

# GUN CONTROL AND THE LONG GUN REGISTRY

## STATEMENT FROM CANADIAN HEALTH ORGANIZATIONS

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### **Firearms Control and Injury Prevention: The gun registry is a good investment**

The recent discussion surrounding gun control has tended to focus on the problems of urban violence, gangs, and handguns. This however ignores the fact that most firearm deaths in Canada are suicides and the guns most often used are rifles and shotguns.

Over the years, members of the health community have fought for stronger controls on firearms because of the staggering burden of preventable gun death and injury: almost 1400 Canadians died of gunshots in 1991, close to half the number killed in automobile crashes. The vast majority of firearm deaths in Canada are not gang related but occur when an ordinary citizen becomes suicidal or violent, often under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or during a personal crisis such as marital breakdown or job loss. When firearms are available, domestic homicides are more likely to involve multiple victims and end in suicide.

While it is true that there are more guns in rural areas, and therefore more opposition to gun control, it is equally true that there are higher rates of gun deaths in rural communities and western provinces. The Yukon, a hotbed of opposition to gun control, has a firearm death rate that is three times the national average. In fact, in spite of all the focus on urban criminal gangs, police officers are most at risk in rural communities.

#### **Positive impact of the law**

We are therefore encouraged to see positive results since the latest waves of legislative reforms. In 2005, there were 818 firearms related deaths in Canada. This represents an astonishing decrease of 43% of all gun deaths since 1991<sup>1</sup>.

Not surprisingly, the areas where we have seen the greatest progress are in the deaths associated with rifles and shotguns — weapons that have been subject to most of the new measure (handguns have been registered since the 1930s). For example, most cases of suicides with firearms among 15-35 years olds involve firearms that were easily accessible in the home. These have decreased by 64% in nine years (from 329 in 1995 to 121 in 2005)<sup>2</sup> with no evidence of substitution with other methods.<sup>3</sup> Along with murders committed by rifles and shotguns, murders of women with firearms as well as lethal gun-related accidents (most of which involve long guns) have declined more rapidly than other types of fatal injuries. In contrast, homicides with handguns, fuelled in part by the illegal trade, have remained relatively stable.

#### **Stronger measures work**

This impressive reduction in gun deaths is no doubt due to stronger gun control measures. For one, screening and renewable licenses for gun ownership reduce the risk that dangerous or suicidal people will get access to firearms. To date more than 2 million gun owners have been licensed. Licensing — and frequently renewing the licences — is a critical component to assessing potential risks. In fact, there have been 22,523 licenses refused or revoked between 1999 and 2008 from individuals deemed a potential risk to themselves or to others<sup>4</sup>.

Licensing and registration work hand in hand to keep legal guns in the hands of legal gun owners. Because it allows guns to be traced back to their last legal owner, registration helps prevent illegal sales or straw purchases to unlicensed (and potentially dangerous) individuals. Licensed gun owners are also

more likely to safely store their firearms if they know their name is attached to each gun. Studies have shown that in the US, states with both licensing and registration (versus one or the other) had fewer guns diverted from legal to illegal markets.<sup>5</sup> It also helps police with the temporarily removal of firearms in households where there may be a risk for suicide or violence. This is why the Supreme Court maintained that the registration component is critical to enforcing licensing provisions and cannot be severed from the system<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, registration is a one time only gesture. The 7 million guns which have been registered do not have to be registered again unless they are traded or sold.

### Worthy investment

The opponents of the registry have deliberately misrepresented the costs. It is true, too much money was spent setting up the system. But at this point the savings that would be obtained from dismantling the registry are less than \$3 million a year. This is a trivial amount considering that the system is used by police thousands of times each day. This small investment is dwarfed by economic benefits of reducing gun death and injury, estimated at nearly \$1.4 billion annually.<sup>7</sup>

### Prevention is a priority

Health organizations have fought to pass improvements to the law in 1991 as well as in 1995.<sup>8</sup> Scientific research shows that progressive controls on firearms have resulted in a reduction in firearm death and injury. Canada's law has been cited as a model of effective legislation worldwide, particularly in combating violence against women. It is also consistent with global norms including the recently announced European Firearms Directive which establishes uniform standards for all European Union countries and includes the registration of all firearms.

