



CANADIAN FEDERATION
OF NURSES UNIONS
LA FÉDÉRATION CANADIENNE
DES SYNDICATS D'INFIRMIÈRES
ET INFIRMIERS

POSITION STATEMENT

Gun Control

OVERVIEW

Since 1991, the CFNU has been advocating for a public health approach to gun control, working with other stakeholders to ensure that any related legislation focuses on public safety in both urban and rural settings, on our streets and in our homes. Given the health impacts of gun violence, and its long-term costs to our health care system, gun control forms an important plank of a public health policy.

Most Canadians – both rural and urban – recognize the problem and support action: 88% support strict screening and licensing; 80% want to track gun sales and control the illegal trade; and 62% want severe restrictions on access to handguns. Further, Canadians are concerned about the availability of military-style assault weapons: 83% want these guns properly classified and prohibited.¹

While many people associate gun violence with hand guns, largely due to the media's focus on urban gang violence, in Canada gun deaths are most likely to be suicides. Firearms are also widely implicated in domestic violence. The fact remains that the ready availability of firearms makes it likelier that violence will occur and that intimate partner violence or suicides will be fatal. In suicides and domestic violence, the firearms of choice are long guns, rather than handguns.

The majority of firearms in Canada are long guns (rifles and shotguns). Of the 7,861,902 firearms registered in Canada in 2011, 91% were rifles or shotguns (531,735 were restricted, and another 197,024 were prohibited).² However, the number of restricted weapons in Canada has risen steadily since 2011 to 839,295. Many of these restricted weapons are handguns. Licenses for restricted firearms are most commonly obtained for target practice or target shooting competitions or as part of a collection (in limited circumstances, they are also permitted in connection with one's profession). The number of prohibited firearms in Canada, such as fully automatic guns, is 183,333, making the combined total for restricted and prohibited weapons over 1 million.³ With the dismantling of the long-gun registry in every province, except Quebec, it is impossible to know how many long guns are now in circulation in Canada.

In terms of the number of households with guns, the most recent estimates, based on a 2002 survey data, suggest 17% of Canadian households own a gun. While individual gun-owners had a mean ownership rate of 3.22 guns, the top 3% of firearms owners owned 15% of all guns (with 15.5 guns per owner on average among this cohort).⁴

From 2008 to 2015, 5,888 Canadians died from firearms, including both accidental and intentional deaths (suicides and homicides).⁵ When considering data absent of the U.S., comparing Canada to EU countries, Canada ranked fourth in firearm mortality, suggesting that Canada has a significant problem with gun violence.⁶

After years of decline, due to the implementation of progressive legislation, firearm-related criminal violence has been on the upswing since 2013. Immediately following dismantling of the long-gun registry in 2012, from 2013 to 2016, the proportion of homicides involving firearms increased by 13%. In 2016 alone, there were 7,000 victims of gun-related crimes in Canada, and the majority (60%) of these incidents involved handguns, many of which were sourced domestically.⁷

The increasing presence of guns poses a threat to nurses working on the front lines of health care, particularly in emergency departments. For example, from January 2016 to November 2016, 61 incidents of violence and threats were reported in Nova Scotia emergency departments. One of those incidents in an emergency room in Middleton, Nova Scotia, in October 2016 involved a man who entered the hospital through emergency, twice in one day, threatening staff with weapons.⁸ In January 2017 a man killed himself in front of nurses in a West Kootenay hospital emergency room in B.C.⁹ In October 2017 there was a woman shot dead in the emergency ward in Coburg, Ontario.¹⁰

Intimate Partner Violence

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is the most common form of violence against women in Canada. In 2016 there were 93,000 victims of intimate partner violence, and the vast majority were women (79%); there were 81 intimate partner homicides in Canada (63 were female).¹¹ A Canadian report on family violence with data from 2001 to 2011 found that shooting was the most common cause of death in spousal murder-suicides.¹² Research shows that the perpetrator's access to a firearm is a risk factor for fatal IPV.¹³ A tragedy which took place in rural Nova Scotia in January 2017 has brought this issue home for nurses and veterans alike: Afghan veteran Lionel Desmond, who was suffering from PTSD, shot his wife Shanna, 31, a nurse, their 10-year-old daughter Aaliyah and his 52-year-old mother Brenda, before turning the gun on himself.¹⁴

