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EVALUATING POST-2019 CHANGES  
TO CANADA'S GUN CONTROL LAWS

March 2026





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## Executive summary | *sommaire*

**Since 2019, the landscape of Canadian firearms legislation** has undergone a seismic shift. Through a series of sweeping executive and legislative actions, the federal government has implemented a national freeze on legal handgun sales, banned thousands of models of so-called “assault-style” weapons, and tightened administrative requirements for licensing and transfers.

While these measures are often framed as essential for public safety, they have remained largely unexamined by independent researchers – until now.

Using the Firearms Policy Evaluation Framework, our study provides a rigorous assessment of these policy shifts. Drawing on a deep dive into the literature on gun control policy, as well as interviews with law enforcement, community workers, and stakeholders, we found that:

- There is no evidence to support a prohibition or confiscation (buyback) of assault-style weapons in the Canadian context.
- There is no evidence to support a freeze on the legal sales of handguns to licensed gun owners.
- Police are concerned with smuggled firearms from the United States and privately manufactured firearms (PMFs), not legal gun owners.

These policies are causing real harm to communities of hunters and sports shooters, Indigenous people, and Canada’s economy and heritage. For instance, the tighter gun restrictions impact small businesses, shooting ranges, historical re-enactors, and the competitive sport shooting community. For Indigenous communities, firearms are essential tools for subsistence and traditional ways of life. Meanwhile, the gun control debate is pitting rural Canadians – who are more likely to use legal long guns for hunting and recreational shooting – against urbanites who may not own guns themselves, but whose communities suffer higher levels of gun violence from gangs and criminals wielding illicit and/or smuggled firearms.

At the same time, there is mounting institutional opposition to Ottawa’s mandatory buyback program from provincial governments, territorial leaders, and police unions across the country, who say limited policing resources should focus on actual criminals.

To enhance safety and national unity, the federal government must pivot toward “precision policy,” targeting the root causes of violence rather than the activities of legal gun owners, by:

- **Investing in intelligence and intervention:** Shift resources from prohibitions to border integrity and community programs. This includes disrupting US smuggling routes and providing sustained funding for violence interruption and community policing.
- **Improving data transparency:** Oversight is impossible without information. The federal government should publish anonymized data on “red flag” petitions and licence revocations to ensure the system is effective, accountable, and free from abuse.
- **Modernizing classification:** The current politicized classification system should be replaced with a transparent, evidence-based model similar to the one used in Czechia. Reversing the “assault-style” ban would respect the rights of vetted shooters without compromising public safety.
- **Ending the handgun freeze:** The freeze provides no measurable safety benefit to an already strictly regulated sector. Restoring a legal handgun market would save businesses and heritage sports while allowing police to focus on actual criminal threats.

The federal government has a choice – it can continue with restrictive measures that offer diminishing returns and deepen social divisions, or it can adopt a strategy that targets illicit smuggling and 3-D-printed firearms. By prioritizing legitimate community violence prevention over symbolic bans, the government can protect both public safety and the rights of law-abiding citizens. [MLI](#)

*Depuis 2019, le cadre législatif en matière d’armes à feu a drastiquement changé au Canada. Par une série d’interventions fortes sur les plans exécutif et juridique, le gouvernement fédéral a mis en place un gel national des ventes légales d’armes de poing, interdit des milliers de modèles d’armes dites « d’assaut » et durci les règles pour l’obtention des permis et les transferts.*

*Bien que ces mesures soient souvent vues comme essentielles pour la sécurité publique, elles sont encore peu examinées par des chercheurs indépendants – jusqu’à aujourd’hui.*

*Notre étude se penche sur le cadre d’évaluation des politiques en matière d’armes à feu pour dûment évaluer ces changements politiques. Après avoir rigoureusement étudié*

la littérature sur le sujet et discuté avec des policiers, des travailleurs communautaires et d'autres intervenants, nous tirons les conclusions suivantes :

- Rien ne justifie d'interdire ou de confisquer (rachat) les armes dites « d'assaut » au Canada.
- Rien ne justifie non plus le gel des ventes légales d'armes de poing aux titulaires d'un permis.
- La police s'inquiète des armes à feu entrant clandestinement des États-Unis ou fabriquées par des particuliers – les armes fantômes – et non pas des propriétaires d'armes légales.

