

[Plan to tighten gun laws to cost up to \\$53m over 10 years, Stuart Nash says](#)

By Kate MacNamara, www.stuff.co.nz July 25, 2019

OPINION: Forty-three to \$53-million over 10 years. That's the rough number police minister Stuart Nash, through his spokesperson, put on the plan to tighten gun laws with a second piece of legislation this year.

The proposal is for a slate of changes that include making it harder to get and keep a gun licence and tighten rules for gun dealers. [At the heart of these changes is a contentious plan to establish a gun registry.](#)

The register would be up and running by the end of next year and look a little like the motor vehicle register operated by the Transport Association, the Government says. It would hold names, addresses, and birth dates as well as gun serial numbers, transfers, sales, and purchases.

Most New Zealanders see the need to reconsider gun laws, or at least enforcement, in the wake of the Christchurch mosque attacks in March where a gunman killed 51 people. The Government has already banned most semi-automatic weapons.

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- * [Police are seizing more than 1300 guns each year](#)
- * [A gun register may help reduce the homicide rate, but it's no sure bet](#)

But a registry for more ordinary shotguns and rifles (legally held and probably numbering over a million) and the likelihood for extraordinary cost escalation on one hand and low levels of gun owner compliance on the other should not be underestimated.

The example of Canada's failed gun registry is often cited, and the Canadian situation has been much referenced this week in New Zealand by those on all sides of the debate.

Given the prominence of the Canadian example, it is worth considering its lessons if only to avoid the myths and pitfalls, chief among which was a price tag that experts like Alberta-based independent firearms expert Dennis Young and put at C\$3 billion (NZ\$3.4b).

These are all-in costs, including those to establish the registry which began operating in 1995 and ended in 2012 when the government finally abandoned tracking long guns (including most shotguns and rifles) and destroyed the records.

Now separately, Canada continues to keep a registry of restricted weapons including handguns and semi-automatic guns.

The Canadian system was national and in that sense it is analogous to the registry proposed in New Zealand. Australia also keeps gun registries but those are fragmented and state-based.

Canada's registry began life with an estimated cost to the public purse of C\$2m. Over the years, the price escalated exponentially.

New Zealand should pay close attention to the reasons for this and one was certainly compliance.

When the Canadian registry was introduced in the wake of a mass shooting in Montreal, it was not the first legislative crackdown on legal gun ownership but the second.

Gun owners felt unfairly conflated with criminality and they flouted the obligation to register in large numbers. Some actively obstructed the process: one wag registered his soldering gun. There were expensive court battles.

In all its 17 years, the registry never contained more than about 7 million guns, roughly a third of the estimated guns that were otherwise legally owned.

Registering guns – shotguns and small calibre rifles in particular – is not like registering cars and boats. In order for your car to be useful you must take it out into the world and use it on public roads where police can monitor it.

Many, perhaps most legal guns, stay home, unused or used only to dispatch possums and rabbits. Others are transported unobtrusively by hunters.

Efforts at enforcement are therefore expensive and unwieldy and the most powerful tool the government has is persuasion.

In Canada, that persuasion often took the form of misleading figures.

Statistics Canada, for example, tracked "firearms related" crime, and those numbers were used by officials to assess whether registering guns was helping reduce crimes where firearms were used.

The problem was that "firearms related" crime captured a large number of so-called paper crimes, including failure by a licensed gun owner to register a change of address. Hardly the public danger that officials had intimated.

Many Canadian misconceptions are now entering the New Zealand conversation. This week Police Association president Chris Cahill claimed Canadian "police officers" check registers (a gun registry remains for restricted weapons) about 11,000 times a day. "That gives you an idea of how useful it can be," he reportedly said.

In reality, police computer systems trigger automatic registry searches thousands of times daily, usually in relation to routine policing like traffic stops. In 2006, Canada's then auditor general Sheila Fraser called such hits "an activity indicator [rather] than an indicator of effectiveness."

If New Zealand draws any lesson from Canada it should be that nothing short of an independent body answering to parliament should oversee gun laws and regulations and measure the cost against a clearly defined benefit.

It's not a new idea; the 1997 review of New Zealand gun control by retired High Court judge Sir Thomas Thorpe recommended as much. A group of experts reporting to police, as is currently anticipated, isn't enough.