

Gun Control: Crime and the Registry

By MAX HARROLD, The Gazette July 30, 2011



There are two basic crime scenes when it comes to gun violence in Canada. One involves weapons that are traceable - sometimes using the \$1 billion long-gun registry that is likely to be scrapped by the Conservative government this fall, as promised. The other - far more common - involves guns that are not traceable because they are not registered, the registration number was erased or the guns used to kill are never found.

The looming question as MPs get set to haggle once again over the emotional longgun registry issue is: Does it save lives?

What do the statistics show for the years since 2001, when the requirement of a licence to possess and acquire firearms started and since 2003, when registration of all firearms, including rifles and shotguns, became mandatory?

The Gazette compiled Statistics Canada data on the use of guns in violent crimes and found that only in a minority of cases were the guns registered. For example, of the 1,466 guns used in homicides between 2002 and 2009, 133 were registered, 360 were not registered, and 973 were of unknown origin (the firearm was not recovered or the serial number was removed). Long-gun homicides in that time declined from 40 to 29, a drop of 27 per cent.

Of the 179 homicides by firearm in 2009, 112 (or 69 per cent) involved handguns - the weapon of choice of organized criminals and the elephant in the room when discussing the value of the long-gun registry.

And despite apparent signs of the registry's success, there is a frustrating lack of research showing the exact outcomes of police investigations using the registry. For such a costly and divisive government policy, the long-gun registry's specific impact remains largely anecdotal and unproven.

Université de Montréal criminologist Étienne Blais said the statistical trends favour keeping the registry.

A study Blais published in January looked at the effect of Canada's gun-control laws, including Bill C-68 passed in 1995, which stipulated the gun ownership licences and firearm registration system now in place. The cumulative effects of those laws were "a significant drop in the number of homicides committed with a firearm, a decrease of five to 10 per cent, depending on the province ... we can say that these gun control laws have saved lives." The report could not say to what extent that was due to the long-gun registry alone.

In 2010, the Institut national de la santé publique du Québec concluded, based on a study by U de M criminologist Marie-Pier

Gagné, that "between 1998 and 2004, the coming into force of Bill C-68 is associated, on average, with a reduction of 50 firearm-related homicides and 250 firearm-related suicides per year in Canada."

"Why not keep what is obviously a good police tool, if it can help save lives?" Blais said this week. "The huge cost of setting it up has been dealt with. Now we have a system in place and police say they need it."

Abolishing the registry would have an impact on police investigations.

Waterloo Regional police chief Matt Torigian explained how the long-gun registry is used on a regular basis. "We came across a crime scene recently with a man who was obviously deceased by gunshot and a long gun was at the scene. Because of the registry, we were able to trace the weapon to the person who had just sold it to the man who was deceased. We determined it was a suicide and the investigation stopped there" and saved valuable police time and resources.

Another likely scenario might involve an armed robbery. "Say a group of thieves breaks into a farmhouse near Montreal and steals a shotgun. They saw it off (to conceal it better under their clothes) and drive to Windsor, Ont., where, in the course of committing a bank robbery they drop the gun and flee the scene," Torigian said. Because of the registry, police can find out that the gun is owned by a Montreal man, a victim of theft. "It might give us a lot more leads to go on. There might be witnesses to the break-in in Montreal. We can coordinate efforts between police departments."

Torigian adds that he respects that the Conservatives won the May 2 federal election and he fully expects the long-gun registry to be scrapped. He adds that the registry is but one tool and doesn't replace other forms of basic policing methods that have proven to be effective over decades.

Using the registry has certainly become part of today's policing. The RCMP says that the average daily queries nationally of the Canadian Firearms Registry On-Line last year was 14,385, up from 1,813 in 2003. In the last quarter of 2010, police in Quebec consulted it 60,880 times.

Gun control By the numbers Dig deeper into the statistics on the gun registry and homicide by checking out interactive graphics by The Gazette's Roberto Rocha at montrealgazette.com/interactives

The registry database allows police to verify a name, address and firearms licence number of an individual, or firearm-related data like the serial number or registration certificate of a firearm. But there is no guarantee the guns on the list will be at the listed address.

"Lots of data show positive effects since the establishment of the firearms registry," former Montreal police chief Yvan Delorme said in 2009.

"From 1995 to 2005, deaths and injuries by bullets went from 1,125 to 818 (nationally). From 1995 to 2007, homicides with shoulder weapons (like rifles, covered in the long-gun registry) diminished by 50 per cent (from 61 to 32). Since 1995, homicides of women by firearms diminished by 30 per cent, while other homicides of women increased by 16 per cent. In 2008, there were less than a third of armed robberies compared to 1995."