Ces politiques nuisent réellement aux communautés de chasseurs et de tireurs sportifs, aux peuples autochtones, ainsi qu'à l'économie et à notre patrimoine. Le durcissement des restrictions affecte donc les petites entreprises, les champs de tir, les passionnés d'histoire récréateurs et les tireurs de compétition. Pour les collectivités autochtones, les armes à feu sont des outils indispensables à la subsistance et à un mode de vie traditionnel. Parallèlement, le débat creuse un fossé entre les gens des campagnes – où on chasse fréquemment au moyen d'armes d'épaule et où le tir est un passe-temps – et les citadins qui, souvent sans armes, vivent dans leurs quartiers la violence des gangs et des criminels bien pourvus en armes de contrebande.

Parallèlement, le programme de rachat obligatoire d'Ottawa se bute à l'opposition croissante des gouvernements provinciaux, des dirigeants territoriaux et des syndicats de policiers à travers le pays. Pour eux, les ressources policières, limitées, doivent se concentrer sur les vrais criminels.

Pour renforcer la sécurité et l'unité du pays, le fédéral doit adopter une « politique de précision » en s'attaquant aux causes profondes de la violence plutôt que de viser les propriétaires d'armes légales, en prenant les mesures que voici :

- **Investir dans le renseignement et l'intervention** : Il faut réorienter les ressources vers la sécurité des frontières et les programmes communautaires, en ciblant notamment la contrebande qui passe par les routes américaines, et en finançant durablement la police de proximité et la lutte contre la violence.
- **Rendre les données plus transparentes** : On ne peut pas surveiller sans données. Pour assurer efficacité, responsabilisation et justice, le fédéral doit rendre ses données publiques – tout en préservant l'anonymat – sur les ordonnances d'interdiction d'urgence (mesures drapeau rouge) et les révocations de permis.
- **Moderniser la classification** : On doit remplacer le système actuel, trop politisé, par un modèle transparent, fondé sur des preuves, comme en Tchéquie. Renverser l'interdiction des armes « d'assaut » respecterait les droits des tireurs accrédités, sans compromettre la sécurité publique.

- **Mettre fin au gel des armes de poing :** *Ce gel n'apporte aucun bénéfice net pour la sécurité d'un secteur déjà très réglementé. Rétablir un marché légal permettrait de protéger les entreprises et le patrimoine sportif tout en recentrant la police sur les menaces criminelles réelles.*

*Le gouvernement fédéral a deux options : maintenir des règles qui ne fonctionnent plus et divisent la société ou choisir une approche qui combat la contrebande et les armes à feu fabriquées en 3D. En privilégiant la prévention réelle de la violence plutôt que des interdictions symboliques, le gouvernement peut assurer à la fois la sécurité publique et les droits des citoyens respectueux de la loi. **MLI***

## Introduction

Shaped by both Liberal and Progressive Conservative governments, Canada's system of gun regulation had achieved a broad public consensus by the early 1990s except for small flashpoints like the long-gun registry. Scholarly literature that demonstrated the effectiveness of policies like magazine capacity limits and safe storage laws supported the consensus.

Since 2019, however, Canadian gun policy has taken on a more partisan tone. Policies like the ban on Assault-Style Weapons (ASW) in 2020, the freeze on handgun sales in 2022, and Bill C-21, *An Act to amend certain Acts and to make certain consequential amendments (firearms)*, in 2023 have transformed Canada's system of regulating firearms and ignited political controversy. The pace of these changes, enacted first through order-in-council (OIC), and in the aftermath of tragedies both in Canada and the United States, raises questions as to the extent to which they are supported by evidence.

