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Firearms Public Awareness Campaign -Phase 2/3: Firearms Owners

Executive Summary

Prepared for Public Safety Canada

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March 2022

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Executive summary

Background and objectives

The Minister of Public Safety's mandate letter outlined the Government's commitment to take action to further reduce firearms-related violence, including by 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. These models represent nine categories of firearms and two types identified by characteristic. PS is currently developing a national campaign that will take a phased approach to raise awareness and educate Canadians and firearm owners of the need to reduce violent crime by limiting illicit access to firearms.

In support of this year's campaign and future firearm-related campaigns, Public Safety Canada wanted to conduct research with firearms owners. This research project was comprised of quantitative and qualitative phases, each with specific objectives:

- National quantitative audience segmentation study to better understand firearms owners as a target audience and their attitudes towards the proposed buy-back program.
- Focus groups to learn more about firearms owners' attitudes around the buy-back program and to test potential "look and feel" products to inform creative development.
- Pre-campaign Advertising Campaign Evaluation Tool (ACET) to set a baseline for assessing the effectiveness of the 2022/23 advertising campaign on the buy-back phase.

This research project had three key research objectives:

- A. Formative research among firearms owners to help segment the audience and inform the public awareness campaign to meet the needs of the target audience of firearms owners. This audience segmentation study will inform the portion of the public awareness campaign targeted at firearms owners and better understand their personal and group habits, dynamics and behaviours. This study also explored attitudes towards the buy-back program among the sub-set of firearms owners who could be eligible for the program.
- B. Qualitative focus group research among firearms owners, to help Public Safety Canada understand how the target audience (Canadian firearms owners) perceive the buy-back program, including their interest in participation, potential concerns, and key program elements. This phase of the research also serves to test buy-back creative concepts that will guide the direction of the campaign's concepts and messaging to evaluate what elements resonate well with the target audience.
- C. A pre-campaign evaluation to set benchmarks for the 2022-2023 campaign, identify current levels of awareness and understanding of the Government of Canada's buy-back program, and to assess and track campaign performance. This research was done using the advertising campaign evaluation tool (ACET), in accordance with the Communications Policy of the Government of Canada, and is mandatory for all advertising campaigns with a media component of \$1 million or more. NB: A post-campaign ACET will be completed following the buy-back advertising, which is to be done in the fiscal year 2022-2023.

Methodology

Phase 1 – Audience Segmentation Study was conducted in February 2022 and consisted of a 15-minute online quantitative survey of 2,001 current Canadian firearms owners. The survey included a diverse sample of current firearm owners (gender, geographic location, urban/rural split, types of activities/hobbies of different firearm owners (i.e., hunters, sport shooters, collectors, etc.). Fieldwork was conducted from February 16-March 3, 2022. NOTE: As the online survey uses an opt-in panel, this is a non-probability sample, and no margin of sampling error is calculated. More details on the methodology are provided in Appendix A.

Phase 2 – Focus Groups with Firearms Owners. Environics Research conducted a series of 12 online focus groups in early March 2022 for Public Safety Canada. The groups were conducted using the Zoom platform and were entirely composed of Canadians who own firearms. Each session consisted of 6 to 8 participants and lasted between 90 minutes and 120 minutes. Environics recruited participants via industry-standard methods to ensure participation in all the sessions across all regions. Participants were offered a \$125 incentive to thank them for their time.

One-to-two sessions were conducted with gun owners from each of the following regions: Ontario (February 28 & March 1), Atlantic Canada (March 2 & 3), Quebec (both on March 8 and conducted in French), British Columbia (February 28 & March 1), and Manitoba/Saskatchewan (March 2), Alberta (March 3), Nunavut (March 7), and Yukon/Northwest Territories (March 7).

The following topics were explored in each focus group: current firearm ownership and usage; awareness of new prohibition and buy-back; reaction to proposed program names and taglines; reaction to the three digital creative concepts; and attitudes towards the prohibition and the buy-back program and how they might participate.

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.

Phase 3 – ACET pre-test took place in between March 21 and 31, 2022 in advance of a communications campaign around the buy-back program for newly prohibited firearms to be launched later. This consisted of a seven-minute online survey of 2,001 Canadians, which conformed to the Government of Canada ACET template. The sample included an oversample of 250 firearms owners to ensure at least 500 of these in the overall sample.

