

## **MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF VIOLENT CRIME: A Canadian Perspective**

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In 1996, Canada's crime rate fell for the fifth consecutive year, down 1.6%. These decreases followed almost three decades of steady increases. Nevertheless, the five-year decline put the crime rate at virtually the same level as it was in 1986. There were 2.6 million Criminal Code incidents reported by the police in 1996, 11% of which were violent crimes and 59% property crimes. The remaining incidents were other criminal offences such as mischief, prostitution, arson and bail violations (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1998). Even the violent crime rate fell for the fourth

consecutive year, this time by 2%. Five of the nine largest census metropolitan areas reported a decline in violent crime, the largest in Toronto (-9%).

The most recent International Crime (Victims) Survey confirms the recent trends in police-reported data. The survey shows declines in most crimes between 1991 and 1995 (Mayhew and van Dijk, 1997).

In spite of this encouraging news, fear of crime among Canadians is reported to have increased. The Canadian public's concerns about crime and, in particular, about youth crime is as great as ever. The International Crime (Victims) Survey indicates, for example, that 26% of respondents expressed a concern about their safety when they are out alone in the dark (*Idem*, p.51).

Law enforcement agencies still seem to enjoy the confidence of the public. According to the same victimization survey data, for instance, 80% of Canadian respondents thought that the police did good job in controlling crime in the area. This was the highest level of satisfaction expressed by respondents in eleven industrialized countries compared by Mayhew and vanDijk (*Idem*, p. 47)<sup>1</sup>. Nevertheless, the overall credibility of the criminal justice system seems to have been significantly eroded during the last decade. In particular, the credibility of the youth justice system as was noted by a recent Parliamentary Committee (Government of Canada, 1997) is particularly low and the public dissatisfaction with the justice system's response to youth crime is alarming (Department of Justice, 1998).

Public attitudes towards the criminal justice system and public fear of crime are not always easy to assess and to understand (Roberts, 1994). In Canada, these attitudes are most certainly influenced by images and reports from our neighbours to the South. In any event, it is probably fair to characterize the current general public attitude towards crime as impatient and punitive. There is often an unrealistic expectation that the criminal justice system can effectively deal with every conceivable

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<sup>1</sup> The eleven countries were Canada (80%), USA (77%), Scotland (69%), England and Wales (68%), Northern Ireland (63%), Sweden (62%), France (56%), Switzerland (55%), Finland (55%), Austria (55%), and The Netherlands (45%). The percentage shown within brackets indicates the respective levels of satisfaction with police expressed by respondents.

social problem. The system tends to be overburdened by this general over-reliance of the criminal law and the criminal justice system and, in particular, Canada's correctional institutions are facing serious problems of prison over-crowding (Correctional Service of Canada, 1997).

Several initiatives have been taken in Canada in the last few years to address some of these issues. These have included: (1) Increased spending in crime prevention programs; (2) measures to combat the violent criminality of organized criminal groups, (3) a comprehensive revision of Canada's sentencing laws, to name but a few. There also is a recent official Federal Government proposal to bring some far reaching changes to the law governing our youth justice system, *The Young Offenders Act* (Department of Justice 1998). Some local concerns, particularly in Vancouver, with specific types of criminality related to drug trafficking and drug consumption are also adding to the pressure already exerted on the system. Vancouver, for instance, has one of the largest rate of property crime in the country and a violent crime rate which is apparently increasing steadily while it seems to be decreasing in most of the rest of the country. The local public is predictably quick in making a link between these facts and the growing problem of drug consumption and trafficking in the city. They are demanding action.

One of Canada's most significant initiatives in the last few years has been the measures it has taken in the area of firearm regulation as part of its efforts to address the problem of violent crime.

Because of the attention that such issues have received in Canada, I would like to use the next few minutes to focus on the question of the link between violent crime and firearms and attempt to relate to you some aspects of the Canadian experience in that regard.

### **Prevention of Violence Through Firearm Regulation**

Although it may be unrealistic to expect that all violent crimes can be prevented, research has already identified a number of factors associated with violence. The

availability of firearms is clearly one of them. Successful preventive strategies that target these factors can be developed. Yet, even if it is indisputable that firearms play a significant role in many violent crimes, the extent to which violent crimes can be prevented by reducing or controlling the availability of firearms is still a matter of considerable debate. Part of the answer to the question of violent crime prevention lies perhaps in the realization that the category .violent crime. itself includes a wide variety of situations which call for different strategies. The respective roles of various factors, including situational determinants such as the presence or availability of firearms, are not necessarily the same from one kind of violent incident to another. Even the category of .homicide. is deceptively simplistic. It does not designate one type of crime, but a wide variety of incidents in which the availability of firearms acquires a different significance.

