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Firearms Public Awareness Research

Executive Summary

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Executive summary

Background and objectives

Issues relating to the regulation of firearms have been very controversial in Canada for the past 40 or so years. Many Canadians possess firearms for perfectly legitimate purposes (i.e., sport or hunting) and this is particularly the case in rural areas. As gun-related violence has grown, there have been more and more demand to find ways to restrict and regulate the availability of firearms, and this has led to clashes of values that have in the past divided Canadians along urban and rural lines and in other ways. In the late 1990s, the federal government establishment of a national long gun registry was highly controversial. More recently, there have been demands to restrict various types of assault style weapons.

The Government of Canada has made a commitment to take action to further reduce firearms-related violence, including banning assault-style firearms and implementing an amnesty and buy-back program. On May 1, 2020, the Government of Canada announced the prohibition of over 1,500 models of assault-style firearms and certain components of some newly prohibited firearms.

Public Safety Canada will be developing a national campaign to focus on raising awareness and educating Canadians and firearm owners of the firearms ban and buy-back program, as well as secure storage requirements. This campaign will also discourage straw purchasing, when a legal Canadian firearm licence-holder buys a gun and then sells it on the black market, through targeted public awareness campaign for individuals and retailers.

In support of this multi-year campaign, Public Safety Canada wanted to obtain data about people's general awareness, attitudes, and behaviours when it comes to firearms. More specifically, the objective of this research was to set benchmarks of Canadians' knowledge of the potential risks they face, their perception of the issue, their current level of understanding as well as their willingness to participate in new Government programs.

The data will help Public Safety to better understand the target audiences, establish quantifiable, measurable objectives, and help tailor messaging to each of these segments.

This research project comprised quantitative and qualitative phases, each with specific objectives:

- **Formative baseline research** to obtain data about people's general awareness, attitudes, understanding and behaviours when it comes to firearm laws. More specifically, the objectives of this phase of the research were to establish a quantitative baseline of the state of public opinion on firearms, including awareness, knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours. The data will help identify and establish target audience segments for a marketing campaign and will help in creating marketing tactics and strategies to inform and protect, as well as educate Canadians about buy-back programs. This research will also constitute a baseline for future research, to measure the extent to which awareness is growing in response to the marketing campaign.
- **Pre-test campaign to evaluate messaging and creative concepts** through two rounds of qualitative focus groups. This research was designed to help ensure the messaging, tone, and overall campaign look-and-feel resonates with target audience groups.

Methodology

Quantitative phase

Phase I Baseline Quantitative Survey consisted of an online quantitative survey of 2,000 Canadians. The target audiences are as follows:

- Current owners of firearms.
- Parents of children under the age of 18.
- Canadian general public.

The survey of 2,000 Canadians included an oversample to ensure interviews were conducted with at least 400 owners of firearms. Parents of minor children being relatively abundant in the Canadian general public, so it was anticipated the survey sample would include 500 to 600 parents without the need to oversample.

Fieldwork was conducted from December 1-11, 2020. It should be noted this field period included the anniversary of the École Polytechnique Tragedy and the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women (December 6), which may have made gun-related violence top of mind for some.

Qualitative phase

Two sets of ten focus groups were conducted to test reaction to creative materials.

The initial **Phase One focus groups** involved a series of 10 online focus groups conducted in January 2021 for Public Safety Canada to assess reactions to three digital ad concepts that were shown in animatic form. Two sessions were conducted with Canadians in each of the following regions: Ontario (January 5), Atlantic Canada (January 6), Quebec (January 7), British Columbia (January 9), and Alberta (January 11). The two Quebec sessions were conducted in French. Each session included six or seven participants. In each region, one session was conducted with gun owners and one was conducted with member of the general public who did not own a gun.

The three ad concept animatics that were tested were intended to communicate recent changes to Canada's gun safety legislation, inform Canadians about recent statistics around gun violence, and remind gun owners about their responsibility for safe firearm storage and practices. The discussion in each group focused on participants' overall reactions to the ad concept animatics, and to specific elements within the ads. Reaction to options for URLs leading to a Government of Canada landing page were also tested.

This was followed by a second set of **Phase Two focus groups** which consisted of another series of 10 online focus groups conducted February 26 to March 1, 2021. These sessions were conducted to test the success of a more finalized and produced version of a digital ad and to test reaction to options for social media banner ads. Two sessions were conducted with Canadians in each of the following regions: Ontario (February 27-28), Atlantic Canada (February 27-28), Quebec (March 1), British Columbia (February 26 and March 1), and Manitoba/Saskatchewan (February 27-28). The Quebec sessions were conducted in French and the other sessions were all conducted in English. Each session included six or seven participants. Half the sessions were conducted with gun owners and the remainder were conducted with non-gun owners.

