

# *Police Beliefs and Attitudes about Gun Control*

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There is a problem with handguns, that's the bottom line. It needs to be dealt with.<sup>1</sup>  
— Former Police Minister for NSW, Michael Costa, 7 April 2002.

There certainly is a lot of handgun use out there and that is of concern to the community and the police.<sup>2</sup>  
— NSW Detective Superintendent Helen Begg, Head of NSW Firearms Trafficking Unit, 7 April 2002.

Few topics in Australian society are as heated and contentious as 'law and order,' and gun crime and gun control are regular features of the law and order landscape. Regular shootings on the streets of Sydney and high-profile incidents like the shooting of Monash University students in the Spring of 2002 increase the vociferousness of the public debate over gun crime, and the question of how best to reduce such tragedies. The police are often called upon to comment publicly on the most effective ways to reduce gun crime, providing an 'expert voice' in the ongoing debate about the nature and efficacy of gun control.<sup>3</sup> In fact, lobby groups invested in the gun control debate in the U.S. have been known to appropriate supposed police support (or lack thereof) when promoting or disparaging certain kinds of gun controls (see Kopel 1995 for a discussion). This makes sense — because police are tasked with reducing gun crime, and because they are popularly considered the 'guardians' of the social and even moral order (Loader 1997), the police can provide a unique perspective on these issues

To date, however, there has been very little research on how police officers in different cultures or societies think about gun control (i.e., its presumed efficacy or the politics of its enactment), or even the nature of firearms trafficking in Western-style democracies (but see Kennedy et al. 1996 for some discussion). If that's the case, what is the potential import of police officers' thoughts and feelings about gun control? Do police beliefs about gun control matter?

The short answer is yes. Police support, or lack thereof, can colour the tone and content of comments police make to the media about gun control legislation, which can ultimately impact upon public support for such policies. Perhaps more importantly, police support for

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1 Quoted in O'Neill 2002.

2 Quoted in O'Neill 2002.

3 For an example from the US, see the website for the Law Enforcement Alliance of America, which discusses the extent to which the Clinton Administration courted the police to support various gun control proposals, and how American officers 'really' feel about gun control (Law Enforcement Alliance of America nd). In contrast, see a BBC News web article that discusses American Police Chief Bernard Parks, who backs tougher gun control laws in the US, and opposed the National Rifle Association's policies regarding gun control (BBC News 1999).

new gun control legislation means police are that much more rigorous in their efforts to enforce it. As gun control is an area where police discretion is a factor (whether or not to prosecute vis-à-vis certain violations of the law, assessing the time and resources to dedicate to investigate and prosecute violations of particular aspects of the *Firearms Act*, etc.), analysing police attitudes may help understand the efficacy of gun control in relation to its enforcement.

This last issue of the efficacy of gun control is a profoundly complicated one. The US-based Committee on Law and Justice (a division of the National Academies of Sciences) conducted a massive review of published studies on the effects of gun control on US crime rates and found little if any evidence that existing gun controls are efficacious for reducing gun crime (2004). While recognising that researchers are seriously hampered by the lack of empirical data on gun ownership rates and accurate statistics on gun crime, the Committee commented on the tremendous amount of flawed research regarding the (supposed) causal relationship between gun availability and gun crime. These are issues that have plagued American criminologists for decades, and have engendered scepticism on the part of criminological community toward much research on gun control (see Kleck 1997 for summaries of the research). In Australia, many criminologists are equally cautious regarding the efficacy of gun controls, although Mouzos (1999) has posited a possible correlation between increasingly stringent Australia-wide gun controls and declining gun-related suicide, accident, robbery and homicide rates. At any rate, the relevant issue for this discussion is that policymakers in both the US and Australia have often fixated on gun control as a solution to gun crime, and police and the public live with the results, in all their complexity.

The study discussed here represents an effort to address what New South Wales police officers believe are the most critical issues relating to gun control, firearms trafficking, and their thoughts and attitudes toward their own firearms. There is in fact a great deal of research on the New South Wales Police as an organisation in and of itself (see, for examples, Chan 1997; Dixon 1999b; and Finnane 1999), and as a part of police organisations in Australia more generally (i.e., Dixon 1999a; Findlay 2004). While this is a rich body of literature, very little of this research addresses police perceptions of issues related to guns and/or gun control (for a brief exception, see Warren & James 2000). This article is an attempt to begin filling that gap. It is also part of the author's long-term research interest in attitudes toward gun ownership and gun control in cultural context, about which there is a burgeoning body of research (i.e., Kohn 2004a; Kopel 1992; Squires 2000).

The data and analysis discussed in this article is drawn from a larger research project that investigated New South Wales police officers' thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes about guns, gun control, and firearms trafficking. The study was divided roughly into 4 parts:

- Officers' personal feeling about their own guns, and the question of legitimate deployment of force with a firearm.
- Officers' thoughts and feeling about the appropriateness of gun control and its efficacy.
- Officers' knowledge and beliefs about firearms trafficking.
- Officers' beliefs about the legitimacy (or lack thereof) of civilian gun ownership.