The ACET findings are not reported here, but information on the methodology is provided in Appendix C. The research instrument is presented on Appendix F.

Contract value

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

Key findings

General summary

Half of firearms owners from the quantitative survey articulate they own just one firearm, and about the same amount say they have owned their firearms for more than five years. A majority of survey respondents have purchased their firearms from retailers versus other sources (e.g., private sellers, inheritances, etc.). Most firearms owners also say they use their firearms less than monthly, showing that overall, Canadian firearms owners do not own many guns per citizen, have not owned them for long (under five years), do not frequently utilize their firearms, and purchase their firearms legitimately from official retailers.

Regarding firearms regulations in Canada, firearms owners from the survey generally articulate that they are knowledgeable of firearms regulations, have valid and up-to-date PALs, and believe that regulations are acceptable and “strikes the right balance” for firearms owners and users. Most support the banning of “assault-style” firearms, and alternatively hold that the possession of manual action rifles and shotguns should be legal above other types of firearms. While a majority of firearms owners say they frequently utilize social media platforms such as Facebook, they primarily prefer to hear from the federal government on government websites and through official announcements on updates about firearms regulations and programs.

Majorities from the quantitative survey say they are concerned that firearms-related violence is a threat to public safety/their local communities, namely through gang violence or organized crime. While about half from the survey say they themselves own newly-prohibited firearms or are unsure, three-quarters/a majority articulate that they would willingly participate in the federal government buy-back program through various channels to get rid of these prohibited firearms. Most express they would prefer to participate in the buy-back program by forfeiting their newly-prohibited firearms in person, rather than participating through other means, such as contactless pick-up methods. Despite fears of firearms-related violence in the country expressed by firearms owners in this survey, a large majority agree with the value statement “I feel Canada is a safe and resilient country,” indicating that while there are widely-held concerns surrounding firearms violence, they still feel that the nation is a safe place overall.

When examining results and feedback from the qualitative side of the study, focus group participants across Canada generally express they are worried about the public’s view of firearms owners and that non-firearms owners may believe gun violence comes from licensed, law-abiding owners rather than illegal activities such as black market trafficking and gang violence. These concerns largely coincide with findings from the quantitative survey, in that firearms owners too fear gang-related firearms violence and are largely law-abiding citizens who support the government ban on “assault-style” firearms.

Also similar to the findings from the quantitative survey is the realization that Canadian firearms owners largely prefer to hear from the federal government on the buy-back program through official channels such as government websites, with their preference being non-sensational ad concepts for the buy-back program that are more informative and neutral in colouring, font usage, and firearms imagery.

Focus group members additionally emphasized their largely-shared preference to participate in the buy-back program by forfeiting newly-prohibited firearms in person, rather than through shipping any firearms through contactless pick-up methods; indeed, the imagery of a shipping truck in some ad concepts was rejected by many.

Quantitative phase

The following are specific findings by topic:

Firearms ownership

- Half of Canadian firearms owners (49%) currently own one firearm. Of those who report currently owning more than one firearm (51%), one-quarter (26%) say they currently own two firearms.
- Six in ten firearms owners (58%) own a rifle; four in ten (43%) own a shotgun and the same amount (42%) say they own a handgun. Two in ten (19%) own a semi-automatic long gun.
- Just over four in ten firearms owners (44%) have owned their firearms for more than five years. Less than one in ten (8%) have owned their firearms for less than a year.
- Most have obtained their firearms by purchasing from a retailer (74%) or from an individual (24%). Three in ten (31%) have inherited their firearms and 13 percent received them as a gift.
- Three in ten (28%) use their firearms at least monthly, whereas six in ten (59%) use their firearms less often.
- A majority of firearms owners (79%) currently have a valid up to date PAL; and six in ten firearms owners (64%) say they have a valid and up to date RPAL. Two in ten (20%) have no need for an RPAL at all.
- The main reasons for owning firearms are target shooting for sport (39%), self-defence and safety (37%), hunting for sport (34%) and hunting for food (28%). Other reasons include having a firearm that was a gift or inheritance, or as part of a collection.
- Most firearms owners (41%) report they mostly use their firearms alone. Another 21 percent say they mostly use their firearms in social settings and 29 percent use them in solo and social setting equally.