As health professionals, we know the importance of investing in prevention, whether in road safety or prevention of infectious diseases. It is true that one cannot easily measure prevention, but we can certainly measure the effects of ignoring it. Six different coroner's inquests recommended the licensing of gun owners and registration of all firearms. Indeed, our daily practice informs us of the very real risks associated with firearms and of the value of a strong gun control law.

That is why we must speak out against Bill C-391, the private member's bill currently before the House of Commons which aims to abolish the long gun registry.

### Signed by:

#### GROUPS (28) :

Jean-Yves Frappier, MD, FRCPC, MSc  
President  
**Canadian Association for Adolescent Health**

Chris Evans, MD  
President  
**Canadian Association of Emergency Physicians**

Ms. Linda Silas  
President  
**Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions**

Dr. Robert Cushman  
Chief Executive Officer  
**Champlain Local Health Integration Network**

Marie Adèle Davis  
Executive Director  
**Canadian Paediatric Society**

Ms. Debra Lynkowski  
Chief Executive Officer  
**Canadian Public Health Association**

Carol Timmings  
President  
**Ontario Public Health Association**

Dr Dale Dewar, MD, FCFP  
Executive Director  
**Physicians for Global Survival**

Dr Geneviève Bécotte, MD, CCMF (MU)  
 President  
**Quebec Association of Emergency Physicians**

Bruno Marchand  
 Executive Director  
**Quebec Association for suicide prevention**

Lucie Thibodeau  
 President  
**Quebec Public Health Association**

Dr. David McKeown  
 Medical Officer of Health  
**Toronto Public Health**

Elizabeth Taylor, PhD OT(C)  
 President  
**Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists**

Dr Jean-François Dorval, MD, LMCC  
 Spokesperson on gun control  
**Regional Strategy Committee for Action on Suicide  
 of Bas-St-Laurent**

#### Quebec Public Health Departments (14):

Dr Réal Lacombe  
 Directeur de santé publique  
**Direction de santé publique d'Abitibi-  
 Témiscamingue**

Dr Robert Maguire  
 Directeur de santé publique  
**Direction de santé publique du Bas-St-Laurent**

Dr François Desbiens, MD, MPH, FRCPC  
 Directeur de santé publique  
**Direction de santé publique de la Capitale-  
 Nationale**

Dr Reynald Cloutier  
 Directeur de santé publique  
**Direction de santé publique de la Côte-Nord**

Dr Louise Soulière  
 Directrice de santé publique  
**Direction de santé publique de l'Estrie**

Dr Christian Bernier  
 Directeur de santé publique  
**Direction de santé publique de la Gaspésie-Îles-de-  
 la-Madeleine**

Dr Jean-Pierre Trépanier, MD, MSc, FRCPC  
 Directeur de santé publique et d'évaluation  
**Direction de santé publique de Lanaudière**

Dr Blandine Piquet-Gauthier, M.D., M.Sc., FRCPC  
 Directrice de santé publique  
**Direction de santé publique des Laurentides  
 Direction de santé publique du Nord-du-Québec**

Dr. Nicole Damestoy  
 Directrice de santé publique  
**Direction de santé publique de Laval**

Dr Gilles W. Grenier  
 Directeur de santé publique  
**Direction de santé publique de la Mauricie-Centre-  
 du-Québec**

Dr Jocelyne Sauvé, M.D., FRCPC  
 Directrice de santé publique  
**Direction de santé publique de la Montérégie**

Dr Richard Lessard  
 Directeur de santé publique  
**Direction de santé publique de Montréal**

Dr Hélène Dupont M.D.  
 Directrice de santé publique  
**Direction de santé publique de l'Outaouais**

Dr Donald Aubin  
 Directeur de santé publique  
**Direction de santé publique du Saguenay-Lac-Saint-  
 Jean**

