**Fact Sheet: Firearms in New Zealand 3 April 2019**

This fact sheet outlines information about firearms for New Zealanders following the mass shootings of 15 March 2019.

**Background.** Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced [changes to the firearms law](http://www.legislation.govt.nz/regulation/public/2019/0055/latest/whole.html#LMS173647) on 21 March 2019: a ban on military-style semi-automatics and assault rifles, along with related parts and high-capacity magazines, operational immediately. The [bill](https://www.parliament.nz/en/pb/bills-and-laws/bills-proposed-laws/document/BILL_86423/arms-prohibited-firearms-magazines-and-parts-amendment) dealing with this is before Parliament this week, and the government has foreshadowed further likely changes.

**Deaths and injuries from firearms in New Zealand**

* The extreme lethality of firearms is a concern.
* There were 867 firearms deaths from 2000 to 2015, an average of 54 per year.[1]
* 91 per cent of firearms deaths were males.[1]
* Most of these firearms deaths are suicides, about 40 per year in recent years (see Appendix Table 1) making up about eight per cent to 10 per cent of all suicides.
* Ready access to firearms is significant for suicide. Nearly 40 per cent of farm suicides involve firearms, compared to eight per cent of suicides in the general population using firearms .[2]
* Other firearms deaths are homicides and accidents. In the 10 years 2008-2017 there were 69 firearms homicides, an average of about seven per year.[3]
* Hospitalisations for firearms injuries 2000-2017 were 2,181, an average of 121 per year.

**The New Zealand firearms system up to March 2019**

* There is no constitutional right to bear firearms in New Zealand.
* The main legislation on firearms is the [*Arms Act* 1983](http://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/1983/0044/latest/whole.html) and the [*Arms Amendment Act* 1992](http://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/1992/0095/latest/DLM278351.html).
* For over 25 years the firearms system has licensed the *person* but not the *firearm,* with some exceptions. See [The Arms Code](https://www.police.govt.nz/sites/default/files/publications/the-arms-code-2013.pdf) for details.
* Currently, anyone of any age can use ‘A Category’ firearms (such as rifles and shotguns) without having a licence if they are under the direct supervision of a firearms licence holder.
* Anyone aged 16 or older can apply for a licence.
* Anyone aged 18 or older can possess and use an airgun without any licence.
* A first-time applicant for a firearms licence has to attend a safety lecture and test, apply to the police with two passport-type photos and pay the fee ($126.50 covers the ten-year period for a standard ‘A category’ licence).
* Police officers then check whether the applicant is a ‘fit and proper’ person to possess firearms, and physically check the person’s firearms storage arrangements.
* Police vettors then interview two people (one the applicant’s spouse, partner or next of kin) about the applicant’s suitability.
* Self-defence is not a valid reason to possess firearms.
* Until now, some firearms had to be registered with New Zealand Police: military-style semi-automatics (MSSAs), pistols and restricted firearms. People owning these, and dealers, collectors, people using firearms for theatre, film etc., applied for special endorsements to their standard firearms licence.
* At 31 October 2018 there were 248,764 active firearms licences, including standard, dealer and visitor licences.[4]
* Licensed firearms owners are overwhelmingly male (93 per cent), and there are more in older age groups, and more per capita in the South Island than the North Island.
* Little else is known about licensed firearms owners; for example, licence applicants are not asked about their ethnicity.

**How many firearms in New Zealand?**

* Military-style semi-automatics, pistols, and restricted weapons must be registered. In 2018 there were 65,837 of these types[4] owned by 9,772[5] licensed owners.
* Most of these are handguns (pistols and revolvers): 41,253[6]
* Other than these registered firearms, no one knows how many there are in New Zealand.
* Police base their estimate of 1.2 million firearms at 2014[4] on the estimate by Justice Thomas Thorp in his [1997 report](https://www.police.govt.nz/sites/default/files/publications/review-of-firearms-control-in-new-zealand.pdf).[7] Thorp’s estimate of New Zealand’s civilian armoury in 1997 was between 700,000 and one million firearms. We have heard recent estimates by firearms owners of 1.5m or 1.7m to 3m or even 4m firearms including air rifles.
* The number of illegally held firearms is also unknown.

**Importation of firearms**

New Zealand Customs Service listed the numbers of shotguns, rifles and airguns imported from 2008 to 2016.[8]

* Over the nine years, 69,621 shotguns and 171,787 rifles were imported, a total of 241,408 firearms (Table 2).
* If the 229,319 airguns, i.e. those arms operated by air compression or gas rather than explosion, are included, the total was 474,847 over the nine years.
* The import system requires police to check owners’ and dealers’ licences against the orders and sign them off. Reportedly, 26,000 firearms imports were checked in 2016.
* There is no cost recovery for this work; taxpayers cover all police time and other costs.

**Previous attempts to change the law**

* Thorp[7] recommended major changes which were not implemented, including:
* All firearms to be individually registered to their owners, in addition to owner licensing
* A buy-back of military-style semi-automatic weapons (MSSAs, or ‘assault rifles’)
* All restricted weapons (privately-held machine guns, etc.) to be permanently disabled
* A three-year re-licensing of firearms owners instead of 10 years
* Ammunition sales to be limited to the types of firearms registered to the buyer
* An independent Firearms Authority to monitor enforcement and compliance with gun laws.
* The government and MPs unsuccessfully attempted various reforms after 1997. Parliament’s [Law and Order Select Committee](https://www.parliament.nz/resource/en-NZ/SCR_72851/f06602dd80c8bcc69220182d246269b2427510b9) looked at firearms laws in 2016-17; of 20 recommendations, the National-led government rejected 12, accepted seven and amended one.
* Both Thorp and the Law and Order Select Committee recommended placing greater controls on MSSAs.
* The rejected recommendations included some that would have started a register of firearms, and restricted sales of ammunition.

