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The Newsletter of the Canadian Firearms Centre
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Stopping The Traffic

The illegal trafficking of firearms has become a major concern in countries around the world. In Canada, the problem is particularly serious in large urban centres such as Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver. As a key source of firearms used in organized crime, underground trafficking networks give drug dealers, bikers, street gangs and the Mob an advantage over both citizens and police.

In 1994, a special firearms smuggling work group was set up to examine the problem and suggest ways of dealing with it. The group's recommendations led to greater controls over importing and exporting in the *Firearms Act*, and to new and separate penalties for smuggling and trafficking in the *Criminal Code*.

To support these legislative initiatives a core group, consisting of representatives from the Department of Justice, Revenue Canada Customs, the RCMP and the provinces, was set up in 1997. A major goal of this group has been to develop a strategy to target criminals by exchanging information and co-operating with enforcement agencies in Canada and the United States.

"The make, model, serial number and other information on a gun found at a crime scene can help catch the criminal who used it," says Bob Holmes, the manager of the core group. "If police officers

want to make the most of this information, they have to be able to share it across national and provincial borders."

In Holmes' view, the new requirement for the registration of common rifles and shotguns, combined with a new, fully automated registration system, can't help but be a valuable tool for helping police track the illegal movement of firearms.

"Studies show that half of all the handguns and other restricted firearms recovered at crime scenes are registered and can be traced back to their original owner. Now it will be much easier to trace the source of non-restricted rifles and shotguns as well," says Holmes, noting that these make up the majority of firearms used in crime.

Moreover, under the new law, criminals who use firearms to commit 1 of 10 of the most serious crimes now get heavier sentences. "Heavier sentences with clearly defined prohibitions give police the tools and incentives to interrupt the flow of guns to the underworld," says Holmes. "This balance of enforcement action with legitimate controls is paramount for public safety."

This is especially important now that illegally acquired firearms are being used more quickly for crimes. Whereas it used to take about five years for such a weapon to be used in a crime, Holmes estimates that this time has fallen to just a few months. Worse still, many of these weapons are either inexpensive "throwaways" or very sophisticated, even military, firearms.

The initiative is already showing results in British Columbia, says Staff Sergeant Bill Carver, who represents the B.C. Association of Chiefs of Police at the core group. He says that the new enforcement policies and strategies have led to a "significant increase" over the past year in the ability of B.C. police to trace crime guns back to their source, even when that source is out of the country.

"Our focus is crime gun enforcement so this is clearly a valuable investigative tool for us," says Carver. "Anything that gets crime guns off the streets will win support from us."

Inspector Bob Frolic represents Ontario at the core group. "The criminals who are trafficking in illegal firearms do not recognize borders," says Frolic. "As such, the sharing of information is of the utmost importance in the enforcement of our firearms legislation. We cannot operate in a vacuum."

In Ontario, the police must report all firearms that come into their possession. As a result, the Ontario Provincial Weapons Enforcement Unit now has more than 83,000 firearms in its firearms database, which it can use for analysis.

For Holmes, knowledge is power, and sharing information keeps another kind of power out of the hands of criminals. "Mao used to say that power comes from the barrel of a gun. Criminals shouldn't have that power over the rest of us."

Recognizing the significance of illicit trafficking and its connections to increased levels of violent crime, other countries are beginning to follow Canada's example. They agree that the key to combatting the problem is more cooperation among the various government agencies to support law enforcement. Through several different international fora, such as the Organization of American States (OAS), the G8 Economic Summit and the United Nations, initiatives are being developed to foster high levels of cooperation to successfully investigate, detain and prosecute criminal traffickers. Canada's experience has enabled us to play a strong role in the development of these initiatives.

Where We Stand Internationally

Different nations have different experiences with firearms. A recent international survey, co-

sponsored by the Dutch justice ministry, compared the experiences of victims of firearms crimes in more than 40 countries around the world. By using uniform questions, rather than police statistics, this survey presents an international overview of the effect of firearms on victimization and on various justice systems, as well as a breakdown of possession trends. On behalf of the Canadian Firearms Centre, Richard Block used the findings of this study to compare Canada, the United States and several European countries.

Tony Dittenhoffer, the senior research officer at the Canadian Firearms Centre, says that we can draw some comfort from the differences between Canada and the United States. "But when you look at where we are relative to countries other than the United States, you discover that maybe we shouldn't be so complacent," says Dittenhoffer.

Here are a few of the highlights of Block's analysis:

- Canada is in the mid-range of firearms ownership, with 22 percent of households having at least one firearm. More than twice as many U.S. households have firearms.
- Only 2 percent of Canadian households have a handgun, whereas 19 percent of households have a long gun.
- Except for Switzerland, where citizens keep guns for military reasons, all countries reported hunting and target shooting as the most common reasons for keeping firearms.
- Between 3 and 4 percent of citizens in most countries have been robbed in the last five years. Half of 1 percent of Canadians were robbed by someone using a firearm. Figures for the United States, however, are much higher.
- Generally, the smaller the community, the more likely its residents are to own firearms. A third of Canadians living in small towns, for example, own long guns.

For more information on the International Crime (Victim) Survey, see the report that Richard Block wrote for the Canadian Firearms Centre: *Firearms in Canada and Eight Other Western Countries: Selected Findings of the 1996 International Crime (Victim) Survey*. The French version is called *Les armes à feu au Canada et dans huit autres pays occidentaux: résultats choisis du Sondage international de 1996 (auprès des victimes) de crime*.

The Numbers on Firearms

Internationally recognized for the accuracy and objectivity of its data, Statistics Canada is an invaluable source for statistics on the impfirearms. Here are some numbers drawn from several of its publications: *Causes of Death*, *Homicide Survey* and *Canadian Crime Statistics*:

- 1,105 firearm deaths occurred in 1995; 82 percent were suicides and 13 percent were homicides
- 211 firearm homicides occurred in 1996, roughly a third of all homicides
- 911 suicides involved firearms in 1995
- 49 people died from accidents with firearms in 1995
- 6,646 firearm robberies were committed in 1996, this being more than one fifth of all robberies

Another valuable source of data is the RCMP, which maintains the *Annual Firearms Report*. Here are some facts culled from the 1997 report:

- 89,741 firearms were recorded as lost or stolen, more than twice as many as 10 years ago
- 63,552 firearm prohibition orders were in effect, more than twice as many as 10 years ago

Share Your Knowledge

The value of the registration system as a law enforcement tool depends largely on the completeness

and accuracy of the data in the registration system. To this end, efforts are now underway to identify, train and appoint "approved verifiers" at strategic locations across Canada.

Superintendent J.A.J. Buisson, the Registrar in charge of the new Canadian Firearms Registry, is inviting gun club members and employees of firearms businesses to join this network and volunteer their services to the general public. Anyone who is approved as a verifier will receive free training and access to reference materials on all known firearms.

Approved verifiers look at firearms and compare them to these reference materials. Once they have found a firearm in the reference material, verifiers are then required to check the firearm's description in the registration application form, to make sure it is consistent with the information in the reference table.

"There are a lot of advantages, for businesses in particular, in having an approved verifier on site," the Registrar noted. "It will not only help them meet their own legislated needs for verification, but will also allow them to provide better service to their customers. As well, it will be a great help in protecting public safety in their community."

For more information on becoming an approved verifier, call 1-800-731-4000.

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