Suicide

In Canada about 80% of firearm-related deaths are suicides. In contrast with the prevailing situation in the United States, where handguns are more commonly used in suicide attempts, when a firearm is used in a suicide attempt in Canada, it generally tends to be a long gun.¹⁵ Men are much more likely to use guns in suicide attempts than women.¹⁶ Suicide in Canada, as in most countries, is a gendered phenomenon: Since the 1950s, Canada's suicide rates for males have been at least three times higher than for females.¹⁷ Suicide, in particular among middle-aged men, has been described as a hidden epidemic with significant implications for public health. There is a strong positive correlation between the availability of a firearm in the home and the risk of completed suicide. For example, a 2014 meta-analysis analyzed the relationship between access to a firearm in the home and the risk of suicide for family members, and concluded: "Access to firearms is associated with risk for completed suicide."¹⁸ More than 5,500 Canadians shot and killed themselves between 2003 and 2012. In the Americas, Canada ranks fourth out of 35 countries in terms of suicides by guns, with a rate of firearms-related suicides 12 times that of Wales and England.^{19 20}

Unintentional Injuries

A 2017 Canadian study in *CMAJ* counted 1,800 firearms-related injuries among children and youth in Ontario over a five-year period, amounting to almost one injury per day. The vast majority of these injuries were unintentional.²¹

Homicides

In 2016, for the third consecutive year, there was an increase in both the number and rate of firearm-related homicides in Canada. In 2016, there were 223 firearm-related homicides reported, 44 more than the previous year.²² 54% of firearm-related homicides were related to gang activity, with the greatest increases in gang crime experienced in Toronto and Vancouver. More than 50% of homicides involved the use of handguns.²³

LEGISLATIVE BACKGROUND²⁴

Firearm-related injury and death are a significant public health and safety issue, and gun control is a mechanism for prevention. Tighter gun control restrictions, as enacted through legislation, were a response to the December 6, 1989, Montreal Massacre in which 14 women were gunned down in a mass shooting at the École Polytechnique. This shooting, the worst massacre in Canadian history, in which women engineering students were specifically targeted, galvanized Canadians – and women in particular – to lobby for greater gun control. In 1991, December 6 was designated as the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence against Women in Canada.

Beginning in 1991, in response to the growing pressure to tighten controls on firearms, the Canadian government passed a number of bills to restrict access to guns. Changes in 1991 included requiring Firearms Certificate applicants to provide a photograph and two references; imposing a mandatory 28-day waiting period; a mandatory requirement for safety training; and expanding the application form to provide more background information. The bill also required a more detailed screening check of applicants. In addition, there were increased penalties for firearm-related crimes; new *Criminal Code* offences; new definitions for prohibited and restricted weapons; new regulations for firearms dealers; and clearly defined regulations for the safe storage, handling and transportation of firearms. A major focus of the new legislation was the need for controls on military, para-military and high-firepower guns.

However, the 1991 law did not address many of the concerns raised by public safety organizations, following the Montreal Massacre. In particular, concerns focused on gaps in the controls over firearms owners. The Firearms Acquisition Certificate (FAC) was required only to obtain guns, not to possess guns, and only 1/3 of guns owners had valid FACs. The Coalition for Gun Control, an alliance of more than 350 organizations, including the CFNU, women's groups, the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police, the Canadian Public Health Association, the Canadian Bar Association and the Canadian Criminal Justice Association, encouraged the federal government to further tighten gun control. This public pressure, coupled with the results of a series of inquests recommending the licensing of all firearm owners and the registration of all firearms, led to further government action in 1995.

In 1995, the government tabled legislation to establish a new licensing system to replace the existing system. Licences would be required to possess and acquire firearms, to buy ammunition, and registration would be required for all firearms, including shotguns and rifles (handguns have required registration since 1969). These changes were

gradually put into place between 2001 and 2003, amid growing opposition. Firearms businesses were also required to have a valid business licence and registration certificate for all firearms in their inventory.