Each section had several questions that examined different aspects of the topic, and officers were always encouraged to provide as much information as they were willing.

## Study Methodology

The author (who was also the principal investigator) designed the study methodology with assistance from several noted academic experts on police procedure and culture, as well as several members of the New South Wales Police, who agreed to assist the author.<sup>4</sup> After consultation with these experts and the NSW Police, the author agreed to concentrate on 3 local area commands (LACs) from 3 different areas within metropolitan Sydney and the state of New South Wales. The primary basis on which each LAC was chosen was the rate of violent crime.<sup>5</sup> As such:

- LAC A was selected because it is in a highly urban, high violent crime area with a history of tension between police and area constituents.
- LAC B was selected because it is a mid- to low-level violent crime area where guns are known to be owned for sporting purposes.
- LAC C was selected because it is located in a predominantly rural, low violent crime area where guns are owned for primary producing.
- A Special Unit was chosen for its expertise in policing illegal firearms-related activities.

The author and police advisors agreed that the author would interview a total of forty sworn police officers. These officers would be of varying ranks and duties from the above 3 LACs (ten from each LAC), and ten officers would come from the Special Unit. The interviews, which ranged from a half-hour to 2 hours for each officer, took place between October 2002 and late February 2003. All officers agreed in writing to participate in the research and be taped during the interviews. The liaising officers at each LAC and the Special Unit all agreed that several days would be set aside for interviews, and the principal investigator would interview officers one after the other, in the order that the liaison officer (who was usually the Superintendent in Charge of the Unit/LAC, or the Crime Manager) had arranged.

All interviews were conducted by the author and were 'semi-structured' --- all officers answered the same twenty-one questions in roughly the same order, but were asked to follow up on answers when they volunteered particularly useful (or alternatively, confusing) information. The ten officers from the Special Unit were interviewed first, followed by nine officers and one non-sworn officer (the community liaison officer) from LAC A. Next eleven officers from LAC B were interviewed (one extra officer was added at the request of the Crime Manager, who wanted that particular officer to be interviewed). And finally ten officers from LAC C were interviewed. Ultimately, the interview data from the one non-sworn officer who was interviewed was not included in the analysis.<sup>6</sup> After the interviews were completed, they were professionally transcribed.

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4 These academic experts include Professor Mark Findlay, Associate Professor Julie Stubbs, Dr John Stanwick, Professor Chris Cunneen, and Ms Jacqueline Fitzgerald. Experts from the New South Wales Police include Ms Julie Stewart, then Senior Researcher with the NSW Police, and Detective Superintendent Helen Beggs. I appreciate their assistance on all counts.

5 Specific statistics for each LAC in terms of violent crime are not provided because doing so would provide verifiable data that could compromise the anonymity of the location, which could potentially compromise the confidentiality of the officers who were interviewed.

6 This non-sworn officer was not included in the data analysis not only because he does not carry a firearm and does not maintain police powers, but also because his interview was cut short and never fully completed.

There are a number of limitations of the study that should be noted. The first is that the study was almost entirely qualitative. The point of the study was to gain a richer understanding of concepts and ideas important to police. Qualitative methods are particularly useful for gathering detailed information from subjects, who are invited to provide lengthy and complex answers to interview questions; the cost of this research method is the limited numbers of interviews conducted. Also, liaison officers used their colleagues' work schedules to determine which officers would be interviewed, and when — therefore a 'randomised' group was interviewed, but this group could not be considered statistically random (and thereby a representative sample of NSW Police). Thus this study does not and cannot represent the attitudes and beliefs of the NSW Police as a whole. However, the ideas and concerns raised by the officers interviewed do provide a good snapshot of the issues of concern for officers more generally, particularly in relation to gun control and firearms trafficking. All that said, for the sake of economy and expedience, from this point on in the article, the officers who were interviewed and discussed here will be referred to simply 'police,' 'police officers,' and 'officers.'

## The Complex Topic of Gun Control

As mentioned, the study on which this article is based was designed to garner thoughts and attitudes that fall into 4 major categories: officers' personal feelings about their own guns; officers' thoughts about gun control; officers' knowledge and beliefs about firearms trafficking; and officers' beliefs about civilian gun ownership. This article will remain focussed for the most part on the issue of gun control.

