

Police put at risk by decline in gun-license renewals

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OTTAWA -- The number of firearm owners who fail to renew their gun licences has steadily increased since the Harper government tabled legislation to scrap the federal long-gun registry.

Opposition critics and the Coalition for Gun Control in Canada say the problem has increased risk for frontline police officers and undermines public safety.

Despite an amnesty the Conservatives introduced to coax gun owners into licence renewals, the latest RCMP figures show the opposite occurred.

The rate of non-renewals climbed to 25.3 per cent of expired licences in the first three months of this year, compared with 14.1 per cent in 2005.

Cabinet began the amnesty in 2006 and extended it for another year last month, waiving licence fees and providing protection from liability under the Firearms Act and the Criminal Code for those who take steps to comply with the law.

But the government's mixed message over the last three years -- bringing in the amnesty along with legislation to dismantle the registry -- has confused gun owners and is eroding the integrity of the program, critics say.

"The real issue is that there is a dramatic inconsistency between what the government has filed, in terms of its rationale for the amnesty, and its political statements on the program," says Wendy Cukier, head of the Coalition for Gun Control.

A little-noticed RCMP report for 2007 on the Canada Firearms Centre contains positive information about the registry and its use by police that could surprise even diehard opponents.

The report includes a groundbreaking RCMP survey that found general duty police officers use the online version of the registry at a high rate to check for potential weapons while responding to trouble calls.

On average, 73 per cent of the officers said they log on to check for the presence of firearms en route.

The rate was even higher for officers trained to use the online registry -- 81 per cent of that group use it on calls.

A total of 408 officers with 56 police departments across Canada, representing large, small, urban, rural, federal, municipal and provincial police forces, responded to the survey.

The government tabled the report from RCMP Commissioner William Elliott in the House of Commons during Parliament's summer recess last August, while MPs were in their ridings or on vacation.

The report covers the 2007 calendar year to Dec. 31.

A departmental spokesman, to whom the office of Public Safety Minister Peter Van Loan referred all questions, did not respond to enquiries about the effect of the amnesty or the RCMP report.

Officers with the Canadian Police Association and the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police were unavailable to comment.

But a CPA spokesman said the group continues to support the registry.

And the association of chiefs last April published an opinion piece saying "the registry has been instrumental in removing guns from potentially dangerous people."

The high rate of police use of the online registry during service calls is central to a three-year battle over the amnesty between registry supporters and the Conservatives.

As more firearm owners opt out of the licensing and take the government on its word that it will dismantle the registry, the system becomes less dependable for police on call, critics note.

"The main objective of the Canadian Firearms Program is to enhance public safety," says the government's own argument in favour of using the amnesty to encourage licence renewals.

"This is achieved in part by maximizing the number of firearms owners who comply with the licensing and registration requirements set out in the Firearms Act and the Criminal Code."

Once registered and licensed, gun owners are subject to continuous screening as a condition of possessing a licence and owning firearms.

RCMP records show 24,234 firearm owners out of 171,133 whose licences were set to expire in 2005 did not renew them.

In 2008, the number of gun owners who did not renew their licences grew to 66,006 out of 309,161. For the first three months of 2009, non-renewals totalled 18,548 out of 73,261 set to expire.

Only 2,596 rifles and shotguns were deactivated or destroyed in 2007.

"It's a problem for that police officer, when he goes into that house," said New Democrat MP Joe Comartin. "The risk level has gone up dramatically."

Liberal MP Mark Holland says the renewal statistics demonstrate the government rationale for the amnesty is a "fraudulent argument."

He accused the Conservatives of attempting to satisfy both sides in the registry debate by continuing to table legislation to dismantle the system, while taking no steps to try to push the bill through Parliament. The government tabled its latest bill to disband the registry in the Senate, where it has been languishing without debate since last April 1.

The Canada Firearms Centre cost \$82.3 million in the 2007-2008 fiscal year, with \$15.7 million going toward the registry and continuing registration of firearms.