

Gun control vital part of strategy to address violence

Every illegal gun was once legal, so registry helps police track weapons

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Gun control saves lives.

For the past 40 years, the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police (CACCP) has been at the forefront pressing for strong firearms control measures. Canada's police leaders have adopted 25 resolutions on firearms control, including support for the Firearms Act and registration of all firearms, in the interests of public and officer safety.

Where do guns come from? Every illegal gun was once legal. Handguns and assault weapons smuggled in from the United States certainly are part of the problem. We have seen escalating gun violence among rival gangs and the devastating results when legal guns are diverted to illegal markets and unlicensed users.

We need to be able to track firearms to enforce laws and combat the illegal gun trade in co-operation with other nations. Without the registry, Canadian police would no longer be able to trace unrestricted firearms and would become dependent upon police in other jurisdictions to establish the source of firearms and lay the evidentiary trail needed for prosecutions. This would undermine Canada's compliance with international agreements and facilitate the illegal importation of firearms.

The B.C. government commissioned "A Report on the Illegal Movement of Firearms in British Columbia." The 2008 report revealed that a substantial number of firearms recovered in crime were once legally owned in Canada. The report documents legal dealers importing guns legally and selling them illegally, and legal gun owners providing guns to unlicensed owners. It also highlights the problem of stolen guns, which by definition are in the hands of criminals.

The report also underscores that rifles and shotguns account for a substantial proportion of crime guns seized. Recently, police in Surrey seized more than 200 rifles and shotguns. In Toronto, a significant number of crime guns seized were once legally owned rifles or shotguns. Rifles and shotguns, many legally owned, are the weapons of choice in domestic violence, in suicide and in the murders of police officers in Canada.

Regrettably, no law or system is 100-per-cent foolproof. However, ensuring that all gun owners are screened and licences regularly renewed reduces the risk that people who are a threat to themselves or others will have access to firearms.

And the current computer-based system, which provides regular alerts if licensed gun owners come into conflict with the law, is not the only control mechanism in place. Screening processes are designed to identify risk factors not known to police and to keep information in the database current.

Registration of firearms is essential to the licensing process. When gun owners are held accountable for their firearms, they are less likely to sell or give them to unlicensed individuals. Registration assists police in knowing what firearms to look for when enforcing prohibition orders. Information about registered firearms found at the scene of a crime supports criminal investigations and convictions.

The registry has been instrumental in removing guns from potentially dangerous people. Shortly after the Dawson College shooting, police found threats from another man. The registry confirmed that there were guns in his home and police removed them quickly. Police across Canada use the firearms registry nearly 10,000 times daily during investigations and for preventive action.

Yes, rifles and shotguns are used less frequently in crime today than 15 years ago. Why? Inquests into several high-profile shootings recommended their licensing and registration. It would seem that these measures have paid off. The rates of firearm murders (particularly of women), robberies and suicides have all declined significantly with improvements to the legislation.

Rhetoric around the registry's cost obscures the reality that the money has been spent. To dismantle an effective system now would be a waste.

The costs going forward are largely associated with licensing of firearm owners. In 2006 the RCMP testified that eliminating rifle and shotgun registration would save less than \$3 million a year, roughly the cost of a couple of complex murder investigations.

The bottom line is that all firearms are potentially lethal. Gun control is a necessary part of an integrated strategy to address violence. The CACP is proud of Canada's international reputation as a country with effective gun-control legislation, and strenuously opposes any weakening of Canada's current firearms control regime. Lives depend on it.

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