This topic, however, is quite complex, and though the questions that were put to officers were fairly straightforward ('Do you think that gun control policies are appropriate and effective ways to reduce violent gun crime?' and 'What do you think is the most effective kind of gun control legislation, and the least effective kind?'), officers' answers were often as multi-faceted and complicated as the issue itself. So while the data (i.e., officers' answers) were sorted into broad categories like 'positive toward gun control' or 'negative toward gun control,' these answers occasionally defied such categorisation. The problem is not simply that the term 'gun control' means different things to different people (police are no exception), but that the term often reflects strong ideological views that are only marginally related to the legislation known as 'gun control'. Also, a good number of officers expressed somewhat ambivalent views toward gun control, however they chose to define it. For example, one officer who had 15 years' experience said the following, when asked if he thought gun control was an 'appropriate and effective way to reduce violent gun crime':

Truthfully ... I think gun control, like most laws, are aimed at law-abiding citizens. Like criminals, they don't care whether the government says you can't have it. I mean they're gonna do it. But I — I guess with gun control ... there's less guns on the street, which means ... less chance of them [i.e., criminals] obtaining the illegal firearms. So I guess you'd have to say yes, but in — in the big picture I think all the laws are aimed at law-abiding citizens, truthfully [#41].

This officer's views were put into the positive/neutral category, but obviously within his answer are several different beliefs and ideas that indicate both support and wary scepticism of gun control. In other words, despite his endorsement that yes, gun control is appropriate and effective for reducing violent gun crime, he believes that the basic premise of gun control is simply to control the already law-abiding, which makes it a somewhat less-than perfect endeavour for reducing violent gun crime (because, according to this assumption, the law-abiding do not commit the majority of violent gun crimes). The point is that although some officers' answers did not fall neatly into the categories developed for

analysis, efforts were made to determine the tone and overall content of officers' statements for the purposes of analysis, thus providing a window into how officers as a group felt about the issues. Logically, then, the categories for analysis are not discrete — they flow into each other with points of overlap. Where appropriate, those points of overlap will be noted and discussed.

There were no overt factors that predicted officers' views (i.e., their years in the service, their rank, or their LAC placement), but such factors did provide the context for the reasons officers provided for their views. For example, officers would occasionally use phrases such as 'Well, in this LAC, you always see the kinds of things I'm talking about,' or other similar remarks. Occasionally an officer would compare his or her current work experience with past work experiences (to point out differences or similarities), but again, such factors as years on the force did not predict or determine officers' views. So while it's clear that years with the NSW Police or professional rank do *inform* officers' thoughts, beliefs, and attitudes, these factors do not determine them.

With those caveats, the data breaks down into the following categories. The majority of officers interviewed held generally positive views (15 officers) or a sophisticated 'yes/neutral' approach (15 officers) towards gun control. The remaining 10 officers fell into the negative category. However, not surprisingly, few officers had *only* negative comments about the value and efficacy of gun control policy, a point that will be discussed later in the paper.

## Positive Attitudes towards Gun Control

The majority (thirty of the forty) of officers held either positive or positive/neutral views toward gun control. Their beliefs can be broadly summarised by several broad subcategories (see below) that provide a window into how officers think about the policy, and why they support it. But first, how do officers define gun control? Though few stated explicitly what they meant by the term, most officers used the term 'gun control' to refer to controlling legal access to firearms. Within this definitional framework, gun control is the legislative mechanism that provides legal access to firearms for some individuals (and groups) and forbids legal access for others. Basically, gun control regulates how and when individuals can own and use firearms. Thus officers subscribed to the basic assumption that gun control does not primarily affect or even address the illegal, or black, market in firearms.

In other words, gun control is colloquially understood as a set of laws that control the law-abiding's access to firearms.<sup>7</sup> This is the basic assumption that this is what gun control is 'supposed' to be, although whether or not that's the case differs from country to country, and era to era, and so on. So perhaps not surprisingly, police also subscribe to this belief. However, it's important to note that this is a *perception* of what gun control is and does, not necessarily an entirely accurate description of the body of law that falls under the rubric 'gun control'. In fact, gun control legislation in Australia (and specifically in the state of New South Wales) does address the black market in firearms. However, few officers discussed this legal fact. Rather, the kinds of gun controls discussed (supported or not) by officers do pertain mainly to legal access: licensing and registration of all firearms, and tight controls on 'legitimate reasons to own' firearms. Generally, officers shared the general perception that gun control can and should reduce the overall gun stock, help reduce accidents with firearms and domestic violence committed with firearms, and increase police powers. These points will be described in full detail in the following sections.

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7 This assertion is based on the author's years of experience researching the topic of gun control, and discussing the issue with gun owners and non-owners like, in both the United States and Australia.

***Gun control is the only really effective way to reduce gun stock and maintain a handle on guns the public owns***

A number of officers asserted that gun control is a necessary and perhaps the only way to maintain control effectively over the civilian gun stock in Australia. Because firearms are a desirable but dangerous commodity, it's important to control the public's access to them — gun control is really the only effective way to do that. One officer with almost fifteen years' experience put it this way: 'I think if you ... don't have some sort of gun control, it's a bit, you know, there'd be people running around everywhere with whatever they want and so ... I don't think is a good idea' [#26].

