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To the Finance and Expenditure Committee

## **Submission on the Arms Legislation Bill, 23 October 2019**

### **Victim Support**

Victim Support welcomes the opportunity to make a submission on the Arms Legislation Bill to improve the safety and wellbeing of New Zealanders. We strongly support this legislation.

Victim Support is a non-government organisation that has been offering practical and emotional support to victims of crime and trauma for more than 30 years. Victim Support offers a free 24/7 service throughout the country, utilising both the expertise of paid staff and highly trained volunteer Support Workers.

In the 2018/19 financial year we supported more than 39,000 people following crime and trauma, including **2267 people nationwide as a result of incidents involving weapons, including firearms**. In other words, **nearly 6% of all victims we supported were victims of weapons incidents**.

Individuals are only recorded once in these statistics, but it is important to note that many were victims of multiple firearms-related incidents, as is often the case in family violence, for example. Our organisation sees the impact of firearms-related crime first-hand and is ideally positioned to strongly recommend tighter controls on the use and possession of arms to improve public safety. Our submission sets out the key reasons why we wish to advocate for changes to New Zealand's firearms legislation.

#### **1. Firearms are involved in a wide range of crimes.**

While firearms are involved in only a minority of all crime, our records show weapons are involved in a wide *range* of crime from animal attacks to homicide. Last financial year we supported victims from 41 different incidents involving weapons, including firearms. We supported 1180 victims following the Christchurch mosque shootings alone. The other most common weapons-related incidents were aggravated robbery (318 victims), family harm (196 victims), suicide (134 victims), grievous assault (122 victims), and threat of serious harm (117 victims). Other incidents involving weapons included home invasion, sexual violence, accidental death, wilful damage, fraud, car conversion, and animal attack.

## **2. A single firearm, or a single individual with firearms, has the potential to harm multiple victims.**

Despite most crimes not involving firearms, those that do have the potential to be more deadly. The Christchurch mosque attacks in March allegedly involved one offender and five weapons, and resulted in the loss of 51 lives with 49 injured. Victim Support workers directly supported 1180 individuals following these attacks, including the family and close friends of those killed, those injured and their families, and witnesses and those present at the mosques during the attacks. The psychological, physical and financial impact on these victims will last a lifetime in many cases. Although the number of victims from these attacks was unprecedented in New Zealand, Victim Support regularly works with survivors and bereaved families whose lives are also changed forever following multiple-victim and single-victim firearm-related crimes.

## **3. Firearms access makes crime, and particularly family violence, more deadly.**

While firearms advocates may state that a motivated perpetrator will still find a way to harm without a firearm, firearms elevate the risk of a situation causing serious harm or death.

Victim Support supported some 12,000 victims of family violence in 2018/19 – more than any other category of victim. We recorded 196 victims involved in family violence incidents involving a weapon, including firearms. When a violent partner has access to a firearm, a dangerous situation becomes a potentially fatal situation.<sup>1</sup> There is consistent evidence that partner access to firearms increases abuse severity.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, between 2009 and 2012, 52 people were killed by an intimate partner in New Zealand, with 15% of these involving firearms.<sup>3</sup>

International evidence suggests legislation is effective in reducing intimate partner homicide rates. For example, a study of 46 major US cities from 1979 to 2003 found a 19% reduction in intimate partner homicide following firearms restrictions.<sup>4</sup> US research also suggests that when firearms legislation is tightened, violent partners do not tend to substitute other weapons for firearms.<sup>5</sup>

## **4. Even if a firearm is not discharged, it has the potential to harm.**

Threats, intimidation, control, and fear – even without physical violence – are key characteristics of family violence. In the US, firearms are used more frequently to threaten in family violence situations than they are used to kill or to protect the home from intruders.<sup>6</sup> It is well established that the mere sight of a firearm can make both angry and non-angry people more aggressive,<sup>7 8</sup> while long-term

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<sup>1</sup> Campbell, J. C., Webster, D. W., Koziol-McLain, J., Block, C., Campbell, D., Curry, M. A., et al. (2003). Risk factors for femicide in abusive relationships: results from a multisite case control study. *American Journal of Public Health, 93*(7), 1069-1097.

<sup>2</sup> McFarlane, J., Soeken, K., Campbell, J., Parker, B., Reel, S., & Silva, C. (1998). Severity of abuse to pregnant women and associated gun access of the perpetrator. *Public Health Nursing, 15*(3), 201-206.