This paper will put these policies into conversation with the available evidence using the Firearms Policy Evaluation Framework (FPEF) developed by Schwartz (2022). Drawing from our research, we argue that these changes have missed the mark and recommend policies that can more reliably address the challenges of gun violence in our streets while bringing real change, employment, and fairness to communities where gun violence is concentrated.

This paper is divided into sections covering each policy change (see Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1:** Summary of Research (see legend in appendices)

| Legislation                        | Logic  | Evidence   | Harm   |
|------------------------------------|--|--|--|
| <b>ASW ban</b>                     | <b>Moderate</b> – Semi-automatic firearms with a detachable magazine could pose a higher risk; already mitigated through licensing and magazine-capacity limits. | <b>Limited</b> – Little evidence to support impact of ASW ban on homicide rates or rate of mass shootings. No evidence that criminal ASW widespread pre-ban. | <b>Likely</b> harm to businesses, sports shooters, collectors; first and second-order harm to hunters.   |
| <b>Handgun freeze</b>              | <b>Moderate</b> – Handguns often used by criminals and spree shooters; risk already mitigated through tight restrictions on ownership.                           | <b>Limited</b> – No scholarly evidence to support handgun prohibitions; law enforcement skeptical.   | <b>Likely</b> harm to businesses, sports shooters, collectors; second-order harm to hunters.   |
| <b>Anti-PMF measures</b>           | <b>Strong</b> – Bans on possession/sharing of instructions for PMF manufacturing and licences to purchase firearm parts are logical.                             | <b>Limited</b> – PMF proliferation too new to assess impacts of these measures, though law enforcement supportive.   | <b>Unlikely</b> – No lawful reason to possess instructions for manufacturing PMFs. Licensing for parts poses little extra burden on gun owners.                    |
| <b>Enhanced background checks</b>  | <b>Strong</b> – Providing CFOs with more data to make licensing decisions helpful.   | <b>Moderate</b> – Background checks effective when paired with legislation that combats straw purchasing (covertly buying on behalf of others who can't).    | <b>Potential</b> – Potential for applicants to be denied a licence for minor past indiscretions; can be mitigated through oversight and transparency requirements. |
| <b>Red-flag la changes</b>         | <b>Weak</b> – Police already have the power to remove guns from dangerous licence holders.   | <b>Moderate</b> – Scholarly evidence is limited and difficult to apply to Canada; some supportive evidence from the United States.                           | <b>Potential</b> – Without strong guardrails and transparency, these laws could be abused.   |
| <b>Record-keeping requirements</b> | <b>Strong</b> – Provide tools for law enforcement to combat straw purchasing.  | <b>Limited</b> – There is no evidence in the literature to suggest that registering long guns is effective at reducing gun crime.                            | <b>Unlikely</b> – May increase hassle for gun owners and businesses, but unlikely to cause harm.   |

## Assault-style weapons ban

On May 1, 2020, shortly after the infamous Nova Scotia spree shooting, which claimed the lives of 22 people a few weeks earlier, the federal government enacted an order-in-council that banned transferring, selling, or using 1,500 models of firearms that it classified as *assault-style weapons* (ASWs). The use of the term “style” was, in and of itself, a tacit admission that the ban targeted form rather than function. In efforts to reconcile this contradiction and make the ban harder for future governments to repeal, and despite widespread objections ranging from NHL hockey players to hunters to Indigenous groups, the government ultimately added an evergreen definition of an ASW: a semi-automatic firearm that can accept a removable magazine. While the government insinuated that this definition would apply only to new firearms entering the market, the ban has since been sporadically expanded to include more firearms. Current owners can only keep these models locked away in their safes, awaiting compensation through a government buyback scheme, which has taken half a decade to organize.

