

## A Realistic Path to Stopping Gun Injury

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Opinion  
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A decade ago, South Africa was seen as a leader in the global trend to reduce gun death. Yet despite encouraging early results, for all we know this momentum might have levelled out, or even reversed.

Among 224 jurisdictions surveyed by University of Sydney researchers, almost every country which updated its firearm legislation this century – South Africa included – did so in favour of gun control. Only the United States and Canada now allow firearm owners to be less accountable for the weapons they own and carry.

Following implementation of the Firearms Control Act 2000, South Africa's success in riding the international tide of armed violence reduction seemed to speak for itself. Take a look at your country's [declining trend in gun homicide](#) from 1998 to 2007. As-yet-unpublished Medical Research Council data could soon show that this trend continued through 2009.

But now, notice something else. Your six most recent statistical years are simply blank. National public health and police data which would allow researchers, politicians and the public to gauge trends since 2007 have not been published. Policymakers are left with spotty comparisons such as this: seven years ago, South Africa's rate of gun homicide was still [many times higher than most 'G7+5' nations](#).

Both public health and justice sector reporting of firearm-related mortality across Africa is erratic, unreliable or non-existent. But while the continent's most progressive democracy once published good gun death data, now it does not. In such a factual vacuum, evidence-based policy solutions must remain elusive, while knee-jerk reactions prevail.

A fine example came in a recent statement from South African Football Association President Danny Jordaan, launching a campaign in memory of Senzo Meyiwa.

"We need to mop up all illegal guns and destroy them... hand in all illegal guns," urged Jordaan. Yet around the world, over and over for decades, such narrowly limited reactions have been [shown to fail](#). Almost without exception the weapons collected are rubbish, while criminals, domestic abusers and those who are for the time being law-abiding gun owners – such as Oscar Pistorius – hold onto the weapons they cherish. [Leading researchers](#) have referred to gun amnesty and buyback campaigns of such limited focus as "a triumph of wishful thinking over all the available evidence", and "the program that is best-known to be ineffective" in reducing firearm violence.

Targeting just "illegal guns" to curb the firearm death toll is akin to focussing only on "illegal cars" to reduce the road toll. As with cars, every factory-made crime gun began its life as a lawfully manufactured firearm, held by its legal owner. From Pistorius to Meyiwa – and in thousands more gun homicides each year in South Africa – the firearm was owned by, stolen or otherwise leaked from an owner who had been legally entitled to possess it. The solution? Start not at the most intractable end of the problem, but at the source where records are kept. To tackle and reduce all forms of gun injury in a single program, successful countries have reduced the *overall* availability of both legal and illegal firearms, especially handguns.

Democracies which have dramatically reduced civilian possession of firearms include Australia, which in recent years [bought back and destroyed a million privately owned guns](#), or one-third of the country's civilian arsenal. In the years that followed, the risk of an Australian dying by gunshot fell more than 50 per cent, [and stayed there](#). The most comprehensive [impact study](#) found that

Australia had nearly halved its number of gun-owning households, and by destroying firearms on such a scale, had saved itself 200 deaths by gunshot and US\$500 million in costs each year.

Other countries have seen similar results. After the Dunblane Primary School handgun massacre in 1996, the UK banned all pistols and revolvers and tightened its restrictions on long guns. In 2011, there were only [38 gun homicides](#) among a population of 63 million. For many Britons, that's still too many.

In Brazil, gun law reform and a massive program of gun buybacks reversed an upward gun crime trend – saving 24,000 lives in four years, according to the Ministry of Health. After conducting its own national gun amnesty and destruction program, Argentina reported similar results.

All these national programs set out to reduce the country's entire stock of privately held firearms – the weapons which could at any time, subject to theft or accident, inebriation or anger, become crime guns.

The good news is that we already know how to tackle the global epidemic of gun death, which now claims 1,000 lives per day. At the risk of putting it too simply, to public health practitioners, the gun is to gun violence as the mosquito is to malaria. Beliefs and fears aside, death and injury by gunshot can be as amenable to public health intervention as were the road toll, drink driving, tobacco-related disease and curbing the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Of course there will be obstructions, but these are nothing new to public health. An industry and its self-interest groups focussed on denial, the propagation of fear and quasi-religious objections – we've seen it all before. But with gun violence, as with HIV/AIDS, waste-of-time notions like evil, sin, blame and retribution could with time be sluiced away to allow proven public health procedures.

After collecting and publishing the basic evidence on which to plan a concerted national public health intervention, then spending a small fraction of the cost of losing 8,000 South Africans to armed violence each year, a gun injury prevention program could save lives as effectively as restricting access to explosives, and mandating child-safe lids on poison bottles.

<http://www.iol.co.za/pretoria-news/opinion/a-realistic-path-to-stopping-gun-injury-1.1780596#.VGZwn8kXJZ4>

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