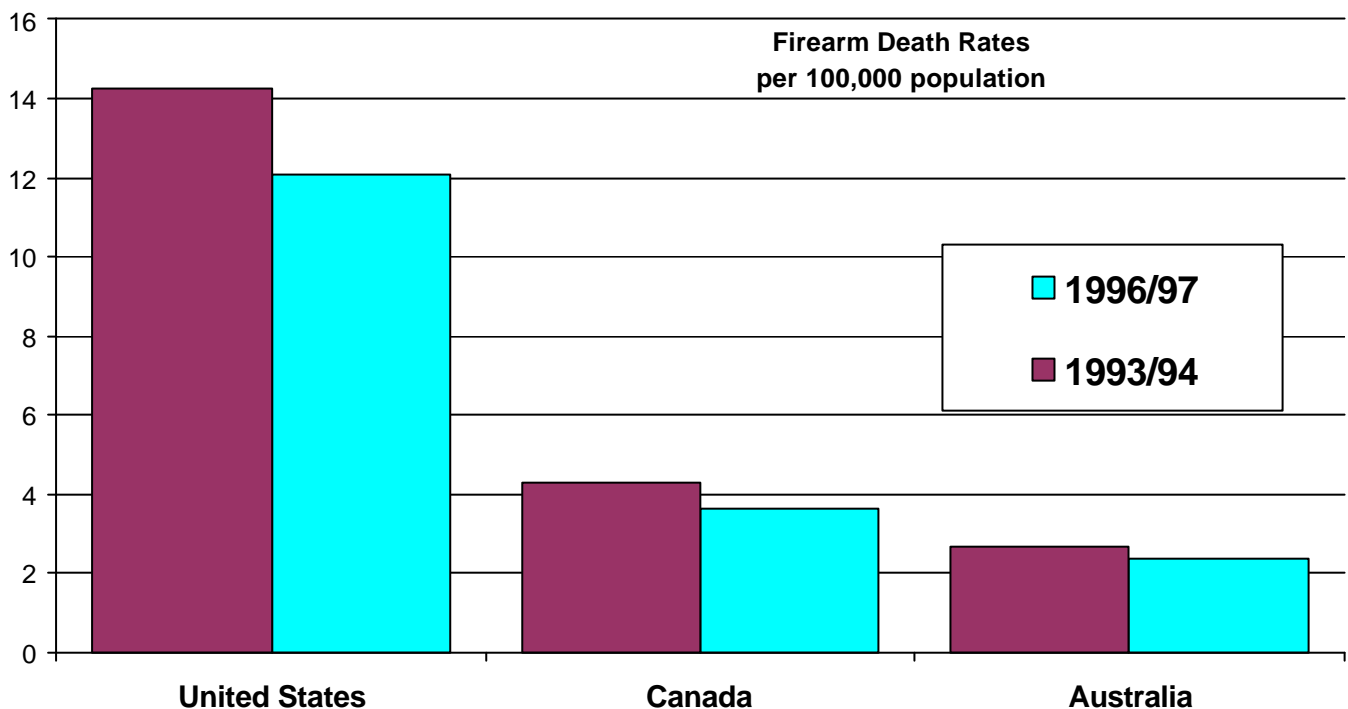
Of course, flawless implementation is rarely possible. All our governments have compliance problems, and just as some unregistered cars and unlicensed drivers remain on our streets, some firearms will remain illegal. But it’s our experience that handgun registration enjoys the support of most legitimate owners of firearms. By and large, gun owners truly are both law-abiding people and good citizens.

No more so than in Hawaii, where handguns have been registered for forty years with very little opposition. Five years ago, Hawaii extended its registration system to cover all firearms, plus all transfers of ownership, both new and second-hand, for the life of every gun.. Following the recent mass shooting near Honolulu, in which the accused is a licensed gun owner, the state is now considering re-registration and re-vetting of all firearm owners at regular intervals in an attempt to weed out high-risk individuals.

Hawaii has a sixteen-day waiting period to buy any firearm, mandatory confiscation in cases of domestic violence, assault weapons are banned and permission to carry concealed weapons is virtually never granted to civilians. The state's gun death rate is one-third the national average for the United States.

Before I finish I'd like to address recent claims relating to Commonwealth countries. It's been said that Canada, Australia and Great Britain have suffered noticeable increases in relevant crime categories since the introduction of new gun laws. These assertions are not supported by the facts.

Gun Death Rates in the United States, Canada and Australia



As you may know, the good news is that gun deaths in America are down 21% since 1993.

Much the same is true in Canada, where the number of gun deaths most recently reached a 30-year low.

In the 1996/97 Australian gun buy-back, two-thirds of a million firearms were sold to the government at market value. Thousands more gun owners volunteered their firearms for free, and nearly 700,000 guns were destroyed. The equivalent in the United States would be 30 million firearms out of circulation.

A year after the implementation of Australia's new laws, and following the gun buy-back, the most recent figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that gun deaths in that country have dropped again, this time to the lowest figure in 18 years.

Two years ago in the United Kingdom, civilian handguns were banned, bought back from their owners and destroyed. In the year following the law change, Scotland recorded a 17% drop in all firearm-related offences. The British Home Office reports that in the nine months following the handgun ban, firearm-related offences in England and Wales dropped by 13%.

A resident of Great Britain is still 50 times less likely to be a victim of gun homicide than an American.

Finally, it may also be worth noting that in the industrialised nations with lower levels of gun death than yours, the population is exposed to similar levels of media violence. So we might ask the question: if it's true that media violence makes guns *desirable*, how do all these countries differ in making guns *available*?

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