ASW is a highly political term; it has been shaped by both advertisers and advocates. It comes from the moniker *assault weapon*, which dates to the Second World War and was originally used to denote a rifle that used an intermediate cartridge, and that could fire in both semi-automatic (one trigger pull = one bullet fired) and fully automatic (pulling and holding the trigger fires bullets continuously). The gun industry then picked up the term as part of a marketing technique that uses military symbolism to sell semi-automatic firearms (Goode 2013). Subsequently, gun control advocates began using the term to gain support for prohibitions: After struggling to increase the regulation of handguns in the US, pro-control advocates aimed to gain general gun control momentum by pushing for ASW regulation, capitalizing on the public’s confusion about semi-automatic civilian ASWs and their fully automatic military counterparts (Sugarmann 1988). In Canada, true fully-automatic assault weapons have been prohibited since 1977 (Brown 2012). Until the late 1980s, the term *assault weapon* rarely came up in Canadian discourse; despite the 1989 École Polytechnique shooting coinciding with early debates, the category did not see regulation until the 2020 OIC.

Existing evaluations of assault weapons bans, including a large meta-analysis conducted by the RAND Corporation (2023), provide little evidence

to suggest that they are effective for reducing criminal violence. Only two of the thirteen studies that passed our criteria of being peer-reviewed, rooted in empirical data, and published between January 1, 2000, and January 1, 2024, provided evidence in support of ASW bans (DiMaggio et al. 2019; Post et al. 2021); however, these studies did not separate these from bans of high-capacity magazines, which have been associated with a lower risk of fatal mass shooting (Webster et al. 2020). It is important to note that high-capacity magazines have been banned in Canada since 1991. Meanwhile, the literature shows that state and federal level ASW bans in the US have had no impact on firearms homicides (Gius 2014), urban firearm mortality (Huang et al. 2022), and the number of mass shootings (Lemieux 2014), and did not reduce deaths in mass shootings (Lemieux 2014). Given the variation in how these studies were conducted, we conducted interviews with Canadian Law Enforcement officers to compare their perspective with the data from the literature.

*“ Evaluations of assault weapons bans provide little evidence to suggest that they are effective for reducing criminal violence.*

Major justification for the ASW ban comes from the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police’s desire to ban ASWs (Brown 2019); however, the rank-and-file officers we interviewed spoke of the rarity of encountering these firearms. Some had never encountered one in the field, and most of those encountered before 2020 were traced to the United States (Interview 1; Interview 2). ASWs encountered not in the commission of a crime may also skew the data on ASW use in crime (Interview 3). It was noted that ASWs are hard to conceal and attract much more attention when wielded than handguns; they are thus much less useful for career criminals (Interview 4; Interview 5).

The experience of Marcell Wilson, a former gang member who now works in violence intervention and steers youth away from gangs, confirmed gang members’ preference for handguns (Interview 6). Ultimately, officers

were skeptical of the ASW ban's potential for reducing crime, pointing also to the effectiveness of existing laws such as the ban on high-capacity magazines and the problem of smuggling and black-market firearms. Wilson corroborated this by noting the ASW he saw in the gang life usually came from the US. The firearms used in the Nova Scotia shooting, the event used as justification for the ban, came from the US as well.

In all, the term ASW is more of a framing device than a technical designation. Our interviews align with the literature's conclusions: While bans on high-capacity magazines have shown some success in reducing fatalities from mass shootings, ASW bans are unlikely to increase public safety due to criminals' preference for handguns and the prevalence of black-market firearms and smuggling across the porous Canada–US border.

## Handgun freeze

The national handgun freeze came into effect on October 21, 2022. This freeze bans the sale, purchase, and transfer of handguns, even for those with a valid restricted firearms licence. Nearly two and a half years after its implementation, handgun crime remains prevalent in Canada, largely due to the supply of illegal firearms being smuggled into Canada.

