

Prevention of Firearm Deaths in Canadian Adolescents and Young Adults.

Magnitude and Nature of the Firearm Mortality problem in Canadian 15-24 year olds.

Gunshot wounds are one of the leading causes of death in Canadian adolescents and young adults. In 1991 there were 309 firearm deaths in 15-24 year olds in this country. To give you perspective, this is compared to 202 cancer deaths and 197 deaths from unintentional poisoning, falls, fires and drowning combined. Motor vehicle accidents are the first cause of death in 15-24 year olds, and suicide is second. Firearms are a leading method in completed suicides.

In Canada, suicides account for the majority of firearm deaths in 15-24 year olds, as well as the general population. For a more in depth description of the firearm mortality problem in young Canadians, see *Firearm Deaths in Canadian Adolescents and Young Adults*, *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, Vol. 85, No. 2.

Firearm Ownership Increases the Risk of Homicide, Suicide or Accidental Death in the Home

Numerous scientifically and statistically valid studies have demonstrated that, far from being a protection, a firearm in the home increases dramatically the chance that someone in that home will die from a gunshot wound. All of these studies were published in highly respected medical journals and the articles were reviewed by other researchers prior to publication to ensure that the studies were statistically valid. Three are summarized below.

Dr. Sloan et al, in the New England Journal of Medicine, compared homicide rates between Vancouver and Seattle, cities that are similar geographically and demographically. Vancouver has stricter gun control laws than Seattle. The study showed that rates of burglary, assault and



Why not react ?

Bill C-68 - Firearm Control Legislation - Bill C-68

Firearm deaths, particularly suicides, are a leading cause of death in Canadian adolescents. The 1995 gun control legislation which was passed by the Parliament in June is presently in danger of dying in the Senate. This law would require registration of all firearms, ban semi-automatic military weapons and certain handguns. Presently the Senators are being deluged with letters from those opposed to gun control legislation. To express your support of this law, named Bill C-68, please write to:

The Honourable Gerald A. Beaudoin, Chair, Standing Senate Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, Senate of Canada, Ottawa, Ontario, K1A 0A4, phone (613) 995-6128, Fax (613) 943-0685.

robberies were similar in the two cities. The homicide rate in Seattle was much higher than the rate in Vancouver and all of the difference was due to a higher number of fire arm homicides in Seattle. The authors conclude that, "virtually all of this excess risk (of homicide) was explained by a 4.8-fold-higher risk of being murdered with a handgun in Seattle as compared to Vancouver. Rates of homicide by means other than guns were not substantially different in the two study communities".

Dr. Brent, in the Journal of the American Medical Association, found that the availability of a firearm in the home increased the risk for suicide in adolescents. Their conclusions were, "The availability of guns in the home, independent of firearms type or method of storage, appears to increase the risk for suicide among adolescents".

In an article published in the New England Journal of Medicine, Dr. S. Kellerman and Reay demonstrated that "for every self protection homicide involving a firearm in the home, there were 1.3 accidental deaths, 4.6 criminal homicides, and 37 suicides involving firearms." In other

words, gun owners were 43 times more likely to be kill with their firearm in a domestic dispute, a suicide attempt, or an accident than in self protection.

Gun Control Legislation has been Shown to Save Lives.

It has been well documented that gun control measures are effective in reducing deaths.

A study commissioned by the Canadian Department of Justice looked at the suicide rate in Canada following the 1978 federal gun control legislation. They showed a significant decline in the suicide rates for all age groups except the over 40 year olds. In the younger age groups, the rate of suicides committed with firearms declined, and suicides with other methods did not increase to compensate, so the total suicide rate declined as well.

In a study published in the Canadian Medical Association Journal, Dr. M. Killias studied national rates of homicide and suicide in Canada, European countries, and the United States. He showed that the rates of homicide and suicide in general were higher in countries with higher rates of home ownership of guns. These higher rates were due to increases in the rates of *firearm* suicides and homicides. In countries with low rates of gun ownership, there were no increases in suicides and homicides using other methods to compensate for the lower number of gun deaths.