Officers sometimes invoked an image of the United States to point out the logic of their support for broad-based gun controls. For example, when asked what he would consider the worst kind of gun control, one officer with 2 years' experience said, 'Oh the — obviously the open slaughter that the States has' [#20]. Interestingly, this officer, like several interviewed, equated a lack of gun control (or perhaps ineffective gun control) with 'open slaughter' — rampant and uncontrollable gun crime. In fact, a number of officers stated that they perceived the United States as lacking gun control (or having exceedingly poor gun control). As an apparent consequence of little gun control, the US has high rates of civilian gun ownership, and as a consequence of that, high rates of gun crime.<sup>8</sup> The US is thus perceived as an obvious example of what happens when the state does not maintain a system of good (i.e., restrictive) gun control. In other words, poor or nonexistent gun control engenders gun ownership, which in turn engenders violent crime and chaos.

The fundamental supposition underlying all of these related beliefs — that gun control can and should reduce and/or maintain control over the civilian gun stock — ties into the basic definition of gun control. Gun control controls the legal access to firearms. Officers pointed out that this is important because while gun control may not prevent criminals from getting guns (which is the main reason that gun control sometimes invokes scepticism, even from supporters), making sure that legal access is tightly controlled is plainly a way to make society safer. Just because most citizens are usually law-abiding (and presumably won't commit crimes with guns) doesn't mean they should have free access to firearms. This point is important because of the following subcategory.

***Gun control helps reduce domestic violence***

When officers spoke more concretely of the beneficial effects of gun control, a number used the example of gun control helping to reduce the dangers of domestic violence. A number of officers specified that the legislation passed in 1997 (after the Port Arthur massacre) enabled officers to check if the persons involved in a call about alleged domestic violence have firearms in their home, and if they do, officers are obligated to confiscate those firearms immediately, without needing a warrant to do so. One officer with sixteen years' experience suggested that such gun controls reduce the chance of domestic violence incidents becoming more deadly. So while gun control policies may not reduce criminal access to firearms, they may prevent 'ordinary' people from causing themselves or each other more harm. The officer put it this way:

I think if the government legislates firearms out of the homes, then there's less chance that ... the domestic-related shootings are going to occur. I don't think it impacts on the criminals because they have access to firearms anyway, and they can get access to them if

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<sup>8</sup> Note that these are the assumptions that officers made about gun crime and its causes, not the author's argument for how and why gun crime occurs in the United States.

they want. ... It's not — it's not as difficult as ... we would like, and we would like to make it as difficult as possible. So I — I think the legislation and — and by it — [I mean] the gun buyback scheme and the handgun buyback scheme, I think it's a good idea because it gets all those firearms. And it may only save one housewife, or husband, or whatever, but if it does, it's done its job .... [#18].

Interestingly, this officer is clearly making a distinction between 'real criminals' and people who engage in domestic violence, even that which ends in murder. While advocates against domestic violence may find this distinction profoundly problematic, not just legally but politically, some police still apparently make this distinction, at least in their thinking processes. On this issue, Findlay (2004) has remarked that officers are sometimes reluctant to police areas they view as private domains; domestic disputes, even ones that become violent, fall into this category. Also, police tend to want to focus those they perceive as the *real* bad guys (i.e., career criminals who are involved in ongoing illegal enterprise), not otherwise law-abiding citizens who are occasionally involved in a 'blue' with their partner. Findlay (2004) and Chan (1997) have argued that police view investigative work and 'locking up the bad guys' as the real backbone of police work. Thus from officers' perspectives, policing domestic violence does not necessarily feel like 'real' police work. But as the officer quoted above discusses, even these kinds of domestics can end in serious violence. Even incidents that involve 'non-criminals' can become deadly if guns are involved. Thus according to officers, this is one of the reasons that reducing the overall civilian gun stock is positive for reducing violence.

***Every little bit helps — 'if it saves just one life, it's worth it'***

Related to the previous point, but construed less specifically, some officers asserted that the very fact of gun control's broad and sweeping nature means it's likely to do some good eventually, at least somewhere, at some point. Kleck (1997) has remarked that this is an argument sometimes adopted by gun control advocates: gun control is worth the cost even if it only saves one life, because life is inherently precious. Part and parcel of this belief is the idea that a number of factors come together to reduce crime and make policing more effective, and gun control is part of this package. An officer with fourteen years' experience put it this way: '... Anything that reduces guns in the community I think is good. ... even if it has some effect, it's still a good thing, I think' [#40]. This position was not commonly expressed — only two officers expressed it concretely — perhaps because this point does not really take into account the huge costs, both financial and political, that passing gun control policies can require. Because a number of officers ostensibly discussed the necessity of weighing the costs (literal and symbolic) of gun control, it's possible (if not likely) that such issues were on some officers' minds.

