

Proper guidelines of reducing firearms violence in Thai context

Piyaporn Tunneekul^{*} and Namtaee Meeboonsalang^{**}

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Nakhon Pathom Rajabhat University^{*}

Office of the Attorney General^{**}

E-mail¹: piyaporn7230@gmail.com

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Abstract

This research of the topic as the proper guidelines of reducing firearms violence in Thai context aims at studying the analysis of situations, policies, and impacts of guns in Thailand and in the foreign countries. This study also targets at studying the problems and obstacles to violence reduction from using guns fitting Thai contexts. The guidelines from reducing firearms violence can result in the good measures and practices being appropriate with the current contexts in Thailand. Using a qualitative design, data were gathered via in-depth interviews with 59 key informants and two focus groups with 42 participants and 15 individuals currently serving sentences for offenses involving firearms were conducted to triangulate the findings and capture diverse perspectives on community safety. Data were processed using thematic analysis to identify systemic loopholes and sociopolitical drivers of gun-related crimes. Furthermore, several prominent projects in Thailand have been studied to extract best practices, such as Contemplative Education (Jitta-Panya), Alcohol-Free Village Projects, Anti-Street Racing and Brawl Prevention Projects and the ‘Five Precepts Village’ project.

This study found that violence related to firearms in Thailand has increased, causing many losses to innocent people. According to most problems as the obstacles to reducing the violence from using guns in Thailand, it was turned out that the main problems and obstacles against reducing the use of guns include legal measures, punishment guidelines,

¹ Corresponding author

law enforcement, emotional control, education/knowledge, and insight. Therefore, it is necessary to search for effective measures to reduce violence related to firearms in society.

Concerning the measures for reducing violence from using guns fitting Thai contexts, it was found that the measures were divided into four main aspects, which are legal measures and law enforcement, the measures promoting the knowledge involving the violence from using guns, technological measures in following up the guns, and the measures in form of the projects/any campaigns involving the reduction on violence.

Keywords: Proper guidelines, Violence, Firearms, Reducing

Introduction

The violence problems related to firearms at present have increased. Not only in Thailand, but firearms involve violence all over the world. In Thailand, the top weapon used by criminals is firearms. In other words, firearms are offensive weapons in most of Thailand's criminal cases. According to the 2022 World Population Review, Thailand ranked 15th globally in firearm-related fatalities, recording 2,804 deaths—an average mortality rate of 3.91 per 100,000 population (Lertjittham, 2022). Furthermore, 2023 statistics reveal that Thai civilians possess approximately 10.3 million firearms, the highest ownership rate in Southeast Asia and the 20th highest in the world (The Government Public Relations Department, 2023).

Research has shown that the rate of gun deaths in Thailand is as high as in countries with active conflicts. Most gun-related deaths in Thailand are associated with a criminal offense, collective violence between different gangs, or personal conflict. There is not a spate of mass shootings that occur often in other countries or in the United States. Although mass shootings remain less frequent in Thailand than in the United States, recent high-impact tragedies—such as the Nakhon Ratchasima and Nong Bua Lamphu incidents—signal a dangerous shift toward indiscriminate, high-casualty violence. (Tunneekul & Meeboonsalang, 2020)

Asian Correspondent has reported that most gun-related deaths in Thailand come from personal conflicts, gang violence, or a loss of face. Although face loss seems trivial to many cultures, it is extremely serious in Thailand. The British journalist, Andrew Drummond, who was stationed in Thailand and had to leave the country with his family after being threatened, commented that crimes in Thailand did not decrease because a perpetrator often gets off scot-free and the Thai authorities' investigation process is unreliable. (Prachatai, 2016)

Another major issue is that guns are now easily available through social media, allowing people to bypass legal checks. At the same time, social pressures have led to more emotional violence and a lack of self-control among the public. Because the Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives, Fireworks, and Equivalent Firearms Act, B.E. 2490 (from 1947) (Government Gazette, 2019) are outdated and cannot control these new problems, this research is interested in studying the real situation and the obstacles to reducing violence. Finally, this study proposes practical measures and “good practices” that are suitable for the Thai context to help improve public safety.

Research Objectives

1. To study and analyze current situations, policies, and impacts related to firearms in Thailand and abroad.
2. To study the obstacle to the reduction of firearm violence in Thailand.
3. To find effective measures to reduce firearm violence in Thai society.