Trends in the Canadian homicide rate can be instructive but they are sometimes difficult to interpret. The lowest rate of homicide between 1926 and today occurred in 1950. Between that year and 1965, there was a gradual rise in the rate of criminal homicide. Then, between 1966 and 1975, a dramatic rise of 250 percent in the homicide rate occurred (from 1.24 to 3.07 per 100,000 population) (Silverman and Kennedy, 1993: 34). Since then, there has been a fairly consistent decline in the homicide rate, from 3.02 in 1975 to 2.11 in 1996 (Hung, 1997). The reasons for this trend reversal in 1975 are not well understood. A number of social, demographic and other factors are necessarily at play, not to mention the potential impact of a number of criminal justice practices aiming to incapacitate offenders and deter recidivism. Furthermore, advances in emergency medicine may also explain some of the observed changes (United States Department of Justice, 1997a: 5). There is no easy way of verifying whether homicide attempts and serious assaults have in fact become less frequent or have simply tended to become less lethal during that period.

In 1996, the firearm homicide rate was 0.70 per 100, 000 population. Based on police reports, there were 211 homicides committed in Canada which involved a firearm, or exactly one-third of the total number of homicides (633) committed during that year. That proportion was consistent with the average percentage of homicides involving a firearm during the last twenty years, 32.9 percent. The proportion was higher before 1975, when it used to fluctuate between 40 and 48 percent. Furthermore,

the proportion of homicides involving a firearm is also subject to considerable regional variations: in 1996, it was the highest in Nova Scotia (44 percent), in Quebec (41 percent) and in British Columbia (38 percent), and the lowest in Saskatchewan (13 percent) and in Manitoba (18 percent) (Hung, 1997a).

The role played by firearms in homicides varies according to the type of incidents, the circumstances, the age and gender of the victim, the age and gender of the offender, the relationship between the offender and the victim, and many other factors. For instance, a distinction is often made between .primary homicides., when serious injury or death is the primary motivation of the assault, and .secondary homicides., when the primary intent is to commit some other crime (Goetting, 1995). Primary homicides tend to be directed at an acquaintance, very often one with whom the offender has an intimate relationship. Primary homicides represent a larger proportion of the total number of homicides than secondary homicides and are therefore frequently identified as the primary target for prevention through a public health approach.

The great majority of murderers are males. Over the thirty year period between 1961 and 1990, female murderers accounted for only 12 percent of all murders and, in three-quarters of these cases, the victim was a member of their own family. Female murderers were also less likely to use a firearm than male offenders (23 percent of cases)(Silverman and Kennedy, 1993: 141). When the murderers are under the age of eighteen, which is in approximately eight percent of all homicides, beating/strangling is the most frequent cause of death (33 percent, between 1991 and 1993), followed by stabbing and shooting (29 percent each during the same period) (Wright and Federowycz, 1996: 71).

During the thirty year period ending in 1990, the vast majority of victims of firearm-related homicides were between the ages of 18 and 34 (41.7 percent) and between the ages of 35 and 54 (40.7 percent). By contrast, victims of firearm-related homicides under the age of 18 accounted for 9.4 percent, and victims over the age of 55, 8.0 percent of the total number of victims. In all, 71 percent of firearm-related homicide victims were male. In fact, when the victim of a homicide was a female, a firearm was

somewhat less likely to be used than when the victim was male (Silverman and Kennedy, 1993).

When the murderer and the victim are strangers to each other, the murderer is extremely likely to be a male (96 percent of cases) and under the age of 26 (50 percent of cases). During the thirty year period ending in 1990, firearms were used in approximately 40 percent of cases (Silverman and Kennedy, 1993: 97).

When the murder victim is female, she is at a much higher risk, as much as nine times greater, of being killed by a spouse or by someone with whom she has an intimate relationship than by a stranger (Rodgers and Kong, 1996; Wilson *et al.*, 1995; Wright and Federowycz, 1996: 68). During the thirty year period between 1961 and 1990, 2129 husbands killed their wives. They used a firearm in 47 percent of the cases and even more frequently when they were above the age of 65 (Silverman and Kennedy, 1993: 69-76). During the same period, among the 782 wives who killed their husbands, only 35 percent used a firearm (as compared to stabbing, in 53 percent of the cases). In 27 percent of the cases where the murderer was male, he also committed suicide. Homicide was followed by a suicide in only 3 percent of the cases of female offenders (*Ibidem*).

When the murder victim is an infant or a child, the murderer is often a parent. In 620 cases of a parent killing a child in Canada, between 1961 and 1990, 323 involved the fathers and 289 involved the mothers. Parents were more likely to kill their infants and young children than older children. In 43 percent of the cases involving the mother, the child was less than two years old (*Ibidem*). Between 1981 and 1992, 24 percent of family-related homicides involved a firearm (Rodgers and Kong, 1996: 124). Firearms were not particularly likely to be used when the victim was an infant or a child. They were rarely used by the mothers (9 percent of cases) and they were used by the fathers in 25 percent of the cases. As the age of the victim increased, firearms were used more frequently (Silverman and Kennedy, 1993). Generally similar patterns were also observed in the United States (Kunz and Bahr, 1996).