***Most people don't really 'need' guns, particularly handguns***

Finally, several officers remarked that reducing the overall civilian gun stock is positive simply because most people don't really 'need' guns, particularly handguns. While there are certainly sports shooters who enjoy handguns, they don't need to have them, and society would be safer without handguns in civilian hands. Even while officers made this observation, none actually asserted that they thought handguns would be regulated out of use. One officer with fifteen years' experience stated that guns are no longer necessary in modern society: '... My personal view being strongly that — that no-one requires a firearm, even though there's sporting implications and other social, and you know, agricultural implications, I personally don't view that a firearm is required ... by anyone' [#11]. This officer argued that because it is ostensibly impossible to control human behavior, it is therefore very important to control people's access to dangerous commodities. Several

other officers asserted that they would like to see guns even more tightly controlled, even to the point of eliminating all legal access to guns, but they believed that interest groups (i.e., sporting shooters and primary producers) have enough political power to forbid total bans from happening. This position, similar to ‘every little bit helps,’ probably reflects sentiment more than studied opinion: officers may genuinely feel that no one really needs guns, but the ways in which they couched these feelings suggest that they understand that these views don’t make for well-crafted, easily-enforced gun control legislation.

## Positive/Neutral to Gun Control

In this category, officers (fifteen of forty) expressed positive thoughts and feelings toward gun control but qualified their remarks with caveats indicating what gun control could/should accomplish, or what constitutes the necessary accompaniments that would enable gun control to work more effectively. For example, one high-ranking officer with more than twenty years’ experience said the following, when I asked him if he thought gun control was an appropriate and effective way to reduce violent gun crime:

Yes. But they don’t stand alone ... policies alone do not work alone. They just can’t. We — we’ve got to talk about a whole — a whole culture... government, enforcement, sporting people that enjoy their guns — it’s got to be the whole lot ... So — yeah, policies work. But as I said, not in isolation [#01].

While about fifteen officers in total expressed these kinds of qualified views, they were more frequently expressed by the officers who worked with the Special Unit. Perhaps not surprisingly, officers in this unit offered the most comprehensive and knowledgeable views about how to fine-tune legislation to become more effective, and how to craft laws that curtail firearms trafficking. These officers pointed out that illicit firearms trafficking is one of the ways that guns move through society illegally, and the primary means by which the legal market can break down and feed the black market. While most if not all officers interviewed could identify the fact that firearms trafficking is illegal, only the officers who worked in the Special Unit were extensively aware of how this occurred, and what kinds of very specific laws could be designed to reduce it.

### *Gun control is a ‘good start,’ with certain caveats*

The officers who articulated the positive/neutral position would often discuss how gun control was a positive move in the right direction (of reducing violent gun crime), but gun control laws do not and cannot accomplish the goal of crime reduction on their own. Officers who voiced this position generally make three kinds of points related to this point. These are:

- Gun controls need to be adequately enforced. The idea here is that if gun control laws are put into effect but are not enforced properly, or are impossible to enforce, then they are relatively useless.
- Gun controls need to be well-crafted, enforceable laws. This point is related to the one above — if laws are poorly crafted, then they are difficult to enforce, or they are easily skirted by criminal dealers and traffickers. Yet well-crafted laws can be enormously beneficial. One example is a relatively new law (created in the last several years in NSW) that if a dealer illegally sells more than three guns in one month, then he or she is classified as a ‘trafficker,’ which increases the penalties against him or her. Officers in the Special Unit were particularly well versed in this kind of legislation, in part because senior officers connected to the unit were associated with its creation. Officers



from this unit were also that much more inclined to recognise that the literal meaning and content of gun control is not necessarily bound to controlling and policing the legal markets.

- Gun control laws need to be synchronised across states. This was a point raised frequently with officers from the Special Unit, and by some of the more experienced officers from the LACs. If and when laws across states do not correspond with each other, such a lack of coordination can actually create a greater opportunity for criminal enterprise. For example, as recently as two years ago, states neighbouring NSW did not have similar laws regarding illicit gun dealing and trafficking. Thus firearms dealers in Queensland, for example, could (and did) engage in certain practices (i.e., render guns temporarily inactive, disassemble guns into parts) for the purposes of moving those guns quickly and illegally into NSW to be reassembled and illegally sold at substantial profit. Such activities were highly illegal in NSW (incurring jail time, in some cases) but incurred only a small fine in Queensland. This meant that officers responsible for reducing trafficking and illegal dealing in NSW were fighting an uphill battle — Queensland dealers were able to ‘flood’ the NSW market with guns illegally but incur very little penalty for doing so. However, legislators and police were able to identify this problem, create compatible legislation in both states, and start resolving this issue. Officers reported to me that the laws were now far more coordinated and compatible.

### ***Gun Control cannot eradicate the black market in guns***

Officers who expressed the positive/neutral perspective were cognisant of the ways that (and extent to which) guns entered into the black market, knowledge that apparently made them more cautious about supporting the kinds of blanket controls that other officers thought would reduce crime (e.g. total bans, further tightening ‘legitimate reasons to own’). Recognition of the complexities of the relationship between the legal and illegal markets made officers more aware of the need for sophisticated, well-crafted legislation. For example, one officer on the Special Unit with almost fourteen years’ experience put it this way:

Gun control works to a certain point. We’ve managed to remove an enormous amount of long arms off the streets, but we still have this issue with handguns. I think we’ve reached the stage now where we have ... [so] many guns out on the street that we could ban them tomorrow, and we would still have this problem for the next 10 years. ... This would continue because people will get them — they’ll get them through illegal importations, they’ll get them from licensed security guards, they’ll steal them from the army, they’ll steal them from the police, they’ll get them [#02].

