

Reasonable control: gun registration in Canada

Over the past decade in Canada, roughly 1200 people have been killed and another 1000 wounded, every year, by firearms.^{1,2} Gunshot wounds are the third leading cause of death among Canadians aged 15 to 24.² We rank fifth among industrialized nations in the incidence of firearm-related deaths in children under age 14.² The estimated cost of gun injuries and deaths in Canada is \$6 billion per year.³

Over the past 30 years most affluent countries, with the exception of the United States, have adopted national programs to control the ownership and use of guns by private citizens. In Canada this has included legislation in 1978 to license new gun acquisitions; additional requirements for owner screening and gun storage were introduced in 1991. Compulsory gun registration, which has been causing all the fuss lately, was written into the Firearms Act (Bill 68) in 1995, which also provided for the establishment of a centralized database. This legislation strengthened licensing provisions through further background and community checks, notification of current and former spouses of the acquisition, renewal of acquisition certificates every 5 years and other provisions. More power was given to firearms officers to investigate complaints and initiate the revocation of licences. As of Jan. 1, 2003, the deadline for registration, about 75% of owners had registered 5.8 million of an estimated 8 million unrestricted firearms.

The Auditor General's report that the registration system has been mismanaged by the federal government at a staggering cost to taxpayers has led to calls to dismantle it. This would be a serious mistake. Registration is a key part of the strategy to reduce mortality and morbidity resulting from the misuse of privately owned guns and the illegal trade in firearms.

Reason and evidence support this view. David Griffin, Executive Officer of the Canadian Police Association, stated in a presentation to the Standing Senate Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs⁴ that licensing and registration of firearms "discourages casual gun ownership" and "has been effective in preventing people who should not have guns from getting them." As a result of the legislation, Griffin reported that "tens of thousands" of "unwanted, unused and unnecessary" firearms had been turned in to police.

Eighty percent of firearms deaths arise from suicide; 15% are homicides and 4% are classified as "accidents." It

is both common sense and a long-standing public health strategy to reduce this toll by controlling access to guns, especially by anyone likely to use them irrationally or with criminal intent.

What the registry adds to gun control is that it links the firearm to the owner. Because the registry makes the owner responsible for specific guns, he or she is more likely to store them safely. This reduces the chances that children, people suffering from mental illness or addicted to drugs or alcohol, or people involved in personal disputes will use a firearm. It also reduces the chance of theft. Stolen guns are increasingly traded for drugs or sold to illegal international arms traders.⁵ Jurisdictions with licensing, registration and other controls report that fewer guns are available to criminals.⁶ Registration also provides police with the information needed to enforce firearm prohibition orders and to recognize risks in volatile situations such as domestic violence.

There will never be undisputed evidence that a law or public policy has achieved, by itself, the desired effect. But most citizens, even if they disagree with a law, will abide by it. Our gun-control legislation has encouraged owners to construct safe storage places for their guns, to buy and sell them legally and to register them. Also, importantly, laws are an expression of societal values; in this case, they serve to educate the public about the risks inherent in gun access and to reinforce the ideal of public safety above the privilege of private ownership. We encourage the federal government to stick with the gun registration program and get the job done. — CMAJ

References

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