#### INDIVIDUALS (33):

**Dr Neil Arya**  
 Director, Office of Global Health  
 Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry

**Suzelle Beaulieu**  
 Agente de relation humaine  
 CSSS de Matane (CLSC)

**Serge Bélanger**  
 Directeur  
 Trajectoires hommes du Kamouraska—Rivière-du-  
 Loup—Temiscouata—Les Basques

**Dr Bruno Bernardin, MD**  
 Médecin d'urgence  
 Hôpital général de Montréal

**André Boudreau**

Directeur  
C-TA-C (Contre Toute Agression Conjugale)

**Dr Ron Charach, MD, FRCP**

Psychiatrist  
Author of *Cowboys & Bleeding Hearts, Essays on Violence, Health and Identity*

**Nathalie Clavette**

Directrice des programmes santé mentale, dépendances et jeunes en difficulté  
CSSS du Témiscouata

**Dr Georges Desrosiers**

Professeur émérite  
Département de médecine sociale et préventive  
Faculté de médecine de l'Université de Montréal

**Dr. Alan Drummond, MD, CM, CCFP(EM)**

Emergency Physician  
Medical Director of the Emergency Department at the Perth and Smith Falls District  
Chair, Public Affairs Committee of Canadian Association of Emergency Physicians

**Dr Annie Duchesne, Ph. D.**

Psychologue  
Université du Québec à Rimouski

**Mélanie Dumont**

Intervenante et formatrice  
Centre de prévention suicide du Kamouraska—  
Rivière-du-Loup—Témiscouata—Les Basques

**Dr Harold N. Fisher**

Clinical Research Physician  
Associate Vice-President  
Eli Lilly Canada

**Maria Fortin**

Coordonnatrice des dossiers santé mentale, services psychosociaux généraux, suicide et dépendances  
Agence de la santé et des services sociaux du Bas-St-Laurent

**Dr Allan J. Fox, MD, FRCPC, FACP**

Chair of the Neuroradiology Section  
Ontario Medical Association

**Dr Thérèse Gagné, Ph. D.**

Psychologue  
Cégep de Matane

**Nathalie Gagnon**

Intervenante sociale  
Agente de planification et de programmation en dépendances  
Agence de la santé et des services sociaux du Bas-St-Laurent

**François Gamache, M. Ps.**

Directeur  
Centre de prévention du suicide et d'intervention de crise du Bas-St-Laurent

**Gaétan Gauthier**

Intervenant - Services Hommes  
L'arrimage (Réhabilitation alcoolisme et toxicomanie)

**Catherine Geoffrion, M. A.**

Responsable des services éducatifs complémentaires  
Direction régionale du Bas-St-Laurent et de la Gaspésie-Îles-de-la-Madeleine

**Dr Abel Ickowicz, MD, FRCPC**

Psychiatrist-in-Chief  
Hospital for Sick Children

**Dr Barbara Kane, MD, FRCP**

Psychiatrist  
Prince George Regional Hospital

**Dr Andrew W. Kirkpatrick, CD, MD, FRCSC, MHSc, FACS**

President  
Trauma Association of Canada

**Corrine Langill, RN, BScN**

Manager, Health Promotion and Injury Prevention  
Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario

**Gilles Lapointe**

Agent de planification, de programmation et de recherche  
Agence de la santé et des services sociaux du Bas-St-Laurent

**Dr Sarvesh Logsetty MD, FRCS(C), FACS**

Director Manitoba Firefighters Burn Unit and Associate Professor  
Department of Surgery, University of Manitoba

**Caroline Morin, erg.**

Chef  
L'Estran (Centre régional réadaptation en dépendances)

**Esther Otis, B. Sc. Inf.**

Responsable du dossier Info-Santé et Info-Social  
Agence de la santé et des services sociaux du Bas-St-Laurent

**Dr Louis Peltz**, MD, MSc, FRCPC  
Chief of the Department of Psychiatry  
Credit Valley Hospital

**Dr I. B. Pless**, CM, MD, FRCPC, FRCPCH (Hon), FCAHS  
Professor  
Pediatrics, Epidemiology and Biostatistics  
McGill University  
Editor Emeritus - Injury Prevention

