

Wary neighbours: North American reflections on guns, crime and social order

James Sheptycki examines the use of guns in crime and suggests that there has been a 'pistolisation' of civil society.

The *Toronto Star* has the largest circulation of all daily newspapers in Canada. The dramatic banner headline for 31 December 2005 read: '2005 – *The Year of the Gun: Is this the end?*' The story's blurb explained that 52 people had died by gunfire over the previous year, an unacceptably high number for the city of Toronto. Since that time, gun-crime has become a persistent issue and an apparently consistent presence across Canada. Why this is so is something of a criminological puzzle.

One puzzling factor is that Canada has experienced declining rates of crime across the spectrum for a long time. According to a Statistics Canada report released in July 2008, crime rates fell in 2007 for the third straight year with declines in everything from homicides and gun crimes to minor property offences. Robbery committed with a firearm declined 12 per cent from the previous year, hitting its lowest point in three decades. Police reported 594 murders, down slightly from 606 in 2006, following a long-term downward trend that began in the mid 1970s (Statistics Canada, 2008).

There are other kinds of empirical evidence that make the gun-crime panic appear somewhat puzzling. Desroches has produced two splendid empirical studies and, if one single point stands out, it is the relative absence of firearms in connection with these kinds of criminal activities in Canada. Other Canadian criminologists have made

not dissimilar observations. For example, Morselli analysed networks of serious criminals involved in international cannabis smuggling and organised racketeering. The evidence he presents indicates that, while there can be no doubt that firearms are one of the tools available for use in the Quebec underworld, historically gun-crime in that province has been episodic rather than epidemic.

But, as even the most cursory media-scan of Canada's big-city newspapers reveals, violent crime – especially involving guns – has a place of undoubted prominence in news' reporting (see www.the-paperboy.com/canada/). Analysis of homicide statistics reveals some interesting points (see Figure 1). What they reveal is that, amidst a long-term downward trend in

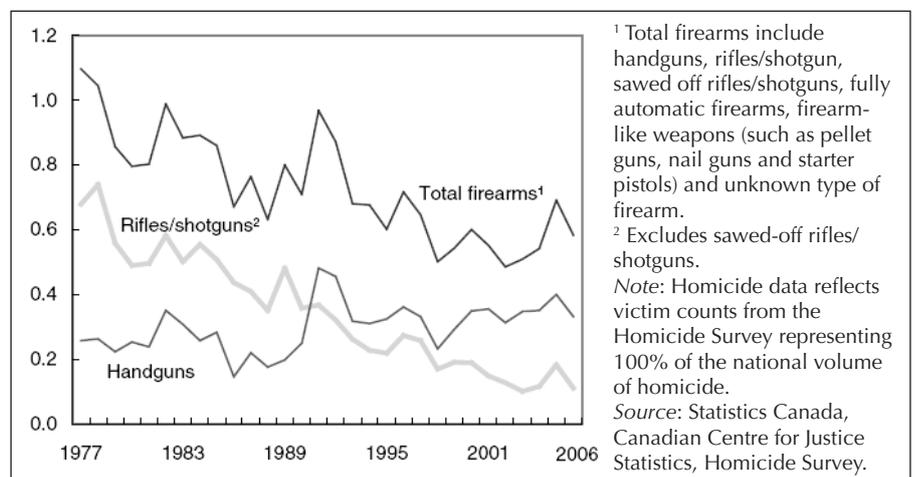
homicide generally, murders committed with so-called 'long-guns' (rifles and shotguns) declined quite precipitously. The rate of domestic homicide also declined over roughly this same period.

However, from about 1991 handguns surpassed long-guns in their prevalence in homicide statistics in Canada. After the 'cross-over' the rate of handgun homicide remained relatively constant while the homicide rate for long guns continued its historic decline. With this shift came the trend towards statistically greater numbers of murders between strangers and 'lightly-engaged' acquaintances and fewer pertaining to 'private' violence.

Many shootings now take place in highly visible public locations and it is this specific type of gun-crime that has gained most public attention, and with good reason. In different communities spread across Canada there is undoubtedly a climate of heightened anxiety, if not outright fear, concerning the violence of young men.

Most public discourse surrounding this phenomenon is a confused mixture of surreptitious racism, penal populism and neo-liberal governmental nostrums. Be that as it may, big cities like Vancouver, Montreal and Toronto are reporting upsurges in incidents of street gunplay and drive-by shootings. Communities across Canada's mid continental hinterland – in Winnipeg, Manitoba and Regina, Saskatchewan, for example –

Figure 1: Firearm-related homicide by type of firearm, 1977-2006, rate of victims per 100,000 population



as well as in the North West Territories, are all experiencing a distressingly high number of gun-related crime incidents.

Amidst long-term declines in crime rates generally (and homicides in particular) and with a milieu for organised and serious criminality that, good evidence suggests, is relatively de-weaponised, there has still been a panic about gun-crime in Canada. Part of the reason is that there has been an apparent upsurge in gun-crime among disorganised street criminals and within some economically disadvantaged ethnic minority communities.

In trying to understand the gun-crime phenomenon, it is instructive to look at comparative rates of homicide in different cities in the United States and Canada.

