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# Political Response to Firearm Violence Resulting in Mass Casualties in New Zealand and the United States: Worlds Apart

Andrew Anglemyer, PhD, and Annette Beautrais, PhD

On 14 December 2012, in Newtown, Connecticut, a man took his family's firearms and killed 26 people, including 20 children, at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Although it was not the deadliest mass shooting in U.S. history, the age of the victims makes it one of the most tragic. On 15 March 2019, in Christchurch, New Zealand, an assailant targeted 2 mosques during Friday prayers, killing 51 worshipers and wounding an additional 49. It was the worst mass shooting in the country's history. These tragedies have tested each country's political will. Here, we contrast the immediate, forceful political response in New Zealand with the slow, anemic response in the United States within the context of how each country views firearms.

## POLITICAL RESPONSE TO ACUTE TRAGEDIES

Within 5 weeks of the Sandy Hook tragedy, President Obama signed 23 executive orders and made 12 congressional proposals. In turn, the U.S. Senate voted on the Assault Weapons Ban of 2013, which failed to pass by a vote of 40 to 60 (1). In addition, the Manchin-Toomey Amendment, which aimed to improve background checks for gun sales (2), failed to pass by a vote of 54 to 46 (60 votes needed). Underscoring the political reluctance to act, perhaps the most productive federal actions since Sandy Hook were simply clarifying that firearms research is not prohibited by federal agencies and the signing of a bill that fixed loopholes in the federal background checks system. Conversely, the Trump administration and Congress reversed an executive order by the Obama administration that made it more difficult for mentally ill persons to purchase firearms (3). Six years after Sandy Hook, in February 2019, the Violence Against Women Act, which restricted domestic violence offenders from purchasing firearms, expired and has not been reauthorized by the Senate. Although states can regulate firearms, their laws cannot contradict federal laws. A recent example is *Duncan v Becerra*, in which a California law that restricted magazine sizes to 10 rounds was ruled unconstitutional by federal courts.

Within 6 days of the Christchurch tragedy, the New Zealand prime minister announced a proposal to ban semiautomatic weapons. Within 2 weeks, a formal introduction of the bill occurred. Twenty-six days after the attack, the bill passed by a vote of 125 to 1 (4). The new firearm laws in New Zealand amend the Arms Act by banning most semiautomatic firearms and some shotguns and large-capacity magazines, as well as introducing restrictions on who is exempt from possessing a prohibited firearm. A large buy-back program for prohibited weapons will be introduced in 2019. In addition,

tougher penalties were instituted for persons illegally possessing prohibited firearms and parts.

## GUN OWNERSHIP AND GUN LOBBIES

Perhaps the resistance to legislate firearm safety in the United States is because of the National Rifle Association (NRA), one of the nation's most influential lobbies. The NRA has more members (about 6 million) than there are citizens of New Zealand (about 4.8 million). It has donated more than \$4 million to active members of Congress during the past 20 years (5). In addition to pressure from the gun lobby, politicians represent many gun owners in their districts. The estimated total number of civilian-owned firearms in the United States is 393 347 000 (6), more than 1 per citizen. The high prevalence of gun ownership may be a result of its constitutional footing. The right to bear arms is defined by the Second Amendment and has been reestablished by federal case law, although federal courts and the Supreme Court do not always agree on its interpretation (for example, *Silveira v Lockyer* and *District of Columbia v Heller*).

Gun ownership is relatively common in New Zealand, with an estimated 1.2 million legally owned firearms (6)—approximately 1 firearm for every 4 citizens. However, in contrast to the United States, New Zealand has no constitutional basis for firearm ownership, and any influence from the gun lobby is small. One of the largest groups is the Council of Licensed Firearms Owners, with several thousand members. Although some gun ownership groups in New Zealand espouse firearm rights rhetoric similar to that of the NRA, their influence on gun legislation is limited. Perhaps the tempered influence of the gun lobby and strong political response in New Zealand reflects the practical role firearms play in their society. Firearms in New Zealand are generally viewed primarily as tools of the trade for farmers and hunters. Further, New Zealand police affirm that possession and use of firearms is not a right, but a privilege that comes with responsibilities (7). Similar to the United States, New Zealand has no comprehensive registry, and estimates of firearm ownership may be inaccurate. Specific firearms need to be registered, namely military-style semiautomatic weapons and handguns.

## FIREARMS DEATHS IN THE UNITED STATES AND NEW ZEALAND

Although firearms are common in New Zealand, firearm fatalities are rare. From 2001 to 2014, the annual average number of firearm deaths was 56 (annual

average of 10 non-self-inflicted deaths, including accidental injury and homicide) (8), compared with an estimated 35 000 firearm fatalities annually in the United States (98 firearms deaths per day) (9). The total firearm death rate in New Zealand is 1.3 per 100 000, driven mainly by suicides (1.1 per 100 000) (9). The total firearm death rate in the United States is 11.2 per 100 000, which is 4 times higher than the next high-income country (9). The U.S. firearm suicide rate is 6.9 per 100 000, the highest among all high-income countries (9).

## WORLDS APART

Comparison of these countries in terms of their views on gun ownership and the roles firearms have in suicide and death highlights the reality of 2 very different gun cultures, which have determined their respective countries' responses to tragedy. The stark contrast between these cultures can affect our understanding of how to address gun violence. New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern echoed this sentiment recently: "Australia experienced a massacre and changed their laws. New Zealand had its experience and changed its laws. To be honest with you, I do not understand the United States" (10). Indeed, the 2 countries are worlds apart.

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