This same officer asserted that he would love to see a total ban on firearms because it would potentially remove numerous guns from circulation. However, he was aware that this was both politically untenable (because the laws are already tight on the legal market, and there are good reasons why sport shooters and primary producers should be legally allowed to own guns), and wouldn’t completely alleviate the problem anyway. This is because, in his words, ‘we are a continent which is accessible by every aspect of the land. We are not landlocked at all’ [#02]. His point was that unless border control and Customs are enabled to monitor incoming and outgoing cargoes far more effectively than they do currently, there will always be a way to smuggle guns (like drugs and even people) into the country. These were reasons that some officers expressed caution with advocating very strong, sweeping gun control policies, despite their allure for gun control advocates and some politicians.

### ***Gun Control tightens control on legal market, a 'positive' move towards reducing violence overall***

This position is basically the same as the position voiced in the 'positive' category (i.e., gun control is the only effective way to police the civilian gun stock). A number of officers remarked that if the legal market isn't policed, then people can obtain anything they want, which is a dangerous, problematic situation. Thus controlling the legal market on firearms, one of the most concrete and achievable goals that gun control can accomplish, is an inherently positive thing and should not be overlooked.

### **Negative towards Gun Control**

As mentioned at the outset of the article, only ten of the forty officers interviewed expressed thoughts and beliefs negative enough to be categorised as 'negative toward gun control.' These were officers who raised issues that other officers (in the positive or positive/neutral categories) expressed, but officers in the negative category stated them more strongly, or were more overwhelmingly sceptical or doubtful about the necessity and/or efficacy of gun control overall. Their thoughts are detailed below.

### ***Gun Control mostly affects 'good people' who don't usually commit gun crimes***

The overwhelming point of scepticism from officers in the negative category is the belief that gun control only affects the law-abiding. One officer with 8 years' experience put it succinctly: 'All the gun laws do is ... even with gun buybacks, the only people we saw being in there were the honest people. The crooks still have them ....' [#38]. In fact, this was an issue that some officers felt passionate about, more so than other areas of the interview. One senior officer with over twenty years' experience said the following:

But the mere fact of gun control, only the honest people in the community ... [are affected]. And I've seen it happen. I've seen it here where the honest people will hand in their firearms, no problem at all. The ones that are going to keep illegal firearms anyway are not going to hand them in anyway, so where's the control? ... So who are we controlling? We're controlling the law-abiding citizens here. Sure enough we're taking certain firearms out of the community that generally I wouldn't necessarily agree that they should have. There's certain aspects of gun control I do agree with, but ... how do you control the other community that doesn't abide by gun control? That's what we should be focusing a lot of our attention on — the illegal gun trade, and the other people that have illegal firearms .... I discussed this with fellow members and a few of the people here. I ... I always find it's going to be the gun you don't know about [that] is going to shoot you [#35].

Here, too, is where it's apparent that some officers sincerely believe that gun control (as both a concept and a set of laws governing firearms ownership) is a paradigm that does not address illegal gun ownership, dealing, or trafficking. This officer is in effect suggesting that we shouldn't be focusing on *gun control*, we should be focusing the illegal gun trade, and illegal gun ownership. In other words, gun control does not do these things. His final comment is particularly interesting — when he states that 'it's going to be the gun you don't know about that is going to shoot you,' contextually he means that the 'criminal gun,' the gun that was never registered to a licensed shooter, is the most dangerous gun. The irony here is that without the basic mechanisms of Australia's gun control policies (like licensing and registration), the gun that police don't know about would include any gun at all. But even while they are extremely sceptical of gun controls, most officers, including this one, support basic control mechanisms like licensing and registration.

### ***Criminals will always get guns***

Officers consistently mentioned this issue as one of the main reasons to remain somewhat sceptical over the efficacy of gun control. Basically, most agreed, criminals (i.e., those who consistently break the law as a matter of course, and will do so to obtain firearms) will always get guns. An officer with twenty-two years' experience said, rather wearily:

I think illegal guns will always be there. I don't think — no matter what anyone does, illegal — they'll always be there. 'Cause there'll always be a black market. In a small percentage of domestic situations, yeah, but for illegal guns no — we'll never control them, that's my feelings [#29].

