

Committee Secretariat
Law and Order
Parliament Buildings
WELLINGTON 6140
Submitted online

Rural Women New Zealand

Submission on the Law and Order Select Committee inquiry into issues relating to the illegal possession of firearms in New Zealand

1. Rural Women New Zealand (RWNZ) welcome the opportunity to provide a submission on the Law and Order Select Committee ('the Committee') inquiry into the illegal possession of firearms. We request the opportunity to appear before the Committee in support of this submission. Please contact Rachael Dean on 021665965 or Rachael.dean@ruralwomen.org.nz to discuss.

Introduction to RWNZ

2. RWNZ is a charitable member based organisation that reaches into all rural communities and advocates on issues that impact on those communities. The Committee's inquiry into firearm possession is an issue of immense importance to our members, many of whom are responsible licensed firearm owners and live in communities where firearms are an essential and everyday part of rural life. The ability to own a firearm in rural New Zealand is vital for farming purposes and for a range of other popular sporting and recreational pursuits including hunting, shooting and collecting.

Overview of our submission

3. It is absolutely imperative to our members that the essential role of firearm use in rural areas is not unnecessarily challenged by this inquiry. We feel strongly that current gun laws in New Zealand are fit for purpose and do not need re-examining. However, we think that there may be issues with a lack of enforcement of these laws and with funding for frontline policing. In support of these views we make the following key points in our submission.
 - While, there have been a number of reports in the media of an increasing firearm problem, it is worth noting that the actual rate of firearm related crime in New Zealand has declined over the last five years. Rates of firearm related crime in New Zealand are also comparatively low by international standards.
 - It has been suggested by some commentators that universal gun registration could provide greater visibility on the spread of illegal firearms in New Zealand. However, there is absolutely no evidential basis supporting the effectiveness of this type of

regulation. Universal gun registration has failed in New Zealand in the past, and would be extremely costly and expensive to implement again. This has been highlighted by recent experiences in Canada.

- If there is in fact an issue with the illegal possession of firearms in New Zealand, we feel strongly that the solution is *not more gun laws*, but rather better police enforcement of existing gun licencing controls along with increased frontline policing. The focus should be on improving community safety and on the prevention of organised and gun-related crime. We think that at present there is a serious shortage of police in rural areas and we believe this should be viewed as a primary cause of firearm thefts in rural communities.

4. We expand on these points below as part of our responses to the Committee's key questions.

The Committee has asked "how widespread is firearm possession among criminals, including gangs"

5. RWNZ does not have a clear view on this. However, we think that the illegal possession of firearms may not be as critical an issue as suggested in the media. According to police statistics, rates of firearm related crime have in fact declined in New Zealand over the last five years. Further rates of firearm related crime in New Zealand are low by international standards, and continue to remain much lower than both the United Kingdom and Australia, despite much stricter firearm laws in these countries. We think these statistics are compelling, and should be interpreted as negating any case for widespread reform of the current gun laws.
6. RWNZ note that some commentators have suggested that universal gun registration could provide greater visibility on the spread of illegal firearms in New Zealand. However, there appears to be no empirical evidence to support this suggestion. Not only are gun registration regimes hugely expensive to implement and administer but there is nowhere in the world, where they have been shown to work at identifying illegal firearms, or at reducing gun related crime. Such regimes can also be seen as diverting valuable police resources away from core police duties like crime prevention and detection.
7. We note that in 2012, the Canadian government withdrew its gun registry for non-restricted guns, concluding that the high costs involved in maintaining the regime could not be justified against any measurable benefit or reduction in firearm crime. All up, the Canadian Government estimated that it had spent over a billion dollars on the registry, and only managed to record around 2/3 of all firearms in circulation. Opposition to the gun registry was widespread in Canada, with former Ontario Provincial Police Commissioner Julian Fantino stating in a press release in 2003 *"We have an ongoing gun crisis including firearms-related homicides lately in Toronto, and a law registering firearms has neither deterred these crimes nor helped us solve any of them. None of the guns we know to have been used were registered..."*. Attempts to require gun registration in New Zealand, have also failed in the past because they were not only ineffective but also very costly and difficult for the police to administer.
8. We think calls for better visibility on this issue would be more effectively achieved through better data collection and reporting by the police. The police should be collecting data on the number of times they encounter incidences of illegal firearm possession and firearm thefts.