Perceptions of regulations

- The vast majority of firearms owners (94%) say they are at least somewhat familiar with firearms regulations, with over half (55%) claiming to be very familiar.
- While one-quarter of firearms owners (24%) report that regulations of firearms are too strict, over six in ten (64%) say they “strike the right balance” and just ten percent say they are not strict enough.
- Most firearms owners feel that the possession of all types of firearms should be legal in all or most cases. This sentiment is strongest when it comes to manual action rifles and shot guns (79%), replica firearms (75%), semi-automatic rifles and shotguns (70%). There is less support for revolvers (62%) and semi-automatic handguns (56%) being legal in all or most cases.
- The vast majority of firearms owners have heard a lot (48%) or a bit (43%) about the ban on assault-style firearms and the vast majority have also heard a lot (39%) or a bit (47%) about the buy-back program.
- Large majorities have also heard at least a bit about various other federal government programs on firearms such as expanding background checks, requiring an “Authorization to Transport,” action against

gun and gang violence, banning the sale or transfer of high capacity magazines, requiring businesses selling firearms to maintain inventories and sales records and validating buyers' licenses, supporting provinces and territories taking action to prohibit handguns, measures to tackle gun smuggling and cracking down on "straw purchasing."

- Large majorities of gun owners support all of the proposed measures to address firearms related violence in Canada. Most notably, 77 percent support banning "assault-style" firearms and 77 percent also support the "buy-back" program.
- Two in three firearms owners (65%) rate the performance of the government of Canada as excellent or good when it comes to introducing measures to address gun-related violence.

Sources of information

- Most firearms owners (41%) say their main source of news and information on regulations around firearms are government websites, followed by family/friends/word of mouth (22%).
- When it comes to firearms regulations and programs, firearms owners would most like to hear from the federal government via government websites (28%) or official announcements (18%).
- The social media platforms most used by firearms owners include Facebook (60%), YouTube (53%), and/or Instagram (34%).

Attitudes towards firearms violence

- A majority of firearms owners (72%) report being at least somewhat concerned that firearms-related violence is a threat to public safety in their local community.
- Most firearms owners (63%) report they think inner cities have the highest rate of firearms violence in Canada. Just ten percent think small towns and rural areas have the highest rates.
- Firearms owners feel that the biggest causes and/or sources of gun violence in Canada are gang violence/organized crime (72%) and criminal activity such as break and entries (67%). Smaller proportions mention other causes such as intimate partner violence, suicide or accidents.

Attitudes towards buy-back program

- Half of firearms owners (49%) report that they definitely or probably currently own newly-prohibited firearms that they think could qualify for the federal government's buy-back program and another seven percent are unsure.
- Among those who own prohibited firearms or are unsure, over half (54%) indicate they currently own just one newly-prohibited firearm; 34% own more than one.
- Three-quarters (73%) of those who own prohibited firearms or are unsure, say they would willingly participate in a buy-back program and another 17 percent would participate but only because it was mandatory. Seven percent would refuse to participate in the program at all.

- Firearms owners who own prohibited firearms or are unsure, say the main motivations for them to take part in the program include financial compensation (51%), wanting to comply with the law (46%), wanting to avoid legal penalties (38%), and support for the principle of banning these kinds of firearms (25%).
- Among the small number of firearms owners who would refuse to participate in the buy-back program, the main reasons for refusing are that they don't want to sell their firearms, they feel they have a right to own these firearms, that the government should go after gangs and criminals instead, or that they are responsible gun owners.

Implementation of buy-back program

- The elements owners of prohibited firearms would most like to see in a buy-back program include an easy way to initiate the application process (31%), convenient drop off options (30%), direct deposit payments (30%), easy ways to ask questions (30%), and automatic text or email updates (28%).
- Most owners of prohibited firearms (58%) would be more likely to register for a buy-back program by completing the process completely online, as opposed to completing the process by phone (22%).
- A large majority of owners of prohibited firearms (75%) feel that if they were to turn in their prohibited firearm as part of a buy-back program, they would prefer to do so in person. Just 20 percent would prefer a virtual/contactless process.
- Most owners of prohibited firearms (55%) say they would prefer to dispose of their newly-prohibited firearm(s) by surrendering them for compensation. Smaller proportions would prefer to deactivate their firearms (19%) or surrender them for no compensation (19%).
- Owners of prohibited firearms turning in their firearm as part of a buy-back program, would prefer to do so at a federal government centre (32%), a local police station (26%), a specific community event (25%), local RCMP detachment (23%), firearm dealer (21%), or retailer (20%).
- When firearms owners as a whole were asked about how they would prefer to get rid of any of their firearms, including those that remain legal, they mostly prefer to do so by participating in a government program for compensation (30%), selling to a Canadian firearm retailer or broker (27%), giving it to a friend or family member (22%), surrendering them to the police (20%), or including as an inheritance (20%).