Handguns have been regulated in Canada for over a century. Section 84(1) of Canada's Criminal Code defines a handgun as: "a firearm that is designed, altered or intended to be aimed and fired by the action of one hand ...". Handguns in Canada are designated as "restricted firearms," a category that encompasses any firearm with a barrel shorter than 18.5 inches (Criminal Code, 1985). As early as 1892, the federal government introduced record-keeping requirements for handgun sales, and a permit was required for anyone carrying a gun in public. Ottawa then tightened requirements further. In the 1930s, it required handguns to be registered with local authorities. In 1951, it centralized gun records with the RCMP. In 1976, it introduced licensing laws, and in the 1990s, it introduced mandatory safety training (RCMP 2025). For 30 years in Canada, federal law has required a Restricted Possession and Acquisition Licence, or RPAL, to purchase a handgun. This can be attained by

completing two firearms safety courses and passing two sets of exams with a score of over 80 per cent. The rules also require handgun owners to show a need to own a handgun; most often, this requires proof of membership in a sports shooting club or range, for fur trapping, or for armoured car drivers. The use of handguns is also heavily restricted. Handguns can only be used at approved ranges; it is mandatory to report to the Canadian Firearms Centre when moving a handgun anywhere other than an approved range or a gunsmith; and handgun owners are required to take the most direct route to the range when in possession of their firearm. If all of these rules are not obeyed, the owner risks facing legal trouble and the revocation of their firearms licence.

On May 24, 2022, a shooter attacked an elementary school in Uvalde, Texas, killing 19 students and two teachers. This was the worst school shooting in the history of Texas and was widely televised. The Trudeau government used the tragedy in Uvalde as a pretext to introduce the handgun freeze. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau held a press conference and announced the government was “capping the market on handguns.” While existing owners of handguns, who had already gone through the regulatory hurdles to obtain their firearms, would be permitted to keep and use their handguns until their death, these handguns were no longer allowed to be sold, transferred, or inherited (Forrest and Taylor-Vaisey 2022). Subsequently, the freeze took effect at the end of October 2022 (Tasker 2022) and was then formalized into law with the passing of Bill C-21 at the end of 2023 (Public Safety Canada, 2023).

We found no evidence in the scholarly literature to support a handgun ban. This ban has made Canada an outlier in OECD countries, the overwhelming majority of which (33 of 38) allow civilians to own handguns for recreational purposes. Our interviews with Canadian law enforcement officers about the freeze and its effects on crime revealed tremendous skepticism about its potential benefits. When asked what impact they have seen from the handgun freeze, most officers were quite direct: “Zero impact” (Interview 3; Interview 7), or “Zero impact in my municipality” (Interview with a Law Enforcement Officer in Saskatchewan, October 15, 2024). Other officers described unintended consequences of the policy, for instance, a large spike in the price of black-market firearms and a shift in where the market is sourcing guns. With one officer remarking: “We could see within a 6 to 12 month timeframe, a steady increase in our seizures (of smuggled guns), where straw purchasing dropped to almost nothing, but our smuggling numbers went through the

roof” (Interview 8). The ban may also have, without meaning to, catalyzed the emerging market in Privately Manufactured Firearms (Interview 9).

So why has the handgun freeze been so ineffective? First, Canada already had tight handgun legislation in place, with registration requirements, mandatory firearms licensing classes, a licensing regime, safe storage laws, and transportation requirements. So, while there will always be a possibility for straw purchasing to take place, it would be challenging to do, and buying large amounts of firearms was impossible due to the ability of police and chief firearms officers to monitor purchases from gun stores. Second, any supply cut off from criminal markets by the freeze is easily supplemented with smuggled handguns from the United States, a country with more firearms than human beings, or through advances in Privately Manufactured Firearms.

## **Additional measures**

### **Privately manufactured firearms (PMFs)**

Privately manufactured firearms is the term used by law enforcement to classify firearms produced by an unauthorized individual, rather than a licensed business. These firearms are often called “Ghost Guns” in the media, so-named because they are not stamped with a serial number and are therefore more difficult to trace. A growing number of PMFs are being created using commercially available 3-D printers, allowing everyday people with access to specific 3-D-printing files to build an entire firearm in the privacy of their own home. Sometimes, PMF production involves printing regulated firearm parts, like a firearm receiver, and combining them with unregulated firearm parts to create a functional firearm while avoiding licensing requirements.