That being said, this was a widely-shared sentiment, even for officers who were quite positive toward the idea of gun control. But if that's the case, why do some eventually draw negative conclusions about the whole paradigm of gun control? Perhaps officers who focus on the perceived failures of gun control (and consider each individual negative point as 'yet one more failure') tend to add up these failures to consider eventually the whole paradigm as failure. In this way they are differentiated from their fellow officers — they see the accumulated failures of gun control, as opposed to the ways that positives could outweigh negatives. And these officers in the negative category seem less likely to perceive the endeavour of reducing the overall civilian gun stock as positive or useful.

### ***Controls like buybacks/amnesties are expensive and time-consuming with little result***

Some officers were concerned that when laws are very broadly construed, designed simply to disarm the public or force the already law-abiding to be more accountable to authorities, such laws may accomplish their goals, but they don't affect the black market (as laws necessarily should). One female officer with 6 years' experience put it this way:

I think they tried a gun buyback scheme, which I was sort of talking about before, where say like all these weapons now are illegal, 'if you've got any, come and hand them in and we'll pay you money for them.' and all that did was get guns out of the hands of legitimate owners, you know, farmers and sporting shooters and that sort of stuff. I don't think it controlled any illegal firearms out there at all, or people that didn't hand it in would have sold them on the black market, or buried them in the backyard, you know [#06].

And when she was asked about policies that seemed foolish or pointless, she responded: 'Mmm, I think that gun buy-back scheme was the biggest one ... the biggest waste of time ... I know it was expensive and — and didn't achieve what they wanted it to achieve' [#06].

Part of the issue that some police alluded to is that when certain kinds of laws are considerably tightened, that tightening requires a high degree of monitoring and record-keeping, both of which cost an enormous amount of time and money, above and beyond what is already in place. For example, the deactivation laws (i.e., when a gun is rendered inactive, it is taken off the Firearm Registry's list of accountable firearms) can be and have been exploited by crooked dealers who are able to move their guns from the legal market to the black market easily, without detection. Such dealers render guns inactive, notify the Registry that the guns are now inactive, and then sell these now-untraceable guns on the black market for a considerable profit. While this issue could potentially be resolved (for example, by legislating that dealers must literally demonstrate to police that their guns have been legitimately deactivated, not slightly deactivated with the potential for reactivation), mandating this kind of behaviour would require a high degree of monitoring by police or another certified party (such as the Firearms Registry), but at great cost to the tax-payer.

Another issue is that some legislation seems actually designed to avoid addressing the criminal markets. For example, in 2002–2003, NSW signed into law prohibitions on certain kinds of high-calibre handguns, and handguns with long barrel lengths, to give but two examples. Gun owners were notified that if they owned such guns, they would be forced to hand them in to the authorities, who would compensate gun owners for these firearms. However, gun owners were *not* financially compensated for guns they could not *prove* they owned legally — they had to provide paperwork showing that the guns they were surrendering were owned legally. While there was an amnesty for illegally-owned and illegally-obtained guns, there would be no compensation for those firearms. The fact that police were handling this buyback, and taking note of who was handing in what, also probably provided strong disincentive for criminals or their associates handing in these illegal guns. Finally, because not all handguns were banned, some gun owners simply used their compensation money to purchase more firearms (because many handguns remained legal for sporting purposes). In fact, when all was said and done, it's possible that these somewhat short-sighted gun controls actually facilitated an *increase* in the size of the civilian gun stock in Australia (Maiden 2004).

It's certainly understandable that the government did not want to compensate people for illegally-obtained guns, and it cannot control how people spend the money with which they are compensated for guns that are legally handed in during a buy-back. However, these are the kinds of reasons that generated extreme scepticism from officers about the idea of gun control. When these reasons add up, officers reach conclusions that demonstrated extreme wariness and doubt regarding the entire paradigm of gun control.

## Conclusions

There are a number of conclusions that can be drawn from officers' comments regarding their perceptions of the nature and efficacy of gun control in Australia. While some of the issues they raise speak to the politics of the gun debate, some speak to broader issues that do not immediately leap to mind when thinking about or discussing the issue of guns in Australia. The first point that does address the politics of the gun debate is that while officers did not dwell on this point, the vast majority of officers interviewed do in fact view civilian gun ownership as legitimate. The unspoken caveat, of course, is that those individuals must be licensed and own registered guns. Provided those caveats hold, officers for the most part assert that sporting shooters and primary producers have acceptable and legitimate reasons to own firearms. This point might not seem terribly important, but it is interesting in light of the fact that some groups within the gun lobby feel strongly that the police view their gun ownership as inherently problematic, even potentially criminal, on the face of it. The officers interviewed here apparently did not subscribe to that belief, or share that perception. However, the nature and structure of the licensing and registration system (which is monitored and reviewed by police and/or associated organisations regularly) may engender that suspicion on the part of gun owners, regardless of what or how police actually feel about the matter.<sup>9</sup>

That said, the officers interviewed also generally feel that while gun ownership by some particular groups is legitimate, they support the idea that gun ownership by the public should be nominal and restricted. This is the second point to emphasise: as far as police are concerned, the (presumed) fact that gun control predominantly affects only the law abiding is not problematic. Police know and recognise that self defence with a firearm is not an acceptable reason to have a firearm in New South Wales (and in most of Australia), and for all intents is a legal impossibility anyway — thus citizen gun ownership is a *privilege* (if a somewhat dangerous one) that some Australians should be able to enjoy. Most police

interviewed would agree that no one *needs* to have guns in their homes. If more guns were to be removed from homes, all the better: officers shared the assumption that reduction of gun ownership across the board would eventually lead to less gun crime across society.