Aboriginal people in Canada have been, in recent years, more likely to be victims and suspects in homicide cases than non-aboriginal people. Studies examining the

overall patterns of homicide among aboriginal peoples, both on and off-reserve, have concluded that the etiology of aboriginal homicides is likely to be different from that of non-aboriginal homicides (Doob *et al.*, 1994). For example, when homicide victims are aboriginal, firearms are used in a smaller proportion of cases than when victims are non-aboriginal (*Idem*: 1994: 53; see also: Moyer, 1992: 393; Silverman and Kennedy, 1993).

The above not only illustrates some of the complexity of homicide incidents, but also shows how the role of firearms may vary depending on the age and gender of the victims and the offenders or the nature of their relationship. Data on homicides show that the methods used in such incidents change over time and across age groups. Different sub-types of homicides involve relatively distinct causal processes and it is important to ask whether firearm usage varies across socially and situationally defined sub-types of homicide and, if so, how (Sacco, 1996). Whether firearms are used or not in these different kinds of incidents depends on a number of factors which cannot simply be reduced to the matter of whether firearms were available/accessible or not. In fact, it is fair to assume that the availability or immediate accessibility of firearms plays a greater role in some types of homicide risk situations than in others. Furthermore, roughly two-thirds of homicides committed each year in Canada cannot be explained by the presence of firearms simply because they do not involve the use of a firearm. Finally, an unknown number of homicides involve methods other than a firearm, even when such a weapon is available.

An average of 208 homicides involving a firearm were committed each year during the last decade. How many of these could have been prevented? The Canadian experience of the last twenty years leaves a number of questions unresolved. First, it must be noted that the relative frequency of firearm-related homicides in Canada has been reduced during that period without significant changes in the overall availability of firearms in the country (Department of Justice Canada, 1996). Secondly, even if the reduction in the rates of firearm-related homicides in Canada can perhaps be explained by the impact of measures taken to limit the availability and the accessibility of certain types of firearms and, in particular, handguns, it must be noted that the proportion of firearm-related homicides involving a handgun has been increasing rather than decreasing.



There obviously is no simple explanation for the observed decrease in both homicides and firearm-related homicides in Canada. The studies we reviewed did not provide conclusive answers to that question (Dandurand, 1998). Firearm control measures may have been successful in preventing firearms from falling into the wrong hands, but there is as yet no firm evidence that that was effectively accomplished. Most studies have shown that, in a significant percentage of cases, the offender was not in legal possession of the firearm and also that the offender had a criminal record. For instance, a study of firearm-related homicides in Toronto revealed that, of the 60 suspects who had been apprehended and charged, 65 percent had prior convictions, 20 percent were awaiting trial on other offences at the time of the incident, and 13 percent were on probation or parole (Axon and Moyer, 1994).

It may also be that the observed change in the homicide rate had little to do with any change in the relative availability and accessibility of firearms in the country. Some answers to these questions may lie in changes in patterns of homicide or patterns of certain specific types of homicides. For example, changes in patterns of armed robberies may have caused changes in so-called secondary homicides, i.e. those committed during the commission of another criminal offence. It is also possible that family violence patterns, which account for approximately one third of all homicides, may have been affected by other factors. The observed reductions in homicide and firearm-homicide was accompanied by a reduction in the observed percentage of all homicides accounted for by domestic homicides (Wright and Fedorowycz, 1996: 67).

### **The Role of Firearms in Assaults, Threats and Robberies**

In Canada, most assaults and threats do not involve a weapon. According to the 1996 International Crime (Victim) Survey, 12.7 percent of Canadian respondents reported having been assaulted or threatened during the previous five years. The incidents involved a weapon in less than one fifth of all cases and a firearm in less than three percent of them. In all, 0.37 percent of Canadians reported being assaulted or threatened with a firearm (Block, 1998). Block, who compared the survey findings for nine western industrialized countries, reported that less than one percent of

respondents, in all countries except the United States, reported being assaulted or threatened with a firearm during the previous five years. In the United States, both armed threats and assaults and those involving a firearm were much more frequent than in other countries. The risk of being threatened or assaulted with a firearm was, for example, 5.9 times higher in the United States than in Canada (Block, 1998: 18; Mayhew and van Dijk, 1997).

Robbery is another type of violent crime frequently involving firearms. According to Statistics Canada .Canadian Crime Statistics., there were 31,242 robberies reported in Canada in 1996. Of these, 21.3 percent were classified as firearm robberies and 33 percent involved other weapons. In the last twenty years, the frequency of robberies has generally increased, but the percentage of robberies involving the use of a firearm has decreased (Department of Justice, 1996; Hung, 1997). There were also considerable regional variations in robbery rates across the country, as well as in the percentage of robberies involving a firearm. For the province of Quebec, that percentage was consistently higher than the national average. Robberies are also overwhelmingly committed in large urban areas (Desroches, 1995: 37), even if firearm ownership is concentrated outside of urban areas.