<sup>3</sup> Family Violence Death Review Committee (2015). Health Quality and Safety Commission New Zealand, Retrieved from Health Quality and Safety Commission New Zealand, <https://www.hqsc.govt.nz/assets/FVDRC/Publications/FVDRC-5th-report-Feb-2016-2.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Zeoli, A. M., & Webster, D. W. (2010). Effects of domestic violence policies, alcohol taxes and police staffing levels on intimate partner homicide in large US cities. *Injury Prevention, 16*, 90–95.

<sup>5</sup> Zeoli, A.M. (2018) *Domestic Violence and Firearms: Research on Statutory Interventions*. Retrieved from The National Resource Center on Domestic Violence and Firearms <https://www.preventdvgunviolence.org/dv-and-firearms-zeoli.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Small Arms Survey 2013: Everyday Dangers (2013). Small Arms Survey: Geneva

<sup>7</sup> Berkowitz, L., & LePage, A. (1967). Weapons as aggression-eliciting stimuli. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 7*, 202–207.

psychological effects are common amongst those threatened with firearms.<sup>9</sup> Our Support Workers regularly support victims who have been threatened by weapons (including firearms) both within and outside of family violence situations, such as in aggravated robbery, burglary, home invasion, kidnapping, rape, threat of serious harm, and intimidation. We supported more than 500 victims of these crimes in the last financial year.

## 5. Firearms are impacting our suicide rate

New Zealand's suicide rate is currently at its highest with 685 lives lost to suicide in the year ending June 30.<sup>10</sup> Victim Support workers support some 3000 people affected by suicide each year. Suicide rates are higher among males and those living in rural areas, both of whom are also more likely to use firearms as a method of suicide than other groups.<sup>11 12</sup>

Rural suicide risk is thought to be exacerbated by easy access to firearms. Of the 185 rural suicides in New Zealand between 2007 and 2015, 40% were caused by firearms – more than five times more likely than suicides in the general population. A study found that firearms-related suicides decreased by 46% for the total population and by 66% for youths following the introduction of more restrictive firearms legislation in New Zealand in 1992.<sup>13</sup>

## 6. Conclusion and recommendations

As our data suggests, firearms-related incidents can have a far-reaching ripple effect throughout the community. Victim Support not only works with the families of those killed by firearms in homicide, suicide and accidents, and those injured or threatened by firearms, but also witnesses, members of the public who were first on the scene, and friends, colleagues, neighbours, and community groups who are traumatised by these events. Our Support Workers see first-hand the impact of firearms – the emotional costs including posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety, depression, complicated grief, substance abuse, and family violence; the physical costs as survivors negotiate life with often debilitating injuries; and the financial costs as victims lose income from the result of their emotional and/or physical injuries, the costs involved in keeping themselves safe, and the costs of involvement in the justice system.

Victim Support acknowledges that the majority of firearms owners are law-abiding, however put simply we need to take firearms out of the hands of those who could use them to kill or harm themselves or others.

***Victim Support therefore strongly recommends changing the Arms Legislation Bill to improve public safety, in particular via: 1) the creation of a registry to store information on firearms and link them to licence holders in order to keep better track of firearms throughout their life cycle, and 2) the strengthening of licensing regimes to filter out high-risk people and behaviour, aiming to ensure firearms remain accessible only to appropriate people acting in the interests of personal and public safety.***

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<sup>8</sup> Carlson, M., Marcus-Newhall, A., & Miller, N. (1990). Effects of situational aggression cues: A quantitative review. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58, 622–633.

<sup>9</sup> Sullivan, T.P. and Weiss, N.H. (2017). Is Firearm Threat in Intimate Relationships Associated with Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Symptoms Among Women? *Violence and Gender*, 4, (2), 31-36.

<sup>10</sup> New Zealand Coronial Services (2019). Coronial Services, Retrieved from

<https://coronialservices.justice.govt.nz/assets/Documents/Publications/Provisional-Figures-August-2019.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Ministry of Health (2015). *Suicide Facts: 2015 Data*. Retrieved from Ministry of Health <https://www.health.govt.nz/publication/suicide-facts-2015-data>

<sup>12</sup> Beautrais, A.L., Fergusson, D.M., & Horwood, L.J. (2006). Firearms legislation and reductions in firearm-related suicide deaths in New Zealand. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, 40, (3) 253-259.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.