**Why do we need stricter firearms laws?**

* Tighter firearms laws will further decrease the danger of firearms deaths and injuries.
* ‘Evidence from 130 studies in 10 countries suggests that in certain nations the simultaneous implementation of laws targeting multiple firearms restrictions [as now proposed in New Zealand] is associated with reductions in firearm deaths’.[11]
* ‘Following the introduction of legislation restricting ownership and access to firearms, [in 1992] firearm-related suicides significantly decreased’ in New Zealand.[9]
* In Australia ‘from 1979-1996 (before gun law reforms), 13 fatal mass shootings occurred in Australia, whereas from 1997 through May 2016 (after gun law reforms), no fatal mass shootings occurred’; and ‘there was a statistically significant acceleration in the pre-existing downward trend for firearm suicide’.[10]

**The financial costs of firearms**

* Financial benefits of firearms to individuals and companies, such as tourism hunting businesses, and firearms retailers must be weighed against the dollar costs to taxpayers of having a high per capita ownership of firearms, and lax regulation.
* ‘Gun City’ has a reported annual turnover of $20m.[12]
* There were 32,413 years of life lost owing to firearms deaths in 2000-2015, a yearly average of 2,026 years of life lost.[1]
* Mortality costs were calculated using a $150,000 value of a life year. Total costs of firearms deaths per year in 2000-2015 were $304 million per year ($4.86 billion over the 16 years).[1]
* The average cost of firearms injury hospitalisations 2000-2017 was $9,638 per injury.[1]
* The average annual cost of firearms injury hospitalisations 2000-2017 was $961,707.[1]
* As noted above, the taxpayer has been subsidising the firearms imports system; individuals, dealers and collectors pay only their 10-year licence fee and zero fees for import services.
* The firearms licensing system cost New Zealand Police $11,876,000 in 2016-17.
* Applicants’ fees paid to obtain a firearms licence that year covered only about 45 per cent of the police’s licensing system; in 2010-11 the proportion of costs covered by applicants’ fees was 17 per cent (annual fluctuations occur in numbers of applicants as owners renew 10-year licences).
* The outstanding costs were covered by the taxpayer, i.e. $10 million in 2010-11, and $6.5 million in 2016-17.[13]

**The gun lobby and the gun-control lobby**

* The gun lobby in New Zealand is organised, well-networked, and well-connected.
* Firearms laws and cultures in the USA are very different from New Zealand, but the United States of America’s National Rifle Association (NRA) attempts to influence firearms policies in other countries such as Australia.
* There appears to be no proof of recent financial support from the NRA to New Zealand groups, but NRA ideas and discourses have clearly been adopted by firearms lobbyists in New Zealand.[14]
* Some New Zealand lobbyists are personal members of the USA’s NRA.
* The gun lobby showed its influence in 2017 when a public outcry against firearms in schools arose. The Ministry of Education expanded its Health and Safety Sector Reference Group to develop guidelines about firearms in schools.[15, 16]
* While half of the 48 people in the group were Ministry people and educators, with some relevant government agencies also represented, one-third of the 48 people were from shooters’ groups. Health specialists in this Health and Safety Group numbered zero.
* The gun lobby ensured that the Ministry decided against keeping a register of schools with guns; consequently, no-one at the Ministry knows which schools have guns.
* The gun lobby’s discourse often focuses on gun crime, and the need to punish criminals—even though crime has been falling since the 1990s in New Zealand as elsewhere,[17] and the main problem with firearms is not crime but suicide and the potential for mass shootings.
* Another gun lobby focus is gun violence as related to mental illness. Yet ‘most violent individuals do not have mental illness, and most mass murderers do not have identifiable severe mental illness. Many have maladaptive personality configurations. Gun availability and gun ownership, not severe mental illness, determines most gun homicides’.[18]
* New Zealand previously had an active gun-control lobby in ‘Gunsafe’ (started 1992) whose members were vilified and threatened.[19] This organisation petered out in the later 1990s. Since then, public health groups, peace organisations and some academics have worked on firearms policy issues, but no broad organisation has presented a firearms control view.
* The government should consult gun control advocates as well as gun lobbyists and shooters.

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APPENDIX

**Table 1 Suicides by firearms and explosives,**

**New Zealand 1996 to 2015**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1996 | 47 |
| 1997 | 56 |
| 1998 | 72 |
| 1999 | 47 |
| 2000 | 37 |
| 2001 | 51 |
| 2002 | 49 |
| 2003 | 42 |
| 2004 | 39 |
| 2005 | 44 |
| 2006 | 48 |
| 2007 | 48 |
| 2008 | 42 |
| 2009 | 53 |
| 2010 | 42 |
| 2011 | 36 |
| 2012 | 47 |
| 2013 | 48 |
| 2014 | 41 |
| 2015 | 41 |

**Table 2 Imports of shotguns, rifles and airguns 2008-2016**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **2008** | **2009** | **2010** | **2011** | **2012** | **2013** | **2014** | **2015** | **2016** | **Totals** |
| Shotgun | 6018 | 6024 | 8236 | 9352 | 9058 | 8375 | 8920 | 8194 | 5444 | **69621** |
| Rifle | 19105 | 18628 | 19692 | 16507 | 18907 | 19063 | 23513 | 20596 | 15776 | **171787** |
| Airgun | 25287 | 18179 | 23519 | 31465 | 27432 | 35257 | 21482 | 27437 | 19261 | **229319** |
| **Totals** | **50435** | **42849** | **51474** | **57362** | **55424** | **64175** | **55258** | **57358** | **40512** | **474847** |

Source: New Zealand Customs Service