

REDUCING SUICIDE

Many people do not realize that the majority of gun deaths in Canada are suicide¹. More than one in five deaths among adults between the ages of 15 and 24 years is due to suicide.² Suicide prevention experts have emphasized the importance of strong gun laws in reducing the death rate. With stronger gun laws gun suicide rates and overall suicide rates have fallen particularly for youth.³ In 1995 (when the Firearms Act was introduced), 329 suicides by firearm were committed by young Canadians aged 15-34, compared to 124 in 2005, representing a 63% decrease.⁴ The rate of firearm suicide have dropped by 46% from 3.1 (per 100,000) in 1995 to 1.7 in 2005.⁵ In Quebec, we observed a 60% decrease; 343 suicides by firearm were committed in 1995, compared to 137 in 2007.⁶

The Problem

Suicide in Canada is a major public health problem. Suicide is the second leading cause of death among Canadian youth aged 15-24.⁷ Fatal injuries from suicidal behaviour closely follow motor vehicle collision injuries as the most likely cause of death for young Canadians.⁸ According to the Canada Safety Council, statistics from 1999, the highest proportion of completed suicides, 92%, was with a firearm. Reducing access to guns results in fewer suicides.⁹

Men are more likely than women to use firearms in suicide attempts and this accounts in part for the high rate of completed suicides.¹⁰ Since the 1950s, Canada's suicide rates for males have been at least three times higher than for females. In 2001, the rate of men who commit suicide was 3.5 times as high as the women rate.¹¹

Evidence indicates a correlation between the availability of firearms and firearm suicide rates; a home where there are firearms is five times more likely to be the scene of a suicide than a home without a gun.¹² A research has shown that the rate of suicide with firearms in Quebec has tended to vary with the rate of hunting licenses issued. In areas of the province where the number of firearm hunting licenses issued is high, the firearm suicide rate is also high.¹³ In rural Alberta, where the use of firearms is overrepresented, the rate of firearm suicide is twice that of urban region¹⁴. Therefore, reducing the availability of firearms would seem to be an important part of a suicide reduction strategy.

The Role of Firearms Legislation

Canada's Firearms Act (1995) requires every firearm owner in Canada to possess a firearm license. . Owners had until January 1, 2003 to register their firearms. The law reinforces the safe storage provisions which are intended to reduce gun theft and unauthorized access. Not only does the legislation provide improved screening for a license but it allows continuous eligibility checks. In other words, if an individual obtains a license and then exhibits behaviour which suggests that he may present a risk, there are mechanisms for flagging the license, revoking it and removing the firearms temporarily or permanently. The law also provides for the issuance of prohibition orders. 23,537 firearms licences have been refused or revoked by Chief Firearms Officers (CFO) for public safety reasons between 1999-2008.¹⁵

In 1993, the costs of firearm injury and death in Canada were estimated to be 6.6 billion dollars.¹⁶ However, recent studies suggest that these costs associated to firearm injuries and deaths have been reduced dramatically from \$4.6 billion in 1995 to \$3.3 billion in 2002 in part because of stronger firearms legislation.¹⁷

The registration provisions of the law are intended to reinforce the licensing and safe storage provisions, to facilitate enforcement and to reduce diversion to illegal markets.

There are a number of key elements to the effective implementation of the legislation:

- **Increasing awareness among individuals and group working towards preventing suicide.** This includes first and foremost police, but also physicians, social workers, educators, suicide prevention experts, counselors, occupational health and safety specialists, women's organizations etc. Preliminary consultation with these groups has suggested that there is uneven awareness of the risks associated with firearms as well as the tools which

may be used to remove firearms from individuals considered a risk. Professionals should be aware of the risks, screen for these risks and undertake appropriate interventions.

