



Gun Violence and Public Safety in Canada

The National Police Federation (NPF) supports an evidence-based approach to advancing public safety and the prevention of gun violence in Canada. To this end, we strongly advocate for government to implement appropriate enforcement strategies, best use of available resources, legal and legislative reforms, accountability in judicial actions, and proper management of financial resources to achieve and enhance public safety.



Background

While Canada has long prided itself as a non-violent, safe, and inclusive country, illegal guns and shootings are on the rise, resulting in loss of life and injuries for innocent Canadians, and decreased safety in many regions and communities.

- Canada shares the world’s longest undefended border with the world’s largest manufacturer of small arms: The United States. In 2019 alone, 2,242 illegally sold guns used in crimes in Canada were traced back to manufacturers in the United States.ⁱ In April 2020, 22 people including RCMP Constable Heidi Stephenson lost their lives in a tragic mass shooting in which all firearms used were illegally obtained. Of the four firearms used, three were obtained illegally from the United States,ⁱⁱ and the gunman did not have a Possession and Acquisition firearms license, making his possession of any firearm illegal.
- Canada reported 678 homicides in 2019, 261 (38 per cent) of which were gun-related fatal shootings. Homicides, including shootings, rose in Canada between 2013 and 2017.ⁱⁱⁱ Notably, city centres, such as Toronto, are experiencing dramatic increases in firearms-related homicides.
- Homicides linked to organized crime or gangs have also risen. In 2015, 16 per cent of homicide victims were linked to organized crime or gangs, and this number rose to its second highest rate (24 per cent) in 2019. In addition, in 2014, 52 per cent of shooting homicides were linked to organized crime or gangs.^{iv} Finally, almost one in four total homicides were related to gang activity in 2019.^v
- In the last decade, handguns have been the primary firearm used in gun-related homicides. In 2019, over 60 percent of the 261 homicides committed with a firearm involved a handgun. These firearms are either already prohibited or restricted in Canada, illustrating the issue of the complexity of illegal firearms usage.^{vi}
- The 2020 “assault” or “assault-style” firearms ban does not alter the status of handguns in Canada. In fact, “assault” or “assault-style” is not a legal weapons classification in Canada – they are colloquial terms to describe high-power and rapid-fire guns (often used by the military) that are mostly already banned in Canada.

Role of RCMP Members

The RCMP plays an integral role in preventing gun violence and works alongside other interdependent agencies such as the Canada Border Services Agency and municipal police forces to ensure the safety of all Canadians. The RCMP shares border security responsibilities with the Canada Border Services Agency, manages the Canadian Firearms Centre and Program,

and is also responsible for addressing cross-border criminal activity. This includes the illegal importation and proliferation of illegal, criminally acquired, and distributed firearms. RCMP Members are an essential element in combatting crime and ensuring public safety. Gun violence threatens public safety while also endangering the lives of law enforcement officers, including Members of the RCMP.

Challenges

The increase in homicides related to firearms continues to threaten the safety of the public and RCMP Members. Effectively addressing the threat of Canada's growing illicit firearms market and related increased gang violence requires the urgent, efficient, and effective deployment of law enforcement expertise, personnel, and financial resources.

While the growing prevalence and threat of illegal firearms in Canada is generally acknowledged, data on the origins of firearms is lacking and greater resources are needed to better understand and address this critical issue:

- The Canadian Firearms Program is responsible for the administration of the Firearms Act; however, does not have the resources to provide effective gun crime tracing and enforcement units.
- The Canadian National Firearms Tracing Centre processes tracing requests for national and international law enforcement agencies. However, the center does not collect statistics on illegal guns; rather, it determines the history of a gun connected to a criminal investigation and uses that information as potential evidence in court. Further, there is no legal requirement for police to submit firearms for tracing.^{vii}

Costly and current legislation, such as the Order in Council prohibiting various firearms and the proposed "buy-back" program by the federal government targeted at legal firearm owners, does not address these current and emerging themes or urgent threats to public safety.

It also does not address:

- criminal activity,
- illegal firearms proliferation,
- gang crime,
- illegal guns crossing the border or
- the criminal use of firearms.

In fact, it diverts extremely important personnel, resources, and funding away from addressing the more immediate and growing threat of criminal use of illegal firearms.

Currently mandated RCMP activities relating to illegal firearms activity are restricted to administrative and academic support. Police agency bodies such as the National Weapons Enforcement Support Team, Canadian National Firearms Tracing Centre, Criminal Firearms Strategic and Operational Support Services and the Specialized Firearms Support Services offer support to *primarily responsive* enforcement; however, do not contribute to *proactive* enforcement investigation efforts to maintain and enhance public safety.

NPF's Call to Action:

1. The NPF calls for the best use of legislative powers to effectively address crime reduction, gang diversion, safe communities, secure borders, Canadian enforcement agency integration, and cross-border safety of the public and all police officers.
2. The NPF calls for funds to be allocated to the RCMP Border Integrity Program, to enable dedicated proactive RCMP investigative weapons enforcement activity and the dismantling of gang and organized crime firearms smuggling.
3. The NPF calls for funding that enables law enforcement to properly address crime prevention rather than towards the ongoing monitoring of unrelated restrictions on licensed and regulated firearms owners.
4. The NPF supports evidence-based policy changes regarding licensing, mandatory safety training, safe storage, and registry of civilian firearms that meet Canada's high standards for legal firearm ownership.

Conclusion

The NPF supports a fact-based approach to protecting public safety and prevention of gun violence. The safety of the public and RCMP Members is of utmost importance. Government programs should target crime reduction capabilities that are centered in law enforcement investigative strategies rather than measures that do very little to address their goal to increase public safety.

*Approved by the NPF Board of Directors
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References

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