The term robbery refers to a wide variety of different incidents where force or the threat of force is used. Little is achieved by attempting to explain the role of firearms in such incidents without distinguishing between the kinds of incidents involved. Robberies of banks and other financial institutions are very different from other commercial robberies or from the mugging of individuals (Desroches, 1995). Whether or not any of these incidents involve a firearm is related to a number of offender/victim/target characteristics. It is known that muggings are more likely to be committed by youthful or teenage offenders, whereas bank robberies are more likely to be committed by men in their twenties (Desroches, 1995: 42). It is also known that repeat offenders committed their first offence at a very young age. The weapons used in street robberies are markedly different from those used in commercial or financial robberies (Seto, 1994: 10).

An offender's decision to use a weapon or not, to use a firearm as opposed to another weapon, and to use a real firearm as opposed to an imitation are likely

structured around several factors directly related to the characteristics of the victim or victims, the target and the offender. Whether a firearm is accessible to the offender is only one of the many factors which structure such decisions and is not necessarily the most important one.

A growing body of research on robbery incidents and on the decisions made by offenders reveals that robberies are often opportunistic and are planned at the last minute. At the center of the offender's concern is the need to manage the victim.. Speed, surprise, intimidation, and force are used to minimize the victim's resistance and the risk of violence or apprehension, as well as to optimize the chances of success of the attempt (Desroches, 1995: 31). Factors such as the availability of guns, one's modus operandi, the number and characteristics of the victims that must be controlled during the attempt will influence the decision of whether to use a weapon. Desroches (*Ibidem*) noted that, since robbery is seldom planned in detail, offenders are likely to use whatever weapons are at their disposal. Lone offenders apparently use a firearm more often than groups of offenders. Finally, the perception that the victim is armed also influences the decision to use a firearm or not. The use of a firearm in a robbery can lead to additional charges and tougher sentences for the offender who is apprehended. However, the extent to which this consideration is an important element in the decisions made by most offenders is unknown.

Some robberies result in murder. During the thirty year period between 1961 and 1990, robberies and theft which resulted in murders involved in an almost equal proportion shooting (31 percent), beating (30 percent) and stabbing (27 percent). In the cases, where a firearm was shot, it was a handgun in 47 percent of the cases (Silverman and Kennedy, 1993: 119). The incidents were generally intra-racial. The victims were generally males (82 percent) and older than 44 (60 percent)(*Ibidem*). An examination of a sample of 127 robbery incidents investigated by the Winnipeg Police Service during 1995, involving a total of 145 victims, revealed that none of the firearm robbery victims were killed, although 12 percent of them were injured during the incidents (Proactive Information Services, 1997).

Not all robberies come to the attention of the criminal justice system. Victimization surveys generally indicate that robberies which do not come to the attention of the

police, as compared to reported incidents, are likely to feature less injury, smaller financial losses, less use of weapons and less use of firearms. Possibly only half of all attempted robberies are completed. When the robbery is not completed, it is at least half as likely to be reported by the victim than when it is completed. Whether the offender is known to the victim and the nature of the victim's relationship to the offender (e.g., licit or illicit) also affects the likelihood that the incident will be reported. Fear of revenge, other personal factors, as well as factors relating to the circumstances of the offence also explain why many incidents are not reported (Desroches, 1995; van Dick and Mayhem, 1995). All of these observations dictate that caution be exercised in interpreting patterns and variations in the official robbery and firearm robbery rates.

### **Violent Firearm-Related Youth Crime**

The Federal/Provincial/Territorial Task Force on Youth Justice concluded its own review of the subject of youth violent crime by stating that there were clear differences between public perceptions of youth crime in Canada and reality (1996:18)(See also: Schissel, 1997; Roberts, 1994:46). The Report of the Task Force argued that the public is undoubtedly influenced by the American media and popular culture, and is probably unaware of the very large differences between Canada and the United States in the amount and seriousness of violent youth crime. (*Idem*: 17). Similar misconceptions based on the American experience with youth gun violence may also be affecting public perception of the seriousness of firearm-related youth violence in Canada, when, in fact, there is no consistent evidence that youth gun violence has been increasing in this country over the last two decades or so.

In the United States, violent youth crime has reached alarming proportions and has become the source of great public concern. Although violent youth crime rates seem to have decreased in the last few years, they did so only in relation to rates which had sharply increased in the previous decade or so. With respect to homicides, for example, between 1985 and 1992, the number of homicides committed each year by juveniles has more than doubled for all ages under 18. Beginning in 1985, there was a steady growth in firearm homicides, with no corresponding upward trend in

homicides which did not involve a firearm (Bilchik: 1996; Blumstein: 1995; 1996; Blumstein and Cork, 1996; Cornell, 1993; Donzinger, 1996; Kellermann: 1995; Powell *et al.*, 1996; Zimring, 1996).

The situation in Canada departs markedly from that of the United States. During the above-mentioned period, violent youth crime rates in Canada have remained much lower than in the United States. The Canadian per capita rate of homicides involving children and youths has not increased (Silverman and Kennedy, 1993: 164). According to Moyer (1996: 95), homicide and attempted murder rates for 12 to 17 year old suspects fluctuated from year to year in the past 17 years, with no consistent trend. Between 1961 and 1990, there was a total of 794 homicides involving children under the age of 18 (Silverman and Kennedy, 1993: 162). Firearms were involved in 45 percent of the cases of children under the age of 15, and in 31 percent of the cases involving youths between 15 and 17 (*Ibidem*).