Dr. Loftin, in a study in the New England Journal of Medicine, described the result of a law passed in the District of Columbia in 1976 which banned handguns and required registration of long guns. Firearm homicide and firearm suicide rates abruptly dropped by about 25%. The rates of homicide and suicide by other methods did not increase, so there was an overall drop in deaths. The adjacent metropolitan areas of Maryland and Virginia which had no such laws enacted did not show any changes in their homicide and suicide rates, which indicates that the drop in gun deaths in DC was due to the new law.

Young People and Firearms - Lethal Combination.

Many of the developmental characteristics of adolescence create special risk for young people when there is a fire-arm available to them. Some of these are summarized below:

- Identity issues and peer pressure - the desire to be respected and to impress others may cause youths to use firearms in an unauthorized and risky way.
- Impulsivity: lack of experience and self control puts youths at risk for injury to themselves and others.
- Independence and autonomy - teenagers want to challenge parental rules and establish own "adult" behaviours.
- Substance abuse: Many youths are experimenting with or using alcohol and other drugs in an irresponsible way. A high proportion of suicide and homicide victims are found to have high blood levels of alcohol.

- Increasing intellectual abilities and resourcefulness - Teenagers and young adults have the ability to bypass parental safeguards on firearms stored in the home, and are thus at higher risk than younger siblings.

Young people seem to be more likely to benefit from gun control measures, reduce the availability of firearms. In the Canadian Dept of Justice study mentioned earlier, the younger age groups were particularly affected by the 1978 gun control legislation.

In a New England Journal of Medicine study comparing suicide rates between Vancouver and Seattle, Dr. Sloan et al found that there was a large difference in the suicide rates of 15-24 olds between the two cities. The suicide rate in Seattle youths was higher than Vancouver's, and the increased suicides in Seattle were due to a much higher number of firearm suicides. The authors state "Persons 15 to 24 year old had a higher suicide rate in King County (Seattle) than in the Vancouver area. Virtually all the difference was due to an almost 10-fold-higher rate of suicide by handguns in King County."

Suicide in young people is often an impulsive act committed under the influence of alcohol or other substances. It is oftentimes not the result of chronic severe mental illness or long-time premeditated plan. If a highly lethal method is available, an attempt is more likely to succeed. If a lethal method is not available, either a less lethal one will be used or the suicide attempt may not be made. Every day young people are admitted to the hospital with overdoses from suicide attempts. Most of these will recover and be offered counselling and other kinds of assistance. Most firearm suicide attempters succeed in killing themselves and are never even seen in a hospital.

Recommendations.

-Registration of all firearms. The Canadian experience with registration and restriction of handguns has resulted in handguns being used in a much smaller percentage of the homicides and suicides committed in this country, as compared to the experience in the United States, where handguns are the leading firearms used. At present long guns (rifles and shotguns) are used in the majority of Canadian homicides and suicides. A system of registration will encourage more responsible use and storage of these presently unrestricted weapons.

A recent study showed that in one half of households owning guns, the guns had not been used in the preceding year. These households might reconsider the need for that gun if registration were required.

At present there are only estimates of the numbers and types of firearms in Canada. A registration system would provide health officials with a national database which is essential for the purpose of researching methods of preventing firearm deaths.

-Ban cheap handguns. Handguns are particularly likely to be used in an impulsive manner, due to their small size and ease of use. Handguns which do not meet criteria for competitive shooting should not be allowed.

-Strengthen standards for storage of weapons. While a determined adolescent or young adult can overcome almost any obstacle to obtain a firearm, the younger age groups are more easily deterred by safe storage methods. Studies have shown that the most common scenario for accidental shooting in children is the presence of an unlocked and loaded firearm.

-Teach gun owners the risks that a gun in the home presents. Include developmental education in weapons training programs for gun owners with children and adolescents in the home. They should know the risks to their children and teenagers and how to minimize these risks.

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