Profile of firearms owners

- A majority of firearms owners from the survey (82%) communicate that of a series of values statements provided, they agree with "It is important to protect traditional values and activities," the most The next most agreed-to statement by firearms owners (78%) is "I feel Canada is a safe and resilient country." An additional value highlighted as important to firearms owners includes the desire to have funded post-secondary education, as over three-quarters (77%) agree that "Post-secondary education should be free and accessible to everyone". Combatting climate change is also seen as relevant to those from the survey, as over three-quarters (76%) agree with the statement that "I believe climate change is an important issue and we need to do more to protect the environment."

- Firearms owners participate in many other activities, especially fishing (70%), hiking (66%), camping (63%), hunting (56%), and boating (49%). Other popular activities include video games that feature firearms, in-person shows about outdoor activities, sport-shooting events, gun shows, gun collecting, paint ball, and laser tag.

Qualitative Phase

Three creative ad concepts and a series of potential names and taglines designed to promote the proposed buy-back program for newly prohibited firearms were assessed by focus group participants, along with awareness and attitudes towards the prohibition of assault-style firearms and the planned buy-back program.

Firearms ownership and usage

- Most participants reported owning a few firearms that were typically hunting rifles. They used their guns for game hunting, for shooting small animals such as birds on their farms, or to defend themselves from predatory animals such as bears. Some also used their guns for sport shooting.
- While a majority of participants did not possess any of the newly prohibited assault-style firearms, a couple of participants in most sessions did possess them. They often used these firearms at ranges, for sport shooting and target practice. Those who had newly-prohibited assault-style firearms tended to own a large number of firearms and considered themselves collectors.
- Many firearms owners—especially those owning newly prohibited guns—described having an emotional attachment to their firearms.

Awareness and attitudes towards prohibition and buy-back

- A large majority of participants were aware of the ban on assault-style firearms. Most had also heard about the buy-back program to compensate owners of newly prohibited firearms.
- Most expressed opposition to the ban. This ranged from passive cynicism and questioning of the government’s motives, to more intense opposition—particularly from those who currently own newly prohibited firearms.
- Many participants were sensitive to feeling stigmatized by non-gun owning citizens and the government, by virtue of owning guns and of potentially being criminalized by the ban on assault-style firearms.
- Many were sceptical about how the buy-back program would work and whether they would get fair compensation. Some were also concerned about the timing of the program, given—at the time of testing—the current law requires surrender by April 30, 2022 and no buy-back system was in place or communicated about.
- There was a strong preference for the surrender of firearms—whether for compensation or deactivation—to be an in-person hand-off. The notion of a contactless delivery was largely rejected.
- Most expressed they would grudgingly comply with the law and try to get what compensation they could. Some stated they would “wait for a change of government,” or would take apart their gun and only surrender the parts that were necessary to comply.

Creative concepts and taglines

- There was a preference for a tagline and name for the program that was as straightforward as possible. It was largely agreed that the name should incorporate “buy-back” and “prohibited firearms”.
- Taglines that imply that this program will make anyone safer or reduce any risk were not appreciated and were seen as telling Canadians that gun owners were responsible for any lack of safety.
- Regarding the creative concepts, there was a clear preference for Concept 3. Most felt it was the least stigmatizing to gun owners because it avoided images of “scary looking” firearms, and they felt the imagery used was easily recognized by the intended audience of owners of newly prohibited firearms. The white background in Concept 3 was seen as the most eye catching, and the additional paragraph it contained was viewed as informative.
- There was a preference for creative concepts that avoid “scary” images, and those that are seen as being clearly aimed at owners of newly banned firearms and not at the non-gun owning general public.
- The image of an AR-15 with a cancel sign in Concept 2 attracted attention, but also elicited a negative visceral reaction. It was seen as sensationalistic and stigmatizing to gun owners. Some also felt that it gave the impression that only one specific gun had been banned.
- Icons depicting the steps involved in the buy-back process found in Concepts 2 and 3 were appreciated, though most felt that the image of a truck to symbolize the “Participate” step in the program was inappropriate and misleading.

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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