The rate of youths charged with robberies involving a weapon other than a firearm has been increasing in the early part of this decade. However, the rate of youths charged with robberies involving a firearm (including fakes and air or pellet guns) has remained relatively low in relation to other types of robberies. That rate, after a decrease in the mid-1980's, climbed slowly back in the early 1990's to roughly the same level at which it was in the beginning of the 1980's. (*Idem*: 99). Youth's participation in violent gangs is possibly also a very different phenomenon in Canada than in the United States and is not as widespread as it is in that country. Unfortunately, there is relatively little Canadian research on the subject (e.g., Mathews, 1993) and even less on the use of firearms by such groups. Youth gang members are more likely than other youths to perceive a need to protect themselves against threats or assaults and to acquire a weapon for that purpose. However, some anecdotal evidence would appear to suggest that members of youth gangs in Canada are less likely than their American counterparts to carry a firearm as opposed to other kinds of weapons.

The observed epidemic of youth violence and, in particular, of youth gun violence in the United States did not find a parallel in Canada. Several authors have reflected on the reasons for this huge difference in the experience of the two countries, but

there is no definitive answer. Moyer noted that the observed increase in youth violent crime in the United States occurred in spite of the fact that juvenile justice legislation was toughened in many states. She concluded that the increase in violent youth crime in that country was most likely associated with social factors other than legislation (Moyer, 1996). In fact, it would appear that one of the most significant factors in explaining the different levels of youth violence in the two countries may indeed be the difference in the relative ease with which youths from the two countries have access to firearms, and in particular to handguns.

Several American authors explain the unprecedented increase in youth gun violence in their country in terms of what they refer to as the diffusion or contagion hypothesis (Bilchik, 1996; Blumstein, 1995; 1996; Blumstein and Cork, 1996; Travis, 1997). This diffusion hypothesis links the increased recruitment in the United States of young people to sell crack cocaine in the mid-1980's, and their easy access to firearms, to the spiralling increase in youth gun violence and its diffusion into the community.

According to this hypothesis (Blumstein, 1996), juveniles who increasingly became involved in the drug trade acquired guns to protect themselves, something which was relatively easy, given the wide availability of firearms in that country. Since youths are tightly related in schools and in neighbourhoods, many youths not involved in the drug business felt that they also had to acquire a firearm to protect themselves from armed drug dealers. The number of events in which guns are used represents only a small proportion of events and conflicts where guns are present. However, according to some authors, the presence of firearms presents a unique contingency that shapes decision-making patterns of individuals (Wilkinson and Fagan, 1996: 58). The increased presence of guns in the community has meant that disputes once settled by fights increasingly escalated to more lethal incidents involving shootings (Zimring, 1996). The end result, Blumstein observed, is that gun possession escalated into an arms race that diffused the weapons broadly throughout the community (1996: 2).

This hypothesis has brought several researchers to conclude that gun acquisition and gun violence among American youths is no longer as closely linked to drug

trafficking as it once was. It would appear that, in many instances, the urban environment has become so threatening even for youth not involved in the drug trade that many are arming themselves and engaging in nominally self-protective behaviour such as joining a gang for self-defence (Kennedy *et al.*, 1996: 153). Fear, self-protection and self-defence emerge as overwhelming reasons why a large proportion of American youths, particularly in cities, have taken to carrying concealed weapons on a regular basis (Bilchik, 1996; Hemenway *et al.*, 1996; Kelly, 1994; Sheley and Brewer, 1995; Sheley and Wright, 1995). This is particularly true of youths involved in crime or in gangs (Ash *et al.*, 1996; Bjerregaard and Lizotte, 1995; Callahan *et al.*, 1993; Decker *et al.*, 1996; Hutson *et al.*, 1994; Kennedy *et al.*, 1996; Koper and Reuter, 1996; Sheley and Wright, 1993; 1995). Youth protective gun ownership, it is often suggested, is best understood as an adaptation to the dangerous associations and circumstances associated with criminal behavior. (Lizotte *et al.*, 1994).

It is important to understand that, at the center of the whole diffusion hypothesis is indeed the observation that firearms, particularly handguns, were readily available to youths (Blumstein and Cork, 1996; Zimring, 1996). The possession or the carrying by a youth of the type of firearm which is defined in Canada as restricted or prohibited is illegal in both countries. In contrast to the situation in the United States where possession and carrying of such firearms is widespread among youths and particularly among youths involved in crime (Callahan *et al.*, 1993; Decker *et al.*, 1996; Kellermann, 1995; Sheley and Wright, 1993; 1995), there is no evidence that this is the case in Canada. In this country, most cases of youths charged with possession of offensive weapons did not involve prohibited weapons (switch blades, martial arts items, automatic firearms) or restricted weapons (handguns). In fact, incidents involving restricted weapons were fairly rare and their relative frequency had remained more or less stable over the last decade (Moyer, 1996: 100).