EnviroNics recruited participants via a combination of industry-standard methods to ensure participation in all the sessions across all provinces. Participants were offered a \$100 incentive to thank them for their time.

EnviroNics invited seven (7) participants to each session. The sessions were hosted using the Zoom conferencing platform.

Statement of limitations: Qualitative research provides insight into the range of opinions held within a population, rather than the weights of the opinions held, as measured in a quantitative study. The results of this type of research should be viewed as indicative rather than projectable to the population.

Contract value

The contract value was \$223,527.56 (including HST).

Key findings

The key findings for each phase of the research are summarized below:

Quantitative phase

Firearm ownership and general awareness

- Firearms owners are distributed quite evenly across Canada, but tend to skew male, younger, have higher incomes, and have been born in Canada.
- One in five Canadians who do not currently own firearms say they are very or somewhat likely to own firearms in the future.
- The main reasons people own firearms are evenly split between hunting and target shooting (just under half each), with one quarter citing they are a firearm collector.
- Almost all (98%) owners are at least somewhat familiar with the requirements around storage of firearms.
- Close to half (44%) of Canadians claim to be at least somewhat familiar with the regulations around the ownership, licensing, transportation and use of firearms in Canada. This proportion rises to 96 percent among firearm owners.

Attitudes

- The vast majority of Canadians as a whole think the current regulation of firearms either strikes the right balance (33%) or is not strict enough (41%). Only ten percent think regulations are too strict, and 17 percent have no opinion. It is notable that, even among current firearm owners, only one quarter think regulations are too strict.
- Canadians, including firearms owners themselves, have conflicted views on firearms in our society. A large majority of Canadians, including 63 percent of current owners, agree our governments need to play a bigger role in protecting communities from firearms-related crime. About half also feel the availability of firearms is a threat to our safety, that banning firearms in their community would make it safer and feel personally uncomfortable with people using firearms for any reason. Even among firearm owners, significant minorities agree with these sentiments.

- At the same time, large majorities of Canadians also agree using firearms to hunt for food and for recreational hunting is a way of life that needs to be preserved, and that there is nothing wrong with someone owning a gun for recreational purposes.
- Around half of Canadians feel firearms-related violence is a threat to public safety in their local community. This sentiment is strongest in Ontario and among urban dwellers.
- One third of Canadians (including half of firearm owners) feel the Government of Canada does a good or excellent job when it comes to bringing in measures to combat gun-related violence. Another third gives the government a “fair” rating, and 21 percent rate its efforts as poor.
- The vast majority of Canadians (81%) think “assault-style” firearms should be illegal in all or most cases, and another 63 percent think handguns should be illegal. A minority (39%) think rifles and shotguns should be illegal in all or most cases.

Safety of children

- Six in ten Canadian parents of children under 18 (including 59% of parents who own firearms) feel the current use and availability of firearms in Canada poses a threat to their own children.
- Three-quarters of gun-owning parents report they have talked to their children about firearms safety, and two-thirds (65%) are at least somewhat concerned their children could endanger themselves through access to improperly secured firearms.

Awareness and support for new regulations

- Just one in ten Canadians have heard anything about any new measures by the government to address gun violence.
- Only three percent of Canadians, including 11 percent of firearm owners, are aware of any groups or organizations in Canada that have advertised or promoted awareness of issues around firearms safety.
- With prompting, most Canadians have heard something about policies to ban all assault-style firearms, and about the buy-back program for certain banned types of firearms. There is much less awareness of the Initiative to Take Action Against Gun and Gang Violence, new rules on storage of firearms, cracking down on “straw purchasing,” or giving municipalities the right to further restrict handguns.
- Large majorities of Canadians (ranging from 70% to 82%) support each of these measures to address firearms related violence in Canada. It is notable that while support is marginally lower, clear majorities of firearms owners themselves support all of these measures.
- Three-quarters of Canadians (including 72% of firearms owners) think these measures will be at least somewhat effective in reducing the incidence of gun violence in Canada.
- Among firearms owners, one third claim to have heard a lot about these proposed government policies to deal with firearms, and another 57 percent have heard a bit about them. Younger firearms owners are much more likely to be aware of these measures.