Related to this point, police generally seemed to feel that while certain kinds of gun controls potentially reduce violence across society (in a more abstract and indirect way), more directly and overtly, these controls make environments safer for police to do their jobs. In the words of one officer with 7 years' experience, 'I think ... my argument is ... based on the opinion that I don't particularly want people pointing firearms at me during the course of my duties ... I don't particularly want anyone to have a firearm' [#39].

In keeping with this sentiment, when police were asked what kinds of guns posed the greatest dangers to them, one officer summed up the general sentiment by stating it's 'the gun you don't know about' that remains the most dangerous. Many officers stated handguns posed the greatest danger; not just because their size, shape, and deadliness make them more appropriate for criminal activity, but also because handguns are more easily hidden, particularly from an approaching officer. Basically, reducing the sheer number of guns in society (regardless of who owns them and why) seems beneficial to police officers.

There are further reasons why police would support gun control. One in particular speaks to a more subtle recognition of the benefit of laws designed to monitor and maintain information about the general public (i.e., licensing and registration, which constitutes the backbone of Australian gun control policy): such laws grant police more powers. For example, the 1997 legislation allows police to check for and seize weapons when policing a domestic incident, prosecute offenders for a wider set of violations (simply because more violations now exist to justify prosecution), and advocate longer prison terms for firearms offences. Finally, such laws enable police to check whether alleged offenders have access to guns before officers go to make an arrest. While these examples do not constitute police powers that affect the rights of all (or even most) Australians, they provide police considerable power to affect the lives of primary producers or sport enthusiasts who resent that fact that their gun ownership makes them a 'person of interest' in the first place. Interestingly, at this time, such laws are enacted without the usual political costs --- 'increased police powers' is not the first thing that comes to mind for the Australian public when thinking about what gun control can accomplish, and few (if any) civil libertarians in Australia would argue that increased police surveillance of firearms owners is problematic. The Australian public may see laws that engender greater police powers as the price some people must pay to own guns in Australia, or as a necessary trade-off for better enabling police to reduce gun-related crime. But it is perhaps important to recognise that this is indeed part of the sociopolitical cost of enacting certain kinds of gun controls.

If officers perceive gun control as beneficial regardless of whether it is able to reduce violent gun crime effectively, perhaps the real question should become, 'Why would any police officer be negatively disposed towards gun control?' If gun control in effect increases police powers and reduces the sheer volume of the civilian gun stock, facts that most police

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9 This assertion about gun owners' suspicions is based on extensive interviewing conducted with both American and Australian gun enthusiasts described in Kohn 2004a and Kohn 2004b. American gun enthusiasts remarked regularly that they believe police and the state distrust them because they are gun owners. They believe strongly that the state is hostile to them because they own guns (Kohn 2004a). Some Australian shooters also stated that their gun ownership made them a target of police suspicion. One Australian shooter engaged in a lengthy discussion with the author about how she was angry and suspicious that the police considered her a 'person of interest' simply because she was a licensed gun owner. She saw this fact as distinctly unfair: her gun license put her in the same category that 'comes up for some child molester'. This data comes from a study described at length in Kohn 2004b.

regard as positive, why would any officer evince negative views toward gun control? In part the answer lies in the quote from the officer above who stated that what gun control *really* accomplishes is the control of law-abiding citizens. For some officers, this means they themselves will have limited access to guns for their own recreation, or their families will be increasingly restricted, as well as members of the community in which officers live and work. Police may find themselves having to defend and enforce new laws that they are not entirely confident will be useful and helpful for reducing crime, even against friends and neighbours whom they do not believe are irresponsible with their firearms.

This may be a particular issue in rural communities. In rural areas where gun ownership is higher (as compared to more urban areas), police are in a position to remove guns, sometimes forcibly, from the homes of people they know and trust, people who may be quite hostile to the idea of having their guns confiscated. Jobes (2003) makes the point that in rural areas, police often find themselves in a position to socialise with people they must literally and figuratively police; doing so creates tensions and awkwardness: for their work and life, and for their families. Because gun control is not simply a law enforcement tool but also a political issue, gun control may create conflict between police and communities who are hostile to it. All that said, as gun ownership becomes more and more restricted in Australia, particularly in the wake of high-profile shooting incidents like Fort Arthur and the Monash University shooting in 2002, it's equally likely that fewer and fewer communities and interest groups will be able to lobby effectively against future gun controls. Luckily for police, most of the Australian public will likely see that potential social fact as a step in the right direction.

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