Yet the maddening fact is that it's hard or impossible to predict who might lose it and go out and shoot people.

Dawson College shooter Kimveer Gill's gun was registered yet that did not stop his deadly rampage in 2006. François Pepin, who shot and killed Laval police Constable Valérie Gignac as she kicked his apartment door down in 2005, was able to keep a powerful un-registered rifle for target

shooting despite having undergone a psychiatric evaluation at the Philippe Pinel Institute that showed him to be hot-tempered, immature and suffering from paranoia.

What irks registered gun owners who oppose the longgun registry is that they feel lumped together with criminal maniacs.

"We feel like second-class citizens but we are actually honest citizens, on the straight and narrow," Pointe Claire Rifle Club president Axel Waschke said. Getting a permit to own a gun, which involves taking a course in safe usage, passing a written exam and criminal background checks, should be sufficient, he added.

"We are simply doing something we like to do, practise shooting at a target," Waschke said. "It requires self-control and concentration, honesty and good sportsmanship. It's an Olympic event."

Blair Hagan, executive vice-president of the National Firearms Association of Canada, with 100,000 members nationwide, said the registration process cannot be compared to getting a car registered. Owning a hunting rifle should be no different than owning an all-terrain vehicle, which doesn't need to be registered, he said.

"The whole process of the registry is going against Canadians' right and cultural tradition of firearm ownership," Hagan said. The money used to maintain the registry should instead be used to help mentally ill people who might pose a safety risk if they own firearms, he added.

Irvin Waller, a criminologist at the University of Ottawa and author of the book *Less Law, More Order: The Truth about Reducing Crime*, said the debate over the longgun registry puts too much focus on a small part of gun violence and ignores other, more prevalent gun crimes.

"These statistics don't prove one way or the other (that the long-gun registry) is worth keeping," Waller said. "The bigger problem is gang-related violence. Gang members don't bother registering weapons."

A broader approach to dealing with violence in general, from sexual assaults and armed robberies to armed assaults and homicides, is what is really needed, Waller said. Alberta is the model jurisdiction in the country right now. The province is in the third year of a 10-year plan to deal with crime, one that includes more money for crime prevention and youth programs and more funds for municipal police departments.

"We're focusing on guns to the exclusion of other things," Waller said about the approach at the federal level and in other provinces.

The set-up cost of the longgun registry has been estimated at around \$1 billion but the annual cost of maintaining it is tough to pinpoint since it is not costed separately from the overall Canada Firearms Program that regulates a wide range of weapons including long guns. According to the RCMP's Departmental Performance Report for 2008-2009 the cost of all firearms registration, licensing and the supporting operations and infrastructure, was \$65.8 million that fiscal year.

Wendy Cukier, founder of the Coalition for Gun Control, said that gauging the precise impact of registering long guns is difficult, not unlike measuring many justice and health policies.

"You can't claim with complete certainty that X causes Y because there are too many variables," Cukier said. Similar challenges are present when measuring the effects of impaired driving laws, boat licensing and the regulation of explosives, she added.

There were 7,789,694 firearms (including 7,069,277 non-restricted weapons)

registered with the Canadian Firearms Program and 1,877,250 gun licenceholders as of last month. If the government removes the registration requirement for non-restricted firearms, police will lose a crucial way to track weapons after they are sold at the gun shops, Cukier said.

"If there's no record of guns owned by you then when you give a gun to someone, they can misuse it and there's no way to trace it back to you."

She points out the registry was used to determine that the rifle used to kill four RCMP officers in Mayerthorpe, Alta., on March 3, 2005, was borrowed illegally. Two men were later convicted of complicity after the fact because they supplied the killer with the weapon.

"Prior to the registration of firearms, police had to go to the (gun) store to access information about the owner of a gun like the Ruger Mini-14 semi-automatic weapon that was used in the Montreal massacre (the 1989 slaying of 14 women at the Université de Montréal)," Cukier said.

The Ruger Mini-14, she noted, was also used by Anders Behring Breivik who killed 76 people in a bombing and shooting spree in Norway on July 22. Breivik had no previous criminal red flags.

Jessica McDonald, a spokesperson for the federal Public Safety Department, said Friday that "should legislation to repeal the requirement to register nonrestricted firearms be passed by Parliament, owners of a Ruger Mini-14 would not be required to obtain a registration certificate."