In the past, PMFs were typically very crude, limiting their potential danger. However, with the popularization and accessibility of 3-D printing technology, the private manufacturing of firearms has become more accessible, from the criminally motivated to the simply curious.

PMFs are difficult to regulate for several reasons. First, since PMFs have no serial number, they are challenging to trace. Second, to “end” the 3-D printing of firearms, legislators would have to impose strict rules and regulations on 3-D

printers themselves, which would conflict with the government's interest in the economic potential of these tools. Last and most importantly, PMFs exist in two forms, digitally and physically. So, regulations need to extend not only to the PMF after its creation, but also to the file created or obtained online.

Despite the challenges of regulating PMFs, Bill C-21 tackles the problem through its Section 2.1.3, which would require a valid PAL to purchase certain firearm parts, such as a barrel or a handgun slide, and other items that are more challenging to manufacture properly or safely using a 3-D printer (Public Safety Canada 2023a). This will help law enforcement stymie unauthorized individuals from accessing the parts needed to produce a PMF. The bill also seeks to increase the maximum penalty that judges can impose on someone being charged with illegally manufacturing a firearm or the unauthorized possession of a firearm to 14 years, from a previous 10 years (Public Safety Canada 2023a). Within Section 2.1.1, the new bill states that any firearm that was illegally manufactured is deemed a prohibited firearm, so anyone found to be in possession of one will be eligible for a prison sentence.

Most importantly, the bill makes it an offence to share files online that could be used to print a firearm.

Our interviews with Canadian law enforcement officials about PMFs and their use in Canada demonstrated that they were an increasing issue in large cities, especially in Eastern Canada. One officer said that, since the handgun freeze, the PMF industry has been “turbocharged,” adding, “The emergence of this technology aligned with C-21 to create the perfect storm. We are the world leaders in PMFs” (Interview 9).

### **Registries and background checks**

Debates over firearms regulation in Canada have been shaped as much by political symbolism and regional cleavages as by empirical evidence. The dismantling of the federal Long Gun Registry under Prime Minister Stephen Harper was one of the most contentious policy battles of the early 2000s, pitting the Conservative government against the Liberals, NDP, and Bloc Québécois. The controversy exposed deep tensions between urban and rural Canada, Western and Eastern regions, and Anglophone and Francophone constituencies. Conservatives framed the registry as an inefficient, costly program that penalized law-abiding hunters and farmers while doing little to deter criminals (Toews 2011). Opposition parties, by contrast, portrayed

the registry as a tool for public safety, with Liberals emphasizing its role in protecting women from domestic violence (Ignatieff 2010) and the Bloc casting its abolition as an affront to Quebec’s values and even to Canadian unity (Paillé 2010).

Handguns have been subject to some form of registration since the late 19th century and centralized under the RCMP by 1951 (RCMP 2023). Long-gun registration, however, briefly existed under wartime measures and re-emerged with Bill C-68 in 1995 following the École Polytechnique massacre (Brown 2012). This required the registration of long guns, with non-compliance resulting in the risk of criminal penalties (Brown 2012). The registry was criticized by gun owners as overly onerous, by Indigenous communities regarding treaty-protected hunting rights, and by fiscal conservatives questioning cost and effectiveness. Administrative failures, technological complexity, and poor planning resulted in booming costs and fuelled public skepticism (Brown 2012).

“ *The controversy, cost overruns, and limited impact left the very idea of a federal long-gun registry discredited across much of the political spectrum.* ”

Some work suggests that Bill C-68 may have reduced firearm homicides, but there is no clear evidence that it reduced overall homicide rates, particularly given that the law bundled registration with other licensing and restriction measures (Langmann 2021). Police data shows that only a small proportion of firearm homicides involved registered long guns, and that very few killings of police officers were committed with firearms registered to the offender. By 2012, many police leaders publicly questioned the registry’s utility for investigations and officer safety. Bill C-19 (2012) abolished long-gun registration and ordered most records destroyed, except those retained by Quebec for its own provincial registry.

