

# SSANZ News March April 2017

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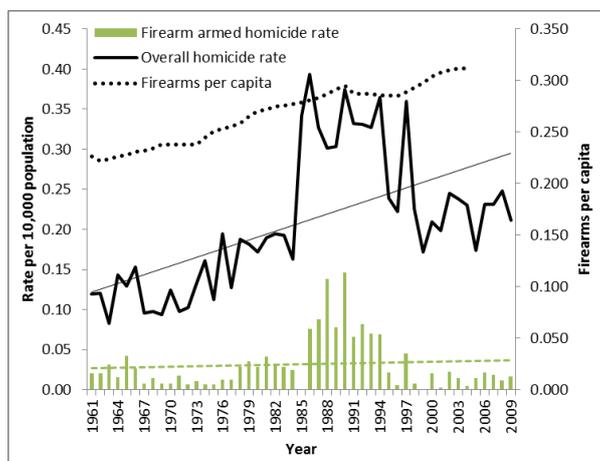
## New Zealand Firearm Legislation

The Arms Act 1983 abandoned registration of individual firearms (with the exception of hand guns and certain other restricted firearms) and replaced it with a system of licensing firearm owners who were judged to be “fit and proper” individuals to be in possession of firearms. A system of safety training lectures and test was introduced for licence applicants administered by volunteer instructors of the Mountain Safety Council together with vetting of individuals and a minimum standard of firearm security established by police. The Act was further strengthened with the 1992 Arms Regulations which classified certain semi-automatic long guns as Military Style Semi Automatics (MSSA) requiring additional vetting and security for owners. Enforcement and administration of this legislation is vested in the Police.

The effectiveness of this legislation may be judged by the following:

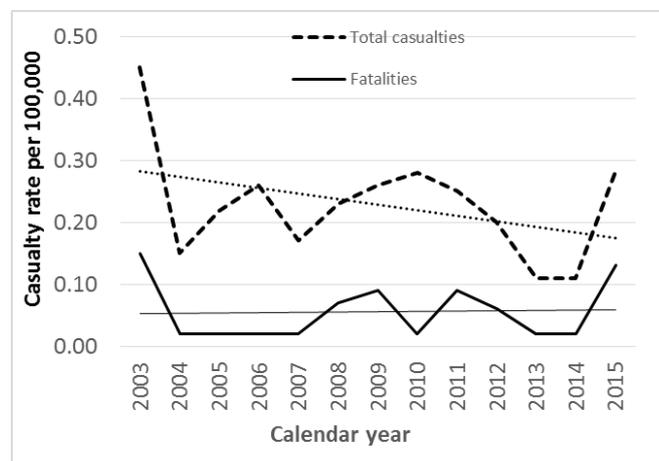
- Since 1985 there has been a steady decline in the number of firearm homicides annually (Fig 1), equating to about 10% of all homicides.
- Since 2003 there has been a steady decline in the number of unintentional shooting incidents (Fig 2).

Both of these results can be set against an increasing population, growing rate of firearm ownership and increasing pool of firearms.



**Figure 1:** Trend in rates of homicide and firearm-armed homicide per 10,000 population, and in firearm ownership per capita, 1961 - 2009.

(Sources: AJ, 1986; Forsyth, 1978, 1985, 2011; Statistics New Zealand, 1996).



**Figure 2:** Unintentional shooting casualties 2003 to 2015.

The trend lines show a decline in the overall casualty trend, and a level trend for unintentional shooting fatalities

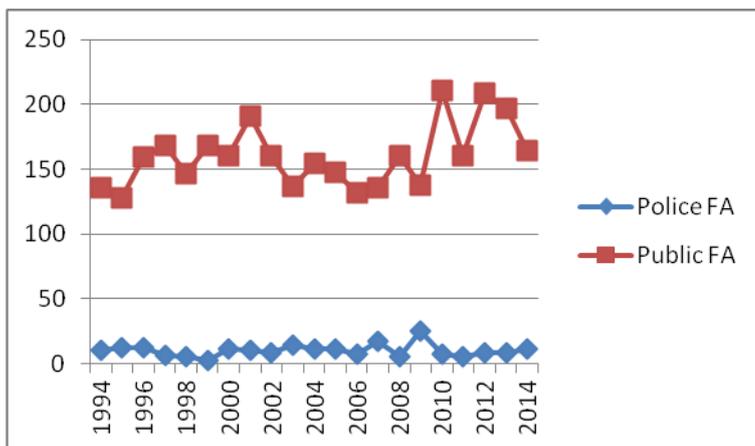
(Source: Forsyth, 2016)

### If the legislation is working well why change it?

All legislation should be kept under review to ensure that it is fit for purpose as technology and social attitudes change. Many firearm owners would welcome improvements to the administration of firearms, as inconsistencies between police districts and delays in issuing licence renewals and import permits is currently causing much frustration.

Anecdotal evidence from Police in 2016, following the shooting of four officers in one incident, that officers were facing firearms more frequently and the subsequent hysteria in the popular media has lead Parliament to instigate a Select Committee Inquiry into the illegal possession of firearms by criminals. Submissions to this inquiry from some quarters have called for the reintroduction of registration for all firearms, reclassifying all semiautomatic firearms as MSSAs as well as a call for stricter security for firearm storage.

However as Figure 3 shows the incidents of assault on police with a firearm, about 10 per year, have changed little over the past 21 years, as is also true for the general public at about 160 per year. Use of a firearm equates to about 0.06% of assaults on police and 0.5 % of assaults on the general public. Thus there is little evidence of an increase in serious firearm offending.



**Figure 3.** Assault with firearm on police and public (source NZ Police 2016)

Reports in the media indicate that illegally held firearms are frequently found when police carry out searches in relation to criminal gangs and drugs. 1231 firearms were seized by police in 2014/15; however this figure includes some that were later returned to their owners. The source of these firearms could be theft from licensed owners, 776 firearms were reported stolen in 2014/15, and with the large sums of money to be made by selling illegal drugs could just as easily have been smuggled into the country when only 10% of shipping containers are inspected by Customs. No evidence has been provided by police for any correlation between stolen firearms and those seized from criminals.

In 2014/15 there were a total of 3,374 reported firearm offences, but only 1,231 firearm seized and only 584 firearm licences revoked, many of the latter for non firearm offending such as DIC, domestic or mental health issues. This would indicate that each seized firearm involves several offences and that licensed owners are involved in a relative small number of offences, no specific data is available.

It is naïve to expect those who conduct their illegal business outside the law to comply with any changes to the Arms Act. Changes to the Arms Act will only impact the already compliant lawful owners, resulting in more costs and inconvenience, possibly leading to less compliance and more firearms going underground. Further, registration of all firearms would be costly and divert already stretched police resources from their core activities with no tangible benefits; this applies equally to reclassifying all semi auto long guns. Improved storage security will be better achieved by an education campaign aimed at all firearm users.

## Conclusion

The current Arms legislation is effective in reducing firearm homicide and unintentional shootings and encourages maximum compliance by firearm owners because it is on the whole reasonable and fair.

Changing this legislation in ways that affect licensed owners will not be effective in curbing criminal possession and use of firearms.