There is, of course, a great deal more evidence worthy of consideration that cannot be discussed in the short space available here. For example the statistics for crimes of robbery, assault and rape committed in the two countries exhibit different prevalence rates for gun usage. Yet, as Table 1 demonstrates, when homicide is focused upon, these two countries are strikingly far apart. The main reason that the homicide rate is so much higher in the US is that assaults are more likely to be committed with a gun than they are in Canada. What this table shows is that the United States – land of the free – has many more handguns than does Canada, the land of ‘peace, order and good government’. As is well known, and as American media-entertainment certainly testifies, the violence in the United States is considerably enabled by the availability of firearms.

In Mexico, the other continental neighbour, the statistics as laid out in a World Health Organisation report of 2002 on *Violence and Health*, are also sadly revealing. With more than 2,500 gun homicides per annum in recent years – a rate of 33.7 per 1,000,000 – Mexico is currently ranked fifth in the world in terms of gun-homicide rates. It was not always that bad. The violence is particularly harsh in Mexico City itself, but no less so along the border

with the United States where a variety of criminal opportunities – including gun smuggling – present themselves (see www2.eluniversal.com.mx/pls/impreso/noticia.html?id_nota=11425&tabla=miami).

Although the official figures that have been made available are mired in controversy, the best estimates are presented in Cukier and Sidel’s work (2006). These show that, with approximately 220 million guns, the USA accounts for about one-third of the world’s supply. Moreover, at least half of the illegal handguns recovered in Canada and 80 per cent of the crime-guns in Mexico originated in the United States.

Quite why there should be apparent increases in gun-related violence across North America over time is much disputed. However, there can be little argument against the proposition that, albeit unevenly

and at differing paces, the regions that comprise the North American continent are experiencing a ‘weaponisation’ – or perhaps ‘pistolisation’ – of civil society.

The terms weaponisation and pistolisation indicate a process whereby individuals come to adopt the custom of carrying personal

firearms in the context of daily life. There are several societies that are substantially weaponised in this way – or at least the men are. Yemen, for example, and Afghanistan are examples of quite large-scale and sophisticated

societies where everyday life is highly weaponised. In the Americas there is a long-term process of pistolisation of civil society that is measurable across the decades of the twentieth century.

Weaponisation is a different issue than that of firearms presence. There are many examples of spurious

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Table 1: Homicide rates in matched US-Canadian cities (2003)

City	Population	Rates per 100,000
Vancouver	2,126,111	2.1
Seattle	576,296	5.9
Calgary	1,023,666	1.1
Denver	565,905	11.1
Winnipeg	688,746	2.6
Minneapolis	378,602	12.1
Toronto	5,118,992	1.8
Chicago	2,898,374	20.6
Ottawa	866,621	1.1
Washington DC	563,384	44.0
Montreal	3,586,221	1.6
Philadelphia	1,495,903	23.3
Halifax	377,932	0.8
Norfolk	242,077	16.5
CANADA	31,629,677	1.7
UNITED STATES	290,809,777	5.7

Source: Coalition for Gun Control, www.guncontrol.ca/Content/default-english.htm

analyses that show confusing patterns of gun ownership relating differentially to different patterns of gun-related deaths. Some European countries – for example Finland and Switzerland – have high rates of gun ownership, but still have very low rates of gun-related death (and, indeed, relatively low crime rates generally), not least in comparison with the United States. Some analyses – particularly the kind advanced by gun-rights activists in the United States – suggest that, since ‘gun prevalence’ does not correlate very well with rates of gun-related death and injury that efforts to legislate and regulate gun ownership are misplaced.

The concept of pistolisation shifts attention away from bare statistics on gun prevalence and how these correlate with gun-related harm and onto the purpose and meaning of the weapons. Canada has relatively high rates of gun ownership, but civil society relations are not pistolised. In contrast, the United States presents an example of a culture that has a higher degree of acceptance for the weaponisation of social relations.

One recent example of this can be found in the Texas school district of Harrold where a policy was adopted allowing teachers to carry concealed firearms in the classroom. Those in favour of the policy blamed mass shootings in schools and on college campuses on government efforts to make educational establishments gun-free zones. They suggested that gun-toting teachers would be the best insurance against armed intruders, or in violent

hostage situations. Current Texas Governor Rick Perry is on record as endorsing so-called right-to-carry laws and has advocated allowing licensed gun owners to carry their weapons on college campuses, in churches and at bars. This is the logic of a pistolised social order. (For an insight into the debates in Harrold, Texas see www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/opinion/editorials/stories/DN-schoolguns_21edi.ART.State.Edition1.4dfcaea.html).

One thing that is interesting to point out is that weaponisation runs counter to the trend Norbert Elias observed in his great work *The Civilizing Process*. In Europe the pattern has been that, as classic Weberian-type states were established, they laid successful claim to a monopoly of the use of coercive force and civil society relations could be de-weaponised. Over time, this trend had favourable consequences for European homicide rates. This raises clear questions concerning future trends in the pistolisation of transnational civil society.

In May 2008, York University in Toronto hosted a workshop entitled *Guns, Crime and Social Order*. The workshop was an opportunity for an international group of criminological scholars to meet and discuss the problems associated with the processes of weaponisation that are on-going within criminal networks and criminal markets in a variety of jurisdictional settings around the world. Preliminary results of the workshop are due to be published in

the journal *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice* in late 2009.

The question of guns, crime and social order is likely to be one of the pressing criminological issues of the coming century, and not only for North America. Worldwide, the uneven processes of weaponisation in civil society have deleterious consequences for social institutions built on trust and, consequently, have fundamental implications for social order itself. ■

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