

# GUN CONTROL AND THE LONG GUN REGISTRY

## STATEMENT FROM CANADIAN HEALTH ORGANIZATIONS

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### **Firearms Control and Injury Prevention: The gun registry is a good investment**

The recent discussion surrounding gun control has tended to focus on the problems of urban violence, gangs, and handguns. This however ignores the fact that most firearm deaths in Canada are suicides and the guns most often used are rifles and shotguns.

Over the years, members of the health community have fought for stronger controls on firearms because of the staggering burden of preventable gun death and injury: almost 1400 Canadians died of gunshots in 1991, close to half the number killed in automobile crashes. The vast majority of firearm deaths in Canada are not gang related but occur when an ordinary citizen becomes suicidal or violent, often under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or during a personal crisis such as marital breakdown or job loss. When firearms are available, domestic homicides are more likely to involve multiple victims and end in suicide.

While it is true that there are more guns in rural areas, and therefore more opposition to gun control, it is equally true that there are higher rates of gun deaths in rural communities and western provinces. The Yukon, a hotbed of opposition to gun control, has a firearm death rate that is three times the national average. In fact, in spite of all the focus on urban criminal gangs, police officers are most at risk in rural communities.

#### **Positive impact of the law**

We are therefore encouraged to see positive results since the latest waves of legislative reforms. In 2005, there were 818 firearms related deaths in Canada. This represents an astonishing decrease of 43% of all gun deaths since 1991<sup>1</sup>.

Not surprisingly, the areas where we have seen the greatest progress are in the deaths associated with rifles and shotguns — weapons that have been subject to most of the new measure (handguns have been registered since the 1930s). For example, most cases of suicides with firearms among 15-35 years olds involve firearms that were easily accessible in the home. These have decreased by 64% in nine years (from 329 in 1995 to 121 in 2005)<sup>2</sup> with no evidence of substitution with other methods.<sup>3</sup> Along with murders committed by rifles and shotguns, murders of women with firearms as well as lethal gun-related accidents (most of which involve long guns) have declined more rapidly than other types of fatal injuries. In contrast, homicides with handguns, fuelled in part by the illegal trade, have remained relatively stable.

#### **Stronger measures work**

This impressive reduction in gun deaths is no doubt due to stronger gun control measures. For one, screening and renewable licenses for gun ownership reduce the risk that dangerous or suicidal people will get access to firearms. To date more than 2 million gun owners have been licensed. Licensing — and frequently renewing the licences — is a critical component to assessing potential risks. In fact, there have been 22,523 licenses refused or revoked between 1999 and 2008 from individuals deemed a potential risk to themselves or to others<sup>4</sup>.

Licensing and registration work hand in hand to keep legal guns in the hands of legal gun owners. Because it allows guns to be traced back to their last legal owner, registration helps prevent illegal sales or straw purchases to unlicensed (and potentially dangerous) individuals. Licensed gun owners are also

more likely to safely store their firearms if they know their name is attached to each gun. Studies have shown that in the US, states with both licensing and registration (versus one or the other) had fewer guns diverted from legal to illegal markets.<sup>5</sup> It also helps police with the temporarily removal of firearms in households where there may be a risk for suicide or violence. This is why the Supreme Court maintained that the registration component is critical to enforcing licensing provisions and cannot be severed from the system<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, registration is a one time only gesture. The 7 million guns which have been registered do not have to be registered again unless they are traded or sold.

### Worthy investment

The opponents of the registry have deliberately misrepresented the costs. It is true, too much money was spent setting up the system. But at this point the savings that would be obtained from dismantling the registry are less than \$3 million a year. This is a trivial amount considering that the system is used by police thousands of times each day. This small investment is dwarfed by economic benefits of reducing gun death and injury, estimated at nearly \$1.4 billion annually.<sup>7</sup>

### Prevention is a priority

Health organizations have fought to pass improvements to the law in 1991 as well as in 1995.<sup>8</sup> Scientific research shows that progressive controls on firearms have resulted in a reduction in firearm death and injury. Canada's law has been cited as a model of effective legislation worldwide, particularly in combating violence against women. It is also consistent with global norms including the recently announced European Firearms Directive which establishes uniform standards for all European Union countries and includes the registration of all firearms.

As health professionals, we know the importance of investing in prevention, whether in road safety or prevention of infectious diseases. It is true that one cannot easily measure prevention, but we can certainly measure the effects of ignoring it. Six different coroner's inquests recommended the licensing of gun owners and registration of all firearms. Indeed, our daily practice informs us of the very real risks associated with firearms and of the value of a strong gun control law.

That is why we must speak out against Bill C-391, the private member's bill currently before the House of Commons which aims to abolish the long gun registry.

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- <sup>1</sup> **Department of Justice**, "Firearms Statistics Updated Table," 2006; Statistics Canada, "Mortality, Summary list of Cause 2005", March 2009.
- <sup>2</sup> **Department of Justice**, "Firearms Statistics Updated Table," 2006; Statistics Canada, "Mortality, Summary list of Cause 2005", March 2009.
- <sup>3</sup> **Department of Justice**, "Firearms Statistics Updated Table," 2006; Statistics Canada, "Mortality, Summary list of Cause 2005", March 2009.
- <sup>4</sup> **Canada Firearms Center**, "2007 Commissioner Report," 2008; **Canada Firearms Centre**, "Facts and Figures Canadian Firearms Program October-December 2008," January 2009
- <sup>5</sup> **Webster DW**, Vernick JS, Hepburn LM. "Relationship between licensing, registration, and other gun sales laws and the source state of crime guns." *Inj Prev* 2001;7(3):184-9. <http://injuryprevention.bmj.com/content/7/3/184.full>
- <sup>6</sup> **Supreme Court of Canada**, *Firearms Act* (Can.), [2000] 1 S.C.R. 783, " The registration provisions cannot be severed from the rest of the Act. The licensing provisions require everyone who possesses a gun to be licensed; the registration provisions require all guns to be registered. These portions of the *Firearms Act* are both tightly linked to Parliament's goal of promoting safety by reducing the misuse of any and all firearms. Both portions are integral and necessary to the operation of the scheme. » <http://csc.lexum.umontreal.ca/en/2000/2000scc31/2000scc31.html>
- <sup>7</sup> **Graduate Institute for International Studies** Geneva. *Small Arms Survey* 2006. Oxford University Press, USA; Revised edition (August 3, 2006)
- <sup>8</sup> Recent support for the Firearms Act include: "Reasonable control: gun registration in Canada," **Canadian Medical Association Journal** (CMAJ) 168 (4), February 18 2003; **Canadian Association of Emergency Physicians**, "CAEP Position Statement on Gun Control", *CJEM* 2009;11(1):64-72, January 2009; **Canadian Association for Adolescent Health**, "Letter to Prime Minister Stephen Harper", March 18 2009; **Association pour la santé publique du Québec** " La sécurité des Canadiens menacée : la Loi canadienne sur le contrôle des armes à feu en péril," Press Release, October 30, 2009; **Directrices et Directeurs régionaux de santé publique du Québec**, "Énoncé de principes de la santé publique du Québec au regard du contrôle des armes à feu," October 2009; **Canadian Association of Emergency Physicians**, "Canadian Emergency Physicians opposed to repealing the Long-Gun Registry," Press Release November 9, 2009.