Literature Reviews

The definition of violence, according to the standards of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Violence Prevention Alliance (VPA), focuses on the intentional use of physical force or power, which results in a broad impact on the body, mind, and individual liberties. (World Health Organization, 2002) In the field of criminology, The Self-Control Theory proposed by Gottfredson and Hirschi indicates that crime is not solely a result of social influence, but stems from a personality trait defined by low self-control or impulsivity, typically influenced by poor parenting during early childhood. People who have low self-control often pursue instant rewards, engage in adventurous behaviors, and resolve problems through physical force rather than intellect. (Akers, 1991) In the Thai context, firearms serve as a shortcut tool that best suits this group of individuals. Because firearms possess the power to resolve conflicts or demonstrate authority over others instantly, users often overlook the long-term legal consequences. This is consistent with the high mortality rates in Thailand resulting from impulsive acts in cases of personal disputes or the “loss of face”.

However, violent behavior is not limited to individual traits; it is also shaped by a learning process according to Sutherland’s Differential Association Theory (Siegel, 2005).

This theory points out that criminal behavior is learned through interaction with specific groups, particularly in a society with a deep-rooted “gun culture”. This learning is not limited to the methods of acquiring or modifying firearms online—which is currently a major issue—but also includes the adoption of “definitions” and attitudes that view violence as acceptable or as a way to gain respect. When individuals are close to groups that glorify lethal weapons, the frequency and intensity of this learning eventually cause them to shift their moral standards toward accepting firearms as a solution to problems.

Moreover, the rise of new media and technological advancements has broadened the scope of this learning, as explained by Albert Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory, which highlights the importance of “observational learning”. Humans can remember and imitate violent behavior without needing direct experience (Bandura, 1971). By observing media portrayals of firearms being used to gain power or successfully seek revenge, a “copycat” phenomenon emerges. This explains the rise of Active Shooter incidents in Thailand, where perpetrators are often motivated by the “representation” of previous attackers in the media, which tends to turn criminals into a focal point of public attention.

The meaning of firearms in the Thai consciousness is further reinforced by Stuart Hall’s Representation Theory, which explains that humans create meaning for objects through cultural exchange (Hall, 1997). In the past, firearms might have been defined as tools for protecting life and property. However, in the present, the representation of guns has shifted to a “Symbol of Power” and a mark of extreme masculinity. Carrying a firearm is no longer just about preparedness for self-defense; it is an expression of status and dominance over public spaces. This meaning, reproduced through media and specific subcultures, turns firearms into dangerous objects when they fall into the hands of those with low self-control in environments that facilitate wrongdoing.

However, this impulsive behavior is further complicated by the framework of Gary Becker’s Rational Choice Theory assumes that offenders are rational decision-makers who choose crime when the benefits seem to outweigh the chances of getting caught or punished (Wickert, 2019). It assumes offenders act logically rather than impulsively. This led the person to believe that violence is the most efficient choice available, despite its long-term costs.

Consequently, effective crime prevention in the Thai context cannot rely solely on traditional deterrence or the swift and severe enforcement of laws. It is essential to expand the scope to Situational Crime Prevention through Crime Prevention Through Environmental

Design (CPTED). This approach creates physical barriers and increases natural surveillance in high-risk areas (Royal Thai Police, 2007), alongside improving firearm control policies. Therefore, firearm violence in Thai society is not an isolated issue but a combination of weak individual self-control, an improper learning culture, and the social belief that guns represent absolute power. This complexity creates a significant gap in existing government policies, which explains why previous efforts have remained ineffective and cannot yet ensure long-term public safety.

Research Methodology

This research was a qualitative study based on in-depth interviews, focus-group discussions, and case studies. A documentary study was first conducted to establish the necessary theoretical and policy frameworks and field data collection was conducted through methodological triangulation

Key informants were selected through a purposive sampling method, guided by a set of explicit criteria to enhance the study's academic integrity. The sample group consists of 3 main groups: 1) government officials in the justice system and local authorities, and 2) civil society groups, academics, and NGOs, by selecting those with at least 2 years of work experience. These two groups were divided into 59 participants for in-depth interviews and 42 participants for 2 focus group sessions. 3) The third group consists of 15 individuals currently serving sentences for offenses involving firearms, which are considered important case studies for an in-depth analysis of criminal motivations and circumstances. Additionally, there is a study of 2 communities with outstanding violence prevention measures to extract best practices in an empirical way.