Youth access to firearms and in particular to handguns, which is far greater in the United States than in Canada, must thus be retained as one of the main factors explaining the observed difference in the levels of youth violence between the two countries.

The amount of school violence and the prevalence of firearms in schools are also two areas in which there are significant differences between the two countries. An American study of 105 school-associated deaths in twenty-five states over a two year period -1992 to 1994 - revealed that a firearm was involved in 77.1 percent of the cases. Victims tended to be male (95.6 percent), students (72 percent), belonging to a minority racial or ethnic group, in a secondary school within an urban school district (Kachur *et al.*, 1996; see also: Sheley *et al.*, 1995). There apparently is no equivalent in Canada to the level of school violence observed in several areas in the United States. There is, nevertheless, a perception among teachers, school board representatives and law enforcement officials that school violence is also increasing in Canada. The latter have indicated in a number of local surveys that they were concerned about an increase in both youth violence and weapon-carrying in schools (e.g., Walker, 1994).

A 1995 survey of Canadian school board and police respondents indicated, for example, that 80 percent of respondents believed that violence was much more commonplace and intense than ten years ago (Gabor, 1995). Many Canadian schools have established violence and weapons policies, including "zero tolerance policies.. However, there still is relatively little research on the prevalence of weapons and violence among students, inside and outside school grounds, and on whether these weapons are actually used in violent acts (Walker, 1994). A national mail-out survey of police officials and educators, indicated that: (1) weapons seizures in schools were unusual, were an urban phenomenon and were rare in rural settings; (2) seizures of firearms in both junior and senior high schools were very limited and restricted to urban centers of 50,000 or more people; (3) most weapons seized were knives, shop- or home-made weapons and clubs, bats and sticks; (4) the use of weapons in confrontational situations between youth in school was not a common practice (Walker, 1994: 8). A 1995 survey of 962 Calgary secondary school students, undertaken in support of a community-based strategy for dealing with youth crime and violence in that city, indicated that 28 percent of the respondents reported carrying a weapon at school or having a weapon in their lockers during the past year. The weapon in question was most often a knife (15.9 percent), a home-made weapon (11.6 percent), or a club or a bat (9.1 percent). The least frequently possessed weapons were handguns (2.6 percent), followed by pellet guns (5.1 percent) and replicas (6.5



percent) (Smith *et al.*: 1995; 1995a). Possession of a handgun was mostly reported by male students. In fact, if one considers only male respondents, the percentage of those who reported possessing a handgun at school was as high as 4.6 percent. However, the reported behaviour was relatively infrequent: four fifths of the students who reported having a handgun at school at least once during the last year reported that it had happened only once or a few times (Smith *et al.*, 1995a: 60).

### **Firearms and Domestic Violence**

In recent years, increased attention has been given to family homicide, and in particular to spousal homicides. Between 1975 and 1990, approximately one third of all domestic homicides involved a firearm (Dansys Consultant, 1992: 13). There does not seem to be evidence of an increase in the relative frequency of family homicides in Canada. Between 1975 and 1991, domestic homicides with firearms have exhibited a sharper decline than homicides in general (*Idem*: 15). However, the proportion of murders in Canada which can be characterized as spousal murders is higher than it is in the United States. This is sometimes cited as a particular source of concern, although Silverman and Kennedy (1993: 69) suggested that this seems to reveal a broader pattern: the lower the overall homicide rate, the higher the proportion of domestic homicide in the country. In fact, given what is known about the complex nature of spousal homicides and the ways in which they differ from other forms of homicide, spousal homicide rates should be expected to evolve somewhat differently than the rates of other types of homicides.

Intimate homicide and violence have many characteristics that render them unique. Confrontations between intimate partners are in most cases expressive, but they nevertheless differ in many ways from other expressive conflicts (Block and Christakos, 1995). According to Daly and Wilson (1997:85) who conducted an extensive review of the available research evidence, sexual proprietariness appears to be the primary motivational factor in most homicides. They concluded that the ostensible motive in the majority of homicides is the husband's aggrieved intolerance of the real or imagined alienation of his wife. (*Ibidem*). Women recently separated from their husband or common-law partners are at a much higher risk of being murdered

(Crawford et al., 1997). Ethno-cultural variables (Block and Christakos, 1995) as well as historical variables (Boisvert and Cusson, 1994) were shown to be significant in explaining variations in patterns of spousal homicides. The type of relationship is also a significant factor.