The effects of changes in legislation were evident: from 1995, when the firearms registry became law, to 2010, there was a 41% reduction in homicides by long guns. The decrease in homicides using long guns, when compared to 1991, was even greater: minus 65%. In 2010, Statistics Canada reported that the total homicide rate had fallen to its lowest level since 1966 (1.62 per 100,000 population).²⁵

Despite the apparent success of the legislation in achieving its goals, in 2012, legislation to end the long-gun registry passed. The registration of long guns had long been a sticking point, with a minority of owners arguing that it criminalized gun ownership when handguns (which still required registration and licensing) were most represented in crime statistics. The bill amended the *Criminal Code* and the *Firearms Act* to remove the requirement to register non-restricted firearms, ordered the destruction of existing registration records and allowed the transferor of a non-restricted firearm to obtain confirmation of the validity of a transferee's firearms acquisition licence prior to the transfer being finalized. Notably, the government failed to reintroduce the controls on sales put in place in 1977, making Canada's controls on gun sales weaker than in the U.S.²⁶

The Government of Quebec filed a court challenge, and as a result of court action, non-restricted firearms registration records for the province of Quebec were retained, and Quebec residents continue to register non-restricted firearms. All non-restricted firearms registration records, except for Quebec, were destroyed.

In 2015, classroom participation in firearms safety courses became mandatory for first-time licence applicants; *Criminal Code* provisions were strengthened with respect to orders prohibiting the possession of firearms when a person is convicted of an offence involving domestic violence; and the Governor in Council was prescribed with the authority to determine if firearms are non-restricted or restricted.

With an increase in the number of guns available in the U.S., and firearms crime rising for the first time in years, police in urban centres are expressing their concerns. With the intent of addressing these concerns, the Government of Canada introduced legislation in March 2018,²⁷ which provides for:

- Enhanced background checks on those seeking to acquire firearms – by eliminating the existing provision that focuses those checks primarily on just the five years immediately preceding a licence application;
- Enhanced usefulness of those background checks and the effectiveness of the existing licensing system – by requiring that whenever a non-restricted firearm is transferred, the buyer must produce his/her firearms licence, and the vendor must verify that it is valid;
- Standardizing existing best practices among commercial retailers to maintain adequate records of their inventories and sales, which would be accessible to police officers on reasonable grounds and with judicial authorization, as appropriate;
- Ensuring the impartial, professional, accurate and consistent classification of firearms as either "non-restricted," "restricted" or "prohibited" – by restoring a system in which Parliament defines the classes but entrusts experts in the RCMP to classify firearms, without political influence;
- Bolstering community safety in relation to restricted and prohibited firearms (mostly handguns and assault weapons) – by requiring specific transportation authorizations to be obtained whenever restricted or prohibited guns are moved through the community, except between a residence and an approved shooting range.

POSITION

In 2010, the CFNU passed a resolution against the weakening of Canada's gun control laws, which recognized that:

- Over 90% of CFNU members are women; therefore, gun control is a women's issue as it reduces the risk of spousal and family homicide, intimidation and injury. Further, it reduces the risk of suicide (most often by men). Health promotion is a key role of nurses in primary care. Gun control is a public health issue because it helps to prevent injury and death. It can therefore be likened to other injury and death prevention policies such as seatbelts or hockey helmets.

The evidence shows that:

- Access and availability of guns increases the risk of both unintentional and intentional injuries and death;
- Access to guns increases the risk of fatalities and serious injuries in suicides;
- Access to guns poses a significant risk for victims of intimate partner violence;
- Access to guns poses a risk of unintentional injuries to children and youth;
- Access to guns poses a potential risk to health care providers;
- Firearm injuries represent a significant cost to our health care system: estimated at \$435,000 per gun-shot wound (2011).²⁸

Therefore, in light of the federal government's introduction of Bill C-71, *An Act to amend certain Acts and Regulations in relation to firearms*, the CFNU recommends a public health approach to gun control, focused on ensuring public safety, and recognizing the gendered nature of firearms-related deaths in domestic violence and suicide, and the high potential for accidental deaths, especially among children. The CFNU supports the following measures:

- Enhanced background checks beyond the current five-year legislated period, which take into account criminal, mental health, addiction and domestic violence records;
- A requirement that whenever a non-restricted firearm is transferred, the buyer's firearms licence must be produced and verified as valid by the vendor;
- Entrusting the RCMP experts to classify firearms, free from political influence;
- When considering grounds for prohibited access to weapons and public safety, including the public health risk consideration which can be summarized in the question: Is the person a threat to themselves or others?
- Accounting for the gendered nature of firearms-related deaths by launching a national awareness program to highlight the risks of firearms in unintentional injuries/deaths, suicide, homicide and domestic violence;
- Ensuring that those with risk factors for domestic violence/a history of domestic violence are prohibited from owning a firearm;
- Funding evidence-based gang prevention initiatives in communities at high risk for gang involvement;
- Restoring controls on sales of rifles and shotguns that were in place in 1977, which required the licensed firearms dealer to record the Firearms Acquisition Certificate (now License) number, make, model and serial number of firearms;
- Ensuring the controls on handguns (restricted and prohibited weapons) are reinstated through restoring strict issuance of the authorizations to transport;
- Ensuring that owners of multiple firearms (citizens and dealers) are subject to higher levels of scrutiny, given the risks of diversion;
- Greater restrictions on military-style assault rifles and large-capacity magazines;

- Empowering the Public Health Agency of Canada to collect detailed data analysis of firearms deaths, injuries and crimes to support research, education and policies, and to provide public transparency on the real impacts of firearms and the risks of firearms, alongside mandatory reporting of firearms injuries;
- Providing education/awareness to public health providers to identify firearms as a potential risk to patients;
- Improving access to mental health services, and access and supports for domestic violence victims;
- Undertaking risk assessments for safety and security in emergency departments, and appropriate measures to keep patients and providers safe;
- Considering adopting elements of Quebec's Anastasia's law,²⁹ including the requirement that physicians and other professionals report cases where individuals are deemed to be a threat to themselves or others.

References

- ¹ Coalition for Gun Control. (March 20, 2018). Federal Government Takes Important First Step with New Federal Gun Regulations but Stronger Measures Still Needed (press release). Retrieved from <http://guncontrol.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Reaction-to-federal-firearm-legislation-introduced-March-20-2018.pdf>
- ² RCMP. (2011). *Commissioner of Firearms 2011 Report: The RCMP Canadian Firearms Program*. Ottawa: RCMP.
- ³ Thompson, E. (2017). More than a million restricted, prohibited guns in Canada. *CBC News*. May 25, 2017. Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/guns-firearms-restricted-canada-1.4129994>
- ⁴ Austin, K. Lane, M. (2018). The prevention of firearm injuries in Canadian youth: Position Statement. Canadian Paediatrics Society. *Paediatrics & Child Health*, 2018, 35–42. doi: 10.1093/pch/pxx164
- ⁵ CANSIM Table 102-0551. Statistics Canada. (2015). Deaths and mortality rate, by selected grouped causes, age group and sex, Canada. Retrieved from <http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/cansim/a26?lang=eng&id=1020551>.
- ⁶ Overton, I. (2016). Opinion: Canada has a gun problem. *Globe and Mail*. March 16, 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/why-canada-has-a-gun-problem/article29642837/>
- ⁷ Leblanc, D. (2018). Goodale vows to toughen Canada's gun-licence screening. *Globe and Mail*. March 7, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/public-safety-minister-vows-to-toughen-gun-licence-screening-in-canada/article38246723/>
- ⁸ Gorman, M. (2017). Report calls for safety and security assessments of all community ERs. *CBC News*. January 20, 2017. Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/health-care-emergency-departments-risk-safety-assessments-1.3944918>
- ⁹ Baker, P. (2017). West Kootenay hospital staff left reeling after man shoots himself in emergency room. *Global News*. January 13, 2017. <https://globalnews.ca/news/3180589/west-kootenay-hospital-staff-left-reeling-after-man-shoots-himself-in-emergency-room/>
- ¹⁰ Farooqi, S. (2017). Man killed in colbourg hospital shooting. *Toronto Star*. October 28, 2017. <https://www.thestar.com/news/crime/2017/10/28/man-killed-in-cobourg-hospital-shooting.html>
- ¹¹ Burczycka, M. (2016). Family violence in Canada: a statistical profile, 2016. Statistics Canada. Retrieved from <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-002-x/2018001/article/54893/03-eng.htm>
- ¹² Sinha, M. (2013). *Family violence in Canada: a statistical profile, 2011*. Statistics Canada. Juristat Article, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics. Retrieved from <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/85-002-x/2013001/article/11805-eng.pdf?st=J1nuvo0a>
- ¹³ Coalition for Gun Control website. (n.d.). The case for gun control reducing domestic violence. Retrieved from http://guncontrol.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/domestic_hom.pdf
- ¹⁴ Bundale, B. (2017). *Canadian Press*. December 28, 2017. Retrieved from http://www.pentictonherald.ca/news/national_news/article_2d2dd4e7-4e74-57af-b0cc-ac4dfc873b23.html
- ¹⁵ Justice Canada. (n.d.). *Firearms, Accidental Deaths, Suicides and Violent Crime: An Updated Review of the Literature with Special Reference to the Canadian Situation*. Retrieved from http://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/csj-sjc/jsp-sjp/wd98_4-dt98_4/p4.html
- ¹⁶ Navaneelan, T. (2009). Suicide Rates: an Overview. *Statistics Canada*. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/82-624-x/2012001/article/11696-eng.htm>
- ¹⁷ Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention. (2009). *The CASP Blueprint for a Canadian National Suicide Prevention Strategy*. Retrieved from <https://suicideprevention.ca/resources/Documents/SuicidePreventionBlueprint0909.pdf>
- ¹⁸ Anglemyer, A., Horvath, T. MA, Rutherford, G. (2014). The Accessibility of Firearms and Risk for Suicide and Homicide Victimization Among Household Members: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis. *Ann Intern Med*. 2014;160(2):101-110. DOI: 10.7326/M13-1301
- ¹⁹ Overton, I. (2016). Opinion: Canada has a gun problem. *Globe and Mail*. March 16, 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/why-canada-has-a-gun-problem/article29642837/>
- ²⁰ CBC. (2017). Canada has a gun problem. *The Current*. November, 8, 2017. Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/the-current-for-november-8-2017-1.4391372/canada-has-a-gun-problem-says-firearms-author-1.4391385>