The data analysis process was systematically conducted using the Content Analysis technique. Data from field notes and word-for-word transcription were used for coding and categorizing key concepts to synthesize into Thematic Analysis that directly answers the research questions. Furthermore, the researchers strictly followed Research Ethics, especially in protecting the rights of vulnerable groups such as inmates. This included obtaining official permission from the Department of Corrections, ensuring Informed Consent, and maintaining the Anonymity of all informants to keep confidentiality and prevent any impacts on participants. This enhances the standards and credibility of the research findings at an

international level. Additionally, this research has already been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee.

Research Findings and Discussion

The research findings are as follows:

Objective 1: To study and analyze situations, policies, and impacts related to firearms in Thailand and abroad.

A study of firearm situations and policies reveals a significant divide between Western and Asian contexts, particularly in Thailand. Unlike Western mass shootings, which are often driven by psychological crises or hate-based beliefs, Thai firearms are perceived as symbols rather than instruments for self-defense violence typically stems from routine street crime and personal disputes in daily life. The core of this phenomenon lies in the concept of low self-control. According to Gottfredson and Hirschi' Self Control Theory, individuals with limited self-restraint are naturally drawn to actions that provide immediate gratification while ignoring long-term repercussions. This is consistent with testimonies from firearm offenders, who noted that,

"It was truly just a split-second decision. With a gun in my hand, I felt I could end the problem instantly. I didn't stop to think that after pulling the trigger, I would have to spend the rest of my life in prison."

Such testimony confirms that firearms serve as a "shortcut tool" for conflict resolution in situations where individuals lack emotional restraint.

The high rate of gun violence in Thailand, notwithstanding various amnesty initiatives, underscores a fundamental truth: legal measures alone cannot suppress a deeply ingrained "gun culture". According to Bandura' Social Cognitive and Sutherland' Differential Association theories, media exposure and peer pressure teach and normalize violent behavior. As Stuart Hall's Representation Theory suggests, the media often glamorizes firearms, cementing their status as essential icons of male authority and toughness in Thai society. As one youth offender noted

“In my circle, the person with a gun is the one with ‘power’. Friends respect you. The older guys told me that if I wanted to be accepted and not seen as weak, I had to be armed. It’s a symbol that we aren’t nobodies.”

A critical issue in Thai society is the relative ease of access to affordable firearms, coupled with obsolete laws that focus heavily on increasing criminal penalties rather than addressing structural causes. When easy access is combined with physical triggers like alcohol consumption, personal inhibitions are further lowered. In a highly competitive and intolerant social environment, the firearm becomes an absolute “shortcut” for settling disputes. Consequently, Thai public policy can no longer rely solely on traditional legal amendments.

Objective 2: To examine the problems that hinder the reduction of firearm violence in Thailand.

The study shows that firearms are perceived as symbols rather than instruments for self-defense violence in Thailand is involved with structural issue. It results not only from legal loopholes and inconsistent enforcement but also from a complex interplay of social and psychological factors. The following sections will analyze them through several key criminological frameworks.

1. Legal Loopholes and Soft Penalties

A fundamental hurdle is the inherent weakness of the Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives, Fireworks, and Imitation Firearms Act B.E. 2490 (1947). (The criteria for license applicants are described as “too general and lacking in empirical testing,” particularly regarding mental health and technical proficiency. This allows lethal weapons to fall into the hands of those ill-equipped to possess them.

Furthermore, a significant discrepancy exists between the severity of prescribed penalties and their actual judicial application. The research highlights a troubling predictability of leniency:

“The offender may predict what penalties will be imposed... as it has become a norm of the court. Therefore, they are not deterred by the punishment and are tempted to commit the offense.”

This phenomenon aligns with Rational Choice Theory. When potential offenders perceive the “cost” of the crime (the actual enforced penalty) to be lower than the immediate “benefit” (retaliation or emotional release), the law loses its deterrent effect.

2. Social Learning and the “Symbolism of Power”

The study emphasizes how the media contributes to the normalization of violence. When violent incidents are broadcasted in real-time and without filters, they act as a “model” aggressive behavior. Following Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory, individuals—especially impressionable youth— to absorb these behaviors through observation.

In Thai society, firearms are perceived as symbols rather than instruments for self-defense. As the study notes:

“Thai media loves showing violence because it sells. The more violent it is, the more people watch. Then they start copying what they see, thinking that having a gun makes them powerful.”

Stuart Hall’s Representation Theory indicates that the media’s propensity to glamorize the “toughness” of firearms and a sign of perceived authority over others. As a result, gun possession becomes shaping a social identity rather than functional use.