Some studies have shown that the number of women killed by men is almost eight times higher in common-law unions than in legal marriages (Crawford *et al.*, 1997; Rodgers and King, 1996; Wilson *et al.* 1995; Daly and Wilson, 1997). In many cases, the offender will kill himself after killing his spouse (Crawford *et al.*, 1997; Department of Justice Canada, 1995b; Felthous and Hempel, 1995; Stack, 1997). It seems that the closer the ties between the offender and the victim in a homicide, the greater the ensuing guilt and the greater the likelihood of suicide (Stack, 1997). It also seems that the female victim resistance in intimate perpetrated assaults increases the likelihood of injury, and this, more so than in situations where the female victim and her aggressor are strangers (Backman and Carnody, 1994). In the cases of women who kill their husband, it is clear that both the motive and the profile of the offenders are significantly different from that of other murderers (O'Keefe, 1997; Roberts, 1996). In many cases, the woman is reacting to past abuses (Department of Justice Canada, 1995b).

The research literature makes it clear that spousal homicide is rarely a spontaneous single event and is more generally the end of serial violence that takes place in the home (Silverman and Kennedy, 1993: 70). In sum, spousal murders appear to result from the problems, tensions, and conflicts endemic in dysfunctional marriages. Attempts to reduce the amount of interpersonal violence in these unions may, therefore, help reduce the likelihood that they will end in a fatality. (*Idem*: 76). A history of fights in the home and substance abuse are important factors for homicides in the home, but there is strong evidence suggesting that a firearm in the home is also associated with a higher risk of homicide by a family member or intimate acquaintance (Boyd, 1995; Gabor, 1994; Kellermann *et al.*, 1993). According to Reiss and Roth (1993: 262), the choice of a weapon in violent domestic disputes may well be the nearest available object that can project force. In contrast to other types of homicide, it would seem likely, the two authors concluded, that in domestic disputes the instrumentality rather than intent contributes most of the firearm's lethal effect. (*Ibidem*).

Reiss and Roth (1993) concluded that domestic disputes are the type of interpersonal confrontation most likely to be influenced by the presence of firearms. Different strategies are apparently called for to prevent homicide in the homes versus homicide in the streets (Tardiff *et al.*, 1995). In addition, because fatal incidents between spouses are most often preceded by other violent incidents often known to the police, they would appear to be preventable, at least in some cases, by measures aimed at reducing the likelihood that a firearm will be present during such conflicts. Crawford and her colleagues studied intimate femicides in Ontario between 1991 and 1994. They found evidence that intimate femicides were not the isolated and unpredictable acts of passion they are often believed to be. (1997: 50). In half of the cases, the victim had previously been attacked or threatened by the offender and, in at least one third of the cases, the couple had had some contact with the police before the killing. The authors concluded that in a substantial portion of intimate femicides, there are clear signs of danger preceding the killing - including signs that are available to those who might be able to intervene to prevent violence. (*Ibidem*).

Prohibition orders and, to a lesser extent, measures to ensure the safe storage of the firearms that are kept at home, are often proposed as effective preventive measures (Department of Justice Canada, 1995b). The effectiveness of such measures in preventing spousal homicides has not been scientifically assessed. Such measures, however, are not likely to affect situations where the firearm is illegally obtained or possessed by the offender. According to Dansys Consultants (1992: 26), as much as one fifth of the firearms used in spousal homicide cases may fall within that category.

### **Source and Type of Firearms Used in Violent Crime**

During 1996, among cases where a homicide involved a firearm, 50 percent involved a handgun, 39% involved a rifle or shotgun, and 11 percent involved a fully-automatic firearm, a sawed-off rifle or shotgun or a firearm of an unknown type (Hung, 1997). Since 1990, the percentage of firearm-related homicides involving a handgun has been increasing significantly, while the percentage of cases involving a rifle or

shotgun has been decreasing proportionally. Axon and Moyer (1994) examined firearm-related homicides that occurred in Toronto from 1991 to 1993. In those cases where information was available on the firearm used, 72 percent were handguns, seven percent sawed-off long guns, 20 percent rifles or shotguns. The percentage of cases involving handguns was significantly larger in Toronto than the national average. In the small percentage of cases of armed robbery, where information was available on the firearm used, the Toronto data revealed that 43 percent were handguns and 36 percent were replicas or air/pellet guns (Axon and Moyer, 1994). A study of firearms homicides investigated by the Winnipeg Police Service between 1990 and 1995, showed that they represented a significantly lower proportion of all homicides than was the case at the national level. The percentage of firearm homicides involving a restricted weapon was also lower than the national average (Proactive Information Services, 1997).

In the United States, for firearm homicides in which the type of weapon is known, handguns account for nearly 80 percent of the cases (Goetting, 1996: 158). Even in countries where the possession of handguns is prohibited or restricted, a proportional increase in their use in crime is being observed (e.g., England and Wales: Mayhew, 1996: 4). Since these firearms often constitutes the primary focus of various regulatory regimes, an increase in their relative use in the commission of various crimes raises the issue of their continuing availability on the illicit market.