- One quarter of firearms owners say they own one of the newly prohibited types of firearms that would qualify for the “buy back” program, and another one in ten are unsure and think they might. The vast majority (84%) of those people say they would either definitely (49%) or probably (35%) participate in the buy-back program.
- The most common sources of news and information on regulations around firearms are government websites and social media. It is notable that, among firearms owners themselves, large proportions also mention firearms in-store sales outlets, blogs for gun owners and, to a lesser extent, online firearms sales outlets and trade shows.

Qualitative phase

Wave One – Animatics and URL Testing

Three 30-second digital ad concepts addressing issues around firearms safety were assessed in animatic form: “Just the facts” (Concept D), “Sense of responsibility” (Concept H) and “A safe place” (concept M).

General observations

- Non-gun owning participants reacted very favourably to the Government of Canada communicating about gun violence and about the measures that were being taken to contain it. While the issue may not have been a top-of-mind concern before seeing the ad concepts, participants were sensitized to the issue as a result of seeing the ad concepts.
- The reaction of gun owners to the ad concepts was more complex. Some, particularly those who owned several firearms, were very critical of measures mentioned in the ads, such as the ban on “assault-style” firearms; this terminology was seen by some as poorly defined, and they felt it was a needless attack on law-abiding gun owners. Gun owners tended to feel that they are already doing their part and are more interested in what is being done to address illegal guns and criminality.
- While some gun owners appreciated the ad concepts that portrayed gun owners in a sympathetic light, particularly as was the case with Concept H, others did not like seeing gun owners featured in any ad concepts at all. They did not want to be the focus of any communications by the Government and resented being connected with criminal violence.

Concept D “Just the facts”

- “Just the facts” (Concept D) was seen to be the most effective of the three ads in the eyes of both gun owners and non-gun owners. The main message most participants took from this ad was that gun violence is rising in Canada, that the government is taking action to curb gun violence, and that Canadians and particularly gun owners all have a role to play in reducing gun violence.
- Some gun owners perceived the main message in a more adversarial way, focusing mainly on elements related to gun owners and new gun laws.
- Most participants took an interest in the statistics and appreciated the overall tone of the messaging. Most felt that this ad concept was aimed at all Canadians, and that, compared to the other concepts, it was more likely to make gun owners feel like they could be part of the solution rather than being blamed.

- The use of statistics and charts in Concept D was a positively received. Many said the statistics might motivate them to click on the ad for more information. Gun owners, some of whom were skeptical about some of the facts within Concept D, indicated the ad would spark their curiosity to find out more.
- The most compelling statistics were that violent offences involving guns were up 81% since 2009 and that break and enters for the purpose of stealing guns had more than tripled in that time.

Concept H “Sense of responsibility”

- Participants felt the main message of Concept H was that gun owners are responsible, family-oriented Canadians who have a role to play in reducing gun violence by properly storing their firearms and that that improper storage contributes to gun related crimes and violence.
- The non-gun owners were generally positive toward the ad, though they tended to feel that the ad was solely aimed at gun owners and therefore not really relevant to them.
- Gun owners, on the other hand, felt the ad concept was very much directed at them, but for the most part did not find it to be an effective method for reminding them of their responsibilities and in some instances felt defensive about the message. Many of the gun owners also did not like being singled out in an ad about gun violence. They felt that, in the eyes of non-gun owners, gun owners were again being depicted as “the problem.”
- Many of the gun owners questioned the purpose of running an ad to remind them about safe storage when gun storage is already a prominent aspect of gun licensing courses and gun owner responsibilities. They suggested that reminders about proper gun safety or information about new laws would be better delivered through a direct notice.
- Many of the gun owners objected to the line in the ad about the “assault style” weapons ban. They found this to be jarring, controversial and not in keeping with the overall tone of the rest of the ad.

Concept M “A safe place”

- This was the least compelling of the three concepts for both gun owners and non-owners. The main message that participants understood from Concept M was that while Canadians see Canada as a safe place to live, gun violence is a growing threat to people of all walks of life in both rural and urban communities, and that Canada must work together as a society to keep everyone safe.
- Participants, especially in the gun owner groups, also seemed to feel that this was more of a public service announcement about new gun laws, rather than a call to action. Many felt this ad concept would elevate fears and anxieties about safety from guns without offering clear facts.
- This concept was not seen to be particularly memorable by most participants, who often described it as a generic government ad with a variety of people and typical Canadian settings, but no clear connection to the message. While many participants noted that the ad concept used images of diversity across ethnicities and age groups and talked about working “together” (or “ensemble”), this mainly contributed to the sense that the concept was a cliché without much substance.
- Gun owners tended to dismiss this concept as being mainly aimed at urban dwellers who likely know very little about guns or the people who own them.