**Dr Jacques Ramsay**  
Coroner  
Bureau du coroner du Québec

**Dr Tarek Razek**, MD FRCSC FACS  
Trauma Director  
Assistant Professor of Surgery  
McGill University Health Centre

**Dr Sandro Rizoli**, MD PhD FRCSC FACS  
Associate Professor of Surgery  
University of Toronto

**Dr Ronald D. Stewart**, OC, ONS, BA, BSc, MD, DSc  
Professor of Emergency Medicine; Professor of  
Anaesthesia; Professor Emeritus in Medical  
Education  
Dalhousie University, Halifax

**Dr Brian Sweeney**

Surgeon and assistant professor  
Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario

**Claire Sylvain**

Directrice  
Cégep de Rivière-du-Loup

**Carol Tremblay**

Directeur  
Centre prévention suicide du Kamouraska—Rivière-  
du-Loup—Temiscouata—Les Basques

**Dr Michael Vassilyadi**, MD, CM, MSc, FRCS(C),  
FACS, FAAP

Associate Professor of Surgery and Pediatrics and  
Ottawa Chapter Director for *ThinkFirst* Canada  
Division of Neurosurgery  
University of Ottawa

**Dr Fernand Turcotte**, MD, M.P.H., FRCPC

Professeur émérite de santé publique et médecine  
préventive  
Département de médecine sociale et préventive  
Faculté de médecine Université Laval

**Dr Donald Wasylenki**, MD, FRCPC

Chair of the Department of Psychiatry  
University of Toronto

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- <sup>1</sup> **Department of Justice**, "Firearms Statistics Updated Table," 2006; Statistics Canada, "Mortality, Summary list of Cause 2005", March 2009.
- <sup>2</sup> **Department of Justice**, "Firearms Statistics Updated Table," 2006; Statistics Canada, "Mortality, Summary list of Cause 2005", March 2009.
- <sup>3</sup> **Department of Justice**, "Firearms Statistics Updated Table," 2006; Statistics Canada, "Mortality, Summary list of Cause 2005", March 2009.
- <sup>4</sup> **Canada Firearms Center**, "2007 Commissioner Report," 2008; **Canada Firearms Centre**, "Facts and Figures Canadian Firearms Program October-December 2008," January 2009
- <sup>5</sup> **Webster DW**, Vernick JS, Hepburn LM. "Relationship between licensing, registration, and other gun sales laws and the source state of crime guns." *Inj Prev* 2001;7(3):184-9. <http://injuryprevention.bmj.com/content/7/3/184.full>
- <sup>6</sup> **Supreme Court of Canada**, *Firearms Act* (Can.), [2000] 1 S.C.R. 783, " The registration provisions cannot be severed from the rest of the Act. The licensing provisions require everyone who possesses a gun to be licensed; the registration provisions require all guns to be registered. These portions of the *Firearms Act* are both tightly linked to Parliament's goal of promoting safety by reducing the misuse of any and all firearms. Both portions are integral and necessary to the operation of the scheme. » <http://csc.lexum.umontreal.ca/en/2000/2000scc31/2000scc31.html>
- <sup>7</sup> **Graduate Institute for International Studies** Geneva. *Small Arms Survey 2006*. Oxford University Press, USA; Revised edition (August 3, 2006)
- <sup>8</sup> Recent support for the Firearms Act include: "Reasonable control: gun registration in Canada," **Canadian Medical Association Journal** (CMAJ) 168 (4), February 18 2003; **Canadian Association of Emergency Physicians**, "CAEP Position Statement on Gun Control", *CJEM* 2009;11(1):64-72, January 2009; **Canadian Association for Adolescent Health**, "Letter to Prime Minister Stephen Harper", March 18 2009; **Association pour la santé publique du Québec** " La sécurité des Canadiens menacée : la Loi canadienne sur le contrôle des armes à feu en péril," Press Release, October 30, 2009; **Directrices et Directeurs régionaux de santé publique du Québec**, "Énoncé de principes de la santé publique du Québec au regard du contrôle des armes à feu," October 2009; **Canadian Association of Emergency Physicians**, "Canadian Emergency Physicians opposed to repealing the Long-Gun Registry," Press Release November 9, 2009.