There is no sound estimate of the proportion of legal and illegal firearms used in crime. The firearm is generally not recovered and, when it is, it has often been tampered with so as to obscure its origin (Mayhew, 1996: 15). When an illegal firearm is used, it has very frequently been stolen from the legitimate owner (Corkery, 1994; Dom, 1995), most often from a private dwelling. In an exploratory study on the use of firearms in criminal incidents in Toronto, Axon and Moyer (1994) found that in the homicide and robbery cases where the firearm was recovered, it was illegally held by the offender in 52 percent of cases. They also noted that many firearm offenders had a criminal record and were not in legal possession of the firearm prior to committing a firearms offence. Nearly two-thirds of murderers and robbers had criminal records (*Idem*). A similar picture was obtained from a study conducted in Winnipeg on firearms

homicide and robbery incidents investigated by the Winnipeg Police Service (Proactive Information Service, 1997).

It is not clear from looking at the experience of other countries that reducing the availability and accessibility of legal firearms will have, in itself, a large impact on the frequency with which firearms will be used for criminal purposes. Where effective restrictions on legal firearms exist, the proportion of illegal versus legal firearms used in crime is often greater. In England and Wales, for instance, most firearms used in crime were held illegally (Mayhew, 1996: 3; Home Office, 1997).

Finally, the .firearm. used to intimidate a victim may or may not be a real firearm. Since, a very small percentage of robberies result in an arrest and since the .firearm. used is even less frequently recovered, it is not possible to estimate with precision the proportion of real versus fake .firearms. used in robberies. One such preliminary estimate based on limited data on recovered firearms used in robberies in Toronto during 1993 suggests that at least 36 percent of weapons used in firearms robberies were replicas including air and pellet guns (Axon and Moyer, 1994: 23). Where effective restrictions on the possession of concealable firearms are in place, there may be a greater pressure on offenders to use imitation firearms as opposed to .real. ones.

### **International Comparisons**

International studies tend to show a positive correlation between levels of firearm ownership and homicide rates, even if the relationship is not exact, but not with violent crimes in general (Gabor, 1994: 35; 1995: 199). Cook and his colleagues (1995: 62) have argued that, while widespread availability of guns is not a .root-cause. of violent crime, it significantly adds to the deadliness of that violence. The exact nature and meaning of the correlation between firearms ownership and homicide is far from being understood. International comparisons indicate a strong statistical association between gun ownership and gun-related homicides (Killias, 1993b). Yet, the observed presence in some cases of a positive correlation between firearm ownership and non-firearm

related homicide rates suggests that other factors are at play in producing the observed correlation between the prevalence of firearms and homicide rates.

Even if there are many other reasons accounting for the differences between the rates of firearm-related crimes in Canada and in the United States, a comparison between the countries' respective rates of firearm homicides and firearm-related robberies strongly suggests that the large difference in the prevalence of firearms in the two countries is an important factor. A recent analysis conducted for the Department of Justice Canada (Hung, 1996) revealed the following: on average, between 1985 and 1995, the homicide rate in the United States was 3.8 times higher than in Canada. For the same period, twice as many homicides involved a firearm in the United States than in Canada. In 1995, the firearm homicide rate was 9.7 times higher than in Canada. In the United States, the average rate for all robberies during a ten year period between 1985 and 1995 was 2.4 times higher than in Canada and more frequently involved a firearm (37 percent versus 26 percent of the cases). During that period, the average firearm robbery rate was 3.4 times higher in the United States than in Canada (Ibidem). The greater availability of firearms in the United States might explain in part why the robbery rate in that country is consistently higher than the Canadian rate (Desroches, 1995: 34; Gabor, 1994: 34).

The killing of police officers in the line of duty is another area which illustrates the difference between the firearm situation in the two countries. According to Gabor (1997: 12), when the relative number of sworn officers in the two countries is taken into account, an American police officer is seven times more likely to be killed than a Canadian officer. In the United States, out of the 74 incidents which occurred in 1995, these incidents involved the use of a firearm in 83.7 percent of cases and a handgun in 58.1 percent of incidents (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1997).

Based on data from the 1996 International Crime (Victim) Survey during which respondents were asked whether they had been victims of a robbery, an assault or a threat in the past five years/and or past year, Block (1998) analyzed incidents of robbery in nine countries including Canada, England and Wales, Scotland, The Netherlands, Switzerland, France, Sweden, Austria and the United States. The frequency of robbery in the past five years varied from 2.5% to 4% in seven of the countries, with Canada situated at 3.4 percent. The differences, according to Block,

are probably not statistically meaningful. Similarly, excluding the United States, there was no meaningful difference in the reported rates of armed confrontation during a robbery. In the United States, respondents were about twice as likely as elsewhere to have been confronted with a weapon during a robbery in the past five years. In the United States, the weapon was twice as likely to be a firearm as it was in Canada (*Idem*: 15-17; Zawitz, 1995).

## **Conclusions**

Canada's numerous recent initiatives to reduce violent crime are perhaps paying off. There has not been however, an evaluation of any of these initiatives and it is therefore quite difficult to ascertain what impact they have effectively had. The observed decrease in violent crime is possibly a random one and even more likely a result of several changes in demographic variables. The phenomenon we are trying to control is very obviously a complex one. Various forms of violence call for different kinds of crime control and prevention strategies. I have shared with you some aspects of Canada's recent experience in the hope that they may generate some useful discussions and exchanges here today.

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