Preferred ad concept

- The vast majority of participants – gun owners and non-gun owners alike – felt that Concept D “Just the Facts” was the most effective of the three ad concepts. The use of charts and statistics grabbed participants’ attention and sensitized them to the fact that gun violence was a growing problem in Canada.
- It was noted that this ad had some relevance for all Canadians be they gun owners or not and that it wove in a message about the responsibilities of gun owners without making them seem to be cause of the problem. There was a general feeling that this ad concept left the impression that the government was on the case and was taking this issue seriously.
- Many participants wished that any of the ads did more to address what the government was doing to crack down on illegal guns and on criminal activity around guns. The gun owners in particular felt this was much more important and relevant information than having to hear more about the ban on “assault-style weapons.”

Preferred URL

- After being six different possible URLs for the website that would be linked to in the ad concepts, most participants from both the gun owner and non-owner groups preferred the URL shown in the concepts themselves (Canada.ca/firearms). They felt it was short, memorable, and self-explanatory.
- The other possible URLs were mostly seen to be too long, with too many hyphens. This preference was even more pronounced in the French sessions since all the URLs were longer and had more hyphens in French. As a result, French participants preferred Canada.ca/armes-a-feu over the other options some of which had as many as four hyphens.

Wave Two – Success Check of Digital Ad and Banners Ads

This second wave of 10 online focus group sessions tested reaction to the fully produced video of the digital ad known as “Just the Facts”. Several executions of banner ads were also tested during these sessions.

“Just the Facts” Digital Ad

- Participants who owned guns reacted quite negatively to this ad, seeing it as politically motivated and likely to stigmatize legitimate gun owners as being responsible for gun violence. Non-gun owners had a more favourable reaction.
- Gun owning participants felt that ad had two contradictory messages and did not like being associated with an ad on gun violence. They were sceptical of the charts and statistics presented in the ad.
- Gun owners did not like how hunting rifles were referenced in the same context as statistics surrounding the rise of gun-related crimes and often viewed the ad in the context of the recent legislation on firearms, which many of them were not happy with.
- The participants who owned guns acknowledged that gun violence is a growing problem, but they resented any implication that they are part of the problem. They felt an ad on this topic should instead focus on action being taken against criminals and against gun smuggling.

- Gun owners felt that the ad was aimed mainly at Canadians who don't own guns, in order to make them feel that guns were a threat, and that the government would make them safer. They did not see themselves as the intended audience for the ad despite the reference to gun storage and safety at the end.
- Non-gun owning participants had a more favourable reaction to the ad and felt main message was that gun crimes were on the increase, that Canadians need to be concerned and that people who own guns need to be careful with them.
- Non-gun owning participants were more likely to believe the statistics and take them at face value. They were the most shocked about the 81% increase in gun violence statistic, as well as the statistic about rural vs. urban gun violence.
- Several non-gun owners mentioned having friends or family members with guns were more reluctant to place blame for gun violence on responsible gun owners who they assume already store their guns safely.
- Most non-gun owners felt that the ad was aimed at the "average Canadian" who does not own a gun but is aware of gun violence from the news. A smaller number felt the ad was aimed at gun owners as a reminder to store their guns safely and they wondered how the ad was relevant to people who do not own guns.
- Many non-gun owners also felt the ad had too much information that was on the screen for too short a time and that there were too many messages.

Banner Ads

- Most participants preferred a banner ad with an image of someone doing a break and enter in an ad whose message is about an increase in break and enters.
- Gun owners prefer not to see themselves represented in any banner ads on gun violence and therefore prefer not to see an image of a hunter or a sport shooter in a banner ad.
- Most participants preferred the "consolidated" versions of the banner ads where all the information was on a single slide as opposed to two slides that would carousel back and forth.
- Most participants preferred imagery of a patrol car in the background if a banner ad is about reducing gun violence. An image of the combination on a gun safe resonated with some people but was not always recognizable to non-gun owners as being connected to gun storage.

Political neutrality statement and contact information

I hereby certify as senior officer of Environics that the deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the Communications Policy of the Government of Canada, and Procedures for Planning and Contracting Public Opinion Research. Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate, or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.

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