- **Ensuring parents and family understand the risks associated with firearms in the home**, particularly if there are individuals suffering from depression or other mental illness. Adolescent males represent a particular risk. Ideally firearms should be removed. As a minimum they must be safely stored. Impulsivity has been identified as a major factor in suicides involving youth and increasing barriers between them and firearms have been effective strategies.
- **Encouraging compliance with safe storage regulations to reduce unauthorized access to firearms.** Studies have shown that a large percentage of Canadians do not store their firearms securely; in 1994, 35% of survey participants who kept long guns in their homes had failed to comply with Canadian firearm storage regulations.¹⁸
- **Encouraging owners to rid themselves of unwanted or unneeded firearms** – surveys have shown that as many as 37% of firearm owners have not used their firearms in the previous year.¹⁹ Many of these individuals, when fully aware of the risks firearms pose in the home as well as the added responsibility and accountability contained in the legislation, may choose to rid themselves of these firearms. In 2008 and again in 2009, the municipality of Ville de Saguenay (QC) launched a campaign to encourage the gun owners of unused firearms to turn them in.²⁰

¹ Kwing Hung, "Firearms Statistics Updated Tables," January 2006

² Health Canada "Suicide Prevention It's Your Health" March 2009. Available: http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/alt_formats/pacrb-dgapcr/pdf/iyh-vsv/diseases-maladies/suicide-eng.pdf

³ Gagné, "L'effet des législations canadiennes entourant le contrôle des armes à feu sur les homicides et les suicides", M.Sc. Thesis, Université de Montréal. 2008

⁴ Kwing Hung, "Firearms Statistics Updated Tables," January 2006; Statistics Canada, Mortality, Summary List of Causes 2005, 2009.

⁵ Kwing Hung, "Firearms Statistics Updated Tables," January 2006; Statistics Canada, Mortality, Summary List of Causes 2005, 2009.

⁶ Kwing Hung, "Firearms Statistics Updated Tables," January 2006; Statistics Canada, Mortality, Summary List of Causes 2005, 2009; Bureau du Coroner du Québec

⁷ Statistics Canada, Mortality, Summary List of Causes 2005, 2009.

⁸ Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention, "The CASP Blueprint for a Canadian National Suicide Prevention Strategy" October 2004. Available: <http://casp-acps.ca/Publications/BlueprintFINAL.pdf>

⁹ Canada Safety Council, "Canada's Silent Tragedy" (Release January 6, 2004, updated September 2006), <http://archive.safety-council.org/info/community/suicide.html>

¹⁰ Health Canada "Suicide Prevention It's Your Health" March 2009. Available: http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/alt_formats/pacrb-dgapcr/pdf/iyh-vsv/diseases-maladies/suicide-eng.pdf

¹¹ Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention, "The CASP Blueprint for a Canadian National Suicide Prevention Strategy" October 2004. Available: <http://casp-acps.ca/Publications/BlueprintFINAL.pdf>

¹² Canada Safety Council, "Canada's Silent Tragedy" (Release January 6, 2004, updated September 2006), <http://archive.safety-council.org/info/community/suicide.html>

¹³ R. Simon et al., "Suicide and Firearms: Restricting Access in Canada" presented to the American Association of Suicidology (April 1996).

¹⁴ Government of Alberta. "2002 Annual Review, Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Alberta," 2003. http://justice.alberta.ca/programs_services/fatality/ocme/Annual%20Review/suicides_2002.aspx

¹⁵ "Facts and Figures (October-December 2009), Canadian Firearms Program". Available at : <http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/cfp-pcaf/facts-faits/index-eng.htm>. Accessed January 20, 2010.; RCMP-GRC, Commissioner of Firearms, 2008 Report. Table 3. Available at : <http://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/cfp-pcaf/rep-rap/2008-comm-rpt/2008-eng.pdf>

¹⁶ Miller, T.R. and Cohen MA Costs of gunshot and cut/stab wounds in the United States with some Canadian Comparisons, *accede. Anal. Prev.* 1997, 29: 329-41.

¹⁷ Small Arms Survey, Geneva, IIS, 2006.

¹⁸ M. Lavoie, L. Cardinal, A. Chapdelaine and D. St-Laurent, "The Storage of Household Long Guns: The Situation in Quebec," *Chronic Diseases in Canada* 22,1 (2001) http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/cdic-mcc/22-1/e_e.html

¹⁹ M. Lavoie, L. Cardinal, A. Chapdelaine and D. St-Laurent, "The Storage of Household Long Guns: The Situation in Quebec," *Chronic Diseases in Canada* 22,1 (2001) http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/cdic-mcc/22-1/e_e.html

²⁰ Ville de Saguenay. "Récupération d'armes à feu inutilisées"
http://www.ville.saguenay.qc.ca/citoyen/%C3%80+surveiller?lang=fr&idDetail=1717&description=a_surveiller