-
- ²¹ Natasha R. Saunders, Hannah Lee, Alison Macpherson, Jun Guan and Astrid Guttmann. (2017). Risk of firearm injuries among children and youth of immigrant families. *CMAJ* March 27, 2017 189 (12) E452-E458; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1503/cmaj.160850>
- ²² CANSIM Table 253-0002. Statistics Canada. (2016). Homicide survey, primary methods used to commit homicide, Canada. November 22, 2017. Retrieved from <http://www5.statcan.gc.ca/cansim/a26?lang=eng&id=2530002>
- ²³ Statistics Canada. (November 22, 2017). *The Daily*: Homicide in Canada, 2016. Retrieved from <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/171122/dq171122b-eng.htm>
- ²⁴ RCMP. History of Firearms Control in Canada: Up to and Including the Firearms Act. Retrieved from <http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/cfp-pcaf/pol-leg/hist/con-eng.htm>
- ²⁵ CBC News. (2011). Scrapping the long-gun registry: some relevant numbers. October 26, 2011. Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/scrapping-the-long-gun-registry-some-relevant-numbers-1.861912>
- ²⁶ Coalition for Gun Control. (March 20, 2018). Federal Government Takes Important First Step with New Federal Gun Regulations but Stronger Measures Still Needed (press release). Retrieved from <http://guncontrol.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Reaction-to-federal-firearm-legislation-introduced-March-20-2018.pdf>
- ²⁷ Government of Canada. (March 20, 2018). Firearms Legislation to Make Communities Safer (press release). Retrieved from <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-safety-canada/news/2018/03/firearms-legislation-to-make-communities-safer.html>
- ²⁸ Note based on: Miller, TR. (1995). Costs associated with gunshot wounds in Canada in 1991. *CMAJ* November 01, 1995 153 (9) 1261-1268. Estimate that in 1991 the total cost associated with gunshot wounds was \$6.6 billion. The cost per survivor admitted to hospital was approximately \$300,000. That number was adjusted for inflation to provide an estimate for 2011: CBC News. October 26, 2011. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/scrapping-the-long-gun-registry-some-relevant-numbers-1.861912>
- ²⁹ Assemblée Nationale. Projet de loi no 9 (2007, chapitre 30) Loi visant à favoriser la protection des personnes à l'égard d'une activité impliquant des armes à feu et modifiant la Loi sur la sécurité dans les sports. Retrieved from www2.publicationsduquebec.gouv.qc.ca/dynamicSearch/telecharge.php?type=5&file=2007C30F.PDF