3. Low Self-Control and Impulsivity

The finding points that the primary driver of violence is psychological, not situational. This is entirely consistent with Gottfredson and Hirschi’s Self-Control Theory, which holds that criminal behavior stems from a lack of self-regulation. The research confirms that:

“Crime problems are not caused by guns, but by individual thoughts and intemperance. The gun is merely a stimulus that makes humans more courageous.”

When individuals possess low self-control, the presence of a firearm creates a “weapons effect”—an environmental cue that increases the likelihood of an aggressive response. Without rigorous emotional training and restraint, a routine dispute can escalate into a tragedy in seconds.

4. Systemic Gaps and “Guns in the Wrong Hands”

The real issue often boils down to cracks in the system. Between “welfare gun” programs that lack proper oversight and a total absence of limits on ammunition, we’ve created a landscape where firearms are far too easy to misuse. There is a growing sense of frustration over “guns in the wrong hands”, especially when the legal system seems to go easy on people caught with registered weapons that don’t actually belong to them.

On top of that, there’s a massive disconnect between the law and the public. Most people find ministerial regulations so opaque and confusing that they don’t even realize they’re breaking the rules. Until the government steps up to close these administrative loopholes and actually prioritizes public education, even the toughest laws will continue to miss the mark.

Objective 3: To find good measures to reduce firearm violence appropriate to Thai context
According to the research, the measures are divided into four main areas:

1. Legal measures and law enforcement

The modernization of the Firearms, Ammunition, Explosives, Fireworks, and Equivalent Firearms Act, B.E. 2490 (1947) (Department of Provincial Administration, 2018) is more than just a legal update; It’s an essential tool for formal social control. The primary answer is a stringent “gatekeeping” method. Licenses should not be valid indefinitely; they must expire to require regular mental health exams. By limiting gun ownership and scaling fines to income, consistent with Bentham’s Utilitarian principles, (Nathanson, n.d.) ensuring the cost of a crime greatly surpasses its benefit. This is still one of the most efficient strategies to maintain social order. Furthermore, monitoring online gun trade represents an adaptation to Cyber-routine Activity, which is currently the primary channel for illegal firearms.

2. Educational and Mass Communication Measures

To truly end gun violence, we must look beyond the law and start reshaping the national mindset through education and media. By integrating the grim realities of firearm risks into school curricula, we can build a Collective Consciousness that strips away the outdated myth that guns equal power or “manly” prestige.

The media plays a critical role here; it must stop glorifying the “gun-toting hero” and instead reflect the agonizing cost of loss. When society begins to view a firearm as a social liability rather than a status symbol, the internal urge to arm oneself will naturally fade. Ultimately, our goal is to dismantle Thailand’s “power and prestige” narrative, replacing it with a culture of accountability and restraint. Finally, we want to create an environment in which safety is a shared goal, rather than a race to amass a private armory for self-defense.

3. Innovation and Technological Measures

Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) is put into practice by using modern technology such as ballistic identification, microstamping, and biometric smart guns. Using these techniques, we can effectively “increase the effort” required to commit a crime, which is a key principle of Rational Choice Theory. These advances do more than merely simplify post-incident investigations with systems like NIBIN; they also serve as a high-tech fail-safe, prohibiting unauthorized users from shooting a weapon. Finally, this provides a technical barrier that breaks the cycle of violence at its root, making the misuse of firearms a high-risk, low-reward enterprise.

4. Spatial Measures and Campaign Initiatives

This section reflects the implementation of Social Control Theory at the micro-level through numerous programs that operate as a social shield.

The “Five Precepts” and Alcohol-Free Village Projects are a project that get to the heart of what actually triggers violence by tackling alcohol—the single biggest driver of impulsive behavior and clouded judgment. By tapping into shared faith and local pacts, we create a natural, resilient form of social control. Ultimately, a community united by its own moral standards is far more effective than any law imposed from the outside, because true restraint has to come from within.

Contemplative Education (Jitta-Panya): Rather than simply teaching rules, this approach emphasizes emotional intelligence (EQ) and self-awareness. It provides individuals with internal tools for navigating disagreements and managing powerful emotions without resorting to violence.

Anti-Street Racing and Brawl Prevention Projects: Police-School-Family Partnerships: Programs aimed at curbing street racing and youth brawls work by strengthening the bond

between authorities, educators, and parents. The core objective is to dismantle the influence of Differential Association—the pull of deviant peer groups—which is often the primary driver of armed confrontations among adolescents.