The Australian Government funded 'National firearms theft monitoring programme' could be used as a framework for similar initiatives in New Zealand. ¹

The Committee has asked how criminals, gangs and those who do not have a license come into possession of firearms?

9. It is our view, that criminals and gangs are coming into possession of firearms because of poor enforcement of the existing gun laws and a lack of funding for frontline policing and organised crime prevention.
10. Government funding for the police has remained static over the last five years and this has led to a decline in the number of frontline police officers nationwide. According to statistics produced by the New Zealand Police Association, New Zealand is significantly under-policed for its population and geography with a ratio of just one constabulary police officer to every 515 people. Queensland which has a very similar total population and urban-rural population split to New Zealand, currently has a ratio of 1:423. We think the Committee should give serious consideration to how the shortage in policing numbers could be contributing to a growth in organised crime and the development of more sophisticated firearm trading networks.
11. There is also evidence to suggest that overseas smuggling of illegal firearms could also be feeding into the domestic supply and exchange of firearms amongst gangs. Figures from NZ customs show that since 2009, 4000 firearms have been seized by NZ customs. This indicates that issues with border security may also be part of the problem.
12. In rural parts of the country, the shortage of police officers is a very real concern for our members. Rates of licensed gun ownership in these areas are high and, not surprisingly, this makes the risk of firearm theft from farming properties much higher. We believe these types of thefts are occurring in rural communities, not because of issues with the current firearm law (which already has a very strong focus on security)² but because of the lack of police on the ground proactively preventing the perpetrators of these crimes and carrying out appropriate follow up investigations of these crimes.
13. The police in rural areas are also not seen by the community as taking an active role in enforcing current gun legislation. RWNZ is aware of a recent example, in which a collector of early sporting firearms, travelled from his Otago home to Police stations at Milton, Balclutha, back home, then to Dunedin in an attempt to comply with the NZ Police Mail Order Sales process and purchase a 103-year old firearm. This activity took an entire day, 185km of travel, \$133 of petrol and ended up with no result.³

The Committee has asked what changes if any, to the current situation might further restrict the flow of firearms to criminals, gangs and those who do not have a licence?

14. If there is in fact an issue with the illegal possession of firearms in New Zealand, RWNZ feel strongly that the solution is not more gun laws. Rather we think there should be increase in

¹ The National Firearms theft monitoring programme
http://www.aic.gov.au/about_aic/research_programs/nmp/0002b.html

² For example, it is already mandatory under current laws that when firearms are not in use they are securely stored in a safe that is not easily penetrable and cannot be easily moved.

³ https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=1612112235772195&id=1500613573588729

spending on frontline policing, with the specific aims of reducing organised crime and of improving gun licensing control by police. Specifically, we recommend that:

- a) Police numbers in rural areas are restored to acceptable levels. We think that restoring policing numbers in rural areas could go some way to reducing criminal activity in these communities.
- b) Funding for frontline policing and border security should be increased. New Zealand needs a larger and more proactive frontline police force to tackle and prevent growth in organised crime. We think that funding for the police should be increased so that police numbers have better comparability with similar overseas jurisdictions like Queensland. Increased funding for border security may also be necessary to bolster efforts to intercept the overseas trafficking of firearms.

15. RWNZ would like to conclude this submission by thanking the Committee for the opportunity to submit on what is a very important issue for our members. We would appreciate the opportunity to appear before the Committee in support of this submission. Please contact Rachael Dean on 021 665 965 or Rachael.dean@ruralwomen.org.nz to discuss.



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