The controversy, cost overruns, and limited impact left the very idea of a federal long-gun registry discredited across much of the political spectrum.

Liberal governments nevertheless have introduced more targeted regulatory measures. Bill C-71 (2019) did not recreate a centralized registry but tightened record-keeping and background check requirements. It extended background checks from five years to applicants' entire lives, required sellers to verify buyers' licences and obtain reference numbers before transferring non-restricted firearms, and mandated that retailers maintain sales records. The government argued that these measures would improve the tracing of crime guns and deter straw purchasing. Critics labelled it a "backdoor registry," warning of privacy risks and bureaucratic burden, but many large retailers had already been keeping detailed records voluntarily (Interview 3). While these new requirements could help law enforcement in tracing firearms diverted from the legal market and give chief firearms officers more data to assess an individual's suitability for a gun license, their potential to prevent gun violence is limited. It is essential that these changes be accompanied by increased transparency and oversight.

### **Red flag law**

A mass shooting at the Connecticut Lottery headquarters on March 6, 1998 prompted the United States to implement Red Flag Laws, or Extreme Risk Protection Orders (ERPOs) (Heflin 2022). ERPOs aim to remove firearms from potentially violent offenders before they commit a crime and are often framed by proponents as a way to reduce the incidents of spree shootings, intimate partner violence, or homicides. A study by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) that examined pre-attack behaviours of active shooters in the US between 2000 and 2013 found that, on average, each active shooter exhibited four to five observable behaviours that were considered concerning in the lead-up to their attack (Silver et al. 2018). Partners and family members of the attackers most often reported observing these behaviours prior to acts of violence (Heflin 2022).

Concentrated entirely in the United States, research on the impact of Red Flag Laws on suicide rates provides some support for changes to Canada's emergency prohibition order system introduced by Bill C-21. For example, quasi-experimental research comparing the impact of ERPOs on suicide rates in Connecticut and Indiana found that the laws may have decreased suicides in Indiana by 7.5 per cent, and Connecticut by 1.6 per cent (Kivisto and Phalen 2018). Further, Heflin's difference-in-difference analysis demonstrates that

Red Flag laws may have lowered suicide rates in American states that use them by 6 per cent to 10 per cent, and homicide rates by 10.96 per cent to 13.52 per cent (Heflin 2022).

At the same time, we must be cautious not to uncritically apply American evidence to the Canadian context. Prior to Bill C-21, Canadian police already possessed the ability to confiscate firearms belonging to those deemed a potential threat. Allowing *ex-parte* applications to be made directly to the courts, circumventing police oversight, may or may not be more effective than encouraging complainants to report their concerns directly to police. Beyond this, firearms are not the most common tool for deaths by suicide or homicide in Canada compared with the United States. For example, only 16 per cent of suicides in Canada use firearms (Langmann 2021) and firearms are used in a small percentage of Canadian homicides. In the decade between 2013 and 2023, only 32 per cent of accusations of homicide by firearm of intimate partners and/or family members were made against those with a “known history of violence with the victim” (Conroy, 2025). Whereas 42 per cent of those who used another method of killing had a history of violent behaviour (Conroy 2025).

## **Gun smuggling and community-based programs**

Canada and the US share the world’s longest undefended land border (USDHS 2012). Two-thirds of Canadians live within 100 kilometres of the US border (Statistics Canada 2023), more than 400,000 people crossed the border every day prior to the second Trump Presidency (GAC 2024), and \$744 billion in goods crossed the border in 2023 (USBTS 2024). As such, it is difficult to control the flow of illegal firearms into Canada as a supply-side measure to combat gun violence. With this, it is valuable to consider demand-side measures such as community-based policing and violence-intervention programs.