Conclusion

Thailand is currently facing a critical crisis regarding firearm violence. According to the 2022 World Population Review, the nation ranked 15th globally in gun-related fatalities. (The Nation, 2023). Furthermore, Thailand holds the highest rate of civilian gun ownership in Southeast Asia, with approximately 10.3 million firearms in circulation. (Small Arms Survey, n.d.) Although the majority of violence is rooted in interpersonal conflict or the loss of face, there is a growing shift toward mass casualty events. This study highlights a change in the cultural perception of firearms, moving from self-protection to a “symbol of power” and dominance. For those with limited self-control, guns act as a “shortcut tool” for conflict resolution. This trend is especially common among young people who adopt a “gun culture” via social media and peers, where violence is seen as a way to gain social status. To truly reform our firearm policies, we need to address four key areas:

1. Reforming the Gatekeeping System

Lifelong permits must give way to a system where licenses genuinely expire and owners must submit to ongoing mental health assessments. Simultaneously, we need to repair the administrative gaps in the “Welfare Gun” program, which has been neglected for far too long due to lax oversight.

2. Raising the Cost of Crime

Introducing income-based fines is a key component in changing our legal punishments such that the “cost” of breaking the law is always greater than any apparent “benefit”. This guarantees that everyone, regardless of their financial situation, is truly deterred by the law, resulting in a more equitable judicial system.

3. Using Technology as a Barrier

Technology has the ability to effectively deter crime. We can make it far more difficult for criminals to operate by using technologies such as ballistic tracking and smart guns. These

steps will turn firearms from easily concealable weapons into deadly assets that are considerably more difficult to abuse.

4. Building a “Social Shield”

Finally, we must look at the root causes within our communities and schools. We need to build a social shield by using Contemplative Education to help people develop better emotional intelligence. By strengthening the bond between home, temple, school, and the community, we can start to dismantle the toxic subcultures that glamorize violence among our youth.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the research team proposes a two-phase framework for firearm policy reform as follows:

1. Short-term Policy: Immediate Regulatory Measures

Controlling Supply and Eliminating the Black Market: We must aggressively enforce the “One Person, One Gun” regulation to limit individual ownership. This must be combined with a nationwide amnesty program aimed at buying back and permanently removing unregistered guns from the street.

Overhauling the Welfare Gun Program: The scale of these programs should be limited to genuine necessity. Access must be restricted to those who don’t already own a gun, or whose current weapon is beyond repair—in which case, the old one must be handed back to the state before buying a new one. These firearms should not be transmitted, save through legitimate succession.

Modernizing Registration for Real-Time Tracking: It’s time to upgrade our national database to allow for real-time monitoring of every firearm’s status. This proactive approach will help block illegal transfers and make it much easier for authorities to track down offenders.

Media Accountability and Social Awareness: We should launch nationwide initiatives to change the public’s perception, demonstrating that a gun is a “last resort” for defense rather than a quick fix for emotional outbursts. These stories need to take into account the actual traumas that gun violence inflicts on the families of both perpetrators and victims.

2. Long-term Policy: Structural and Legislative Reform

Reform of the 1947 Firearms Act: Our current 1947 legislation is long overdue for a major update to meet modern global standards. The focus of this reform should be on tightening the screening process and introducing mandatory expiration dates for all gun licenses. More importantly, the Act needs its own set of non-negotiable penalties. By making the legal “cost” of violations high enough, we can create a genuine deterrent that doesn’t rely on the standard leniency found in our general Criminal Code.

Centralizing Control & Cyber Enforcement: To manage the entire lifecycle of a weapon—from the moment it’s imported to the day it’s licensed—we need a centralized, independent National Firearm Control Center. To keep things transparent and free from political interference or discretionary abuse, this agency should be run by a multi-sectoral board. At the same time, we must empower a specialized Cyber Police unit. By hiring non-commissioned IT experts for proactive surveillance, they can effectively shut down illegal online sales, homemade gun workshops, and any content that fuels violence.

Financial Crackdown Measures: To really hit traffickers where it hurts, we need to list illegal firearm trade as a “predicate offense” under the Anti-Money Laundering Act (AMLO). This change is a game-changer for enforcement—it allows authorities to go beyond just the weapons and start seizing assets. By freezing their bank accounts and tracking their money, we can effectively cut off the financial lifelines that keep these criminal networks alive.

Building a Culture of Peace and Legal Literacy: In the long run, we have to move toward prevention through education. This means teaching the next generation how to resolve conflicts peacefully while making sure the public actually understands the laws on self-defense. By providing clear, consistent legal knowledge, we can build a kind of “social immunity” that slowly dismantles the culture of violence from the inside out.

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