Law enforcement has long known about the Iron Pipeline of American firearms being smuggled to arm Canadian criminals. The pipeline is profit-driven and has become even more lucrative in recent years; for example, a handgun can now be bought in the US and sold illegally in Canada for more

than a 1,000 per cent markup (Yousif 2024). This market is also relatively easy to access: While drug smuggling requires a sophisticated network and many transactions to distribute, firearms are highly available in the US and demand fewer transactions (Leuprecht and Althouse 2014). Since Canada cannot dictate American gun control policies, our capacity to stem the supply of crime guns is inherently stifled.

Additionally, a lack of funding and political will has precluded a central tracing mechanism to more effectively combat the Iron Pipeline – inconsistencies across jurisdictions make it difficult or impossible to determine the source of many crime guns (Allen 2022). This has also resulted in many objects being misclassified as firearms (Jackson 2020). Moreover, the Canadian National Firearms Centre Tracing Program does not even collect statistics on the source of crime guns (Nolan 2022). Good data is needed to determine where to place investment to combat gun crime.

Given the lack of readily available data, we compiled a database using articles from four media databases to glean a snapshot of the gun smuggling issue. We corroborated the findings using our interviews with law enforcement and publicly available government documents. Most individual instances of seizures we identified were done at land border crossings, followed by targeted searches (i.e., following intelligence reports). Most smugglers operated in highly trafficked areas; they hid firearms in various places in crossing vehicles, sometimes hiding them in unsuspecting vehicles and tracking them via GPS for later recovery (Willhelm 2014). Smuggling also occurred through Indigenous reservations (*Montreal Gazette* 2024) and across lakes and rivers (Denette 2023).

Anti-smuggling police operations such as Project Chrome, a Peel Regional Police operation that led to the interception of 70 illegal firearms, have shown success. Significantly, the Canadian Border Services Agency (CBSA) reported intercepting over 68,000 firearms and illegal accessories (e.g., high-capacity magazines and suppressors falsely labelled as fuel filters) by mail between 2018 and 2022 (*Toronto Sun* 2023). A senior police officer (Interview 5) also pointed to space for further securing sea and rail borders, which are sometimes utilized for smuggling.

Co-operation with the American Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) is and has been essential for tracing firearms, training Canadian officers in this regard, and regulating American gun dealers to stem the supply

of illegal guns to smugglers. President Donald Trump has recently undermined this important work by cutting over half of the ATF inspectors who monitor gun dealers (Thrush 2025) and removing a policy that shuttered gun dealers who break the rules (Giffords 2025).

Bill C-21 included some minor measures to address gun smuggling (e.g., increasing the maximum sentence), but police, through public statements and our interviews, do not believe the bill does enough to create meaningful change due to its focus on legal firearms while most crime guns come from the US (Toronto Police Union 2024; Surrey Police Union 2024). Police call for investment in border investigations and firearm tracing.

“ Since the supply of crime guns is so difficult to stem, focusing on demand-side measures is likely the best way forward.

Since the supply of crime guns is so difficult to stem, focusing on demand-side measures is likely the best way forward (Leuprecht and Aulthouse 2014). Criminal gangs are significant drivers of the demand for illegal firearms (Leuprecht and Aulthouse 2014; Cook, Cukier, and Krause 2009) and firearm violence – responsible for almost 50 per cent of firearm homicides in 2023 (Conroy 2023). Moreover, gang violence is more lethal and begets retaliatory violence (Brantingham, Yuan, and Herz 2021). Community-based policing, such as Boston’s Operation Ceasefire Program, which connects police, government, and communities to offer both *carrots* and *sticks*, are more successful at reducing gun violence than supply-side (e.g., gun buybacks, waiting periods, and background checks) and tough-on-crime policies (Makarios and Pratt 2012). Participating factions in Chicago saw a 23 per cent reduction in shootings using such programs (Papachristos and Kirk 2015). These may involve assembling forums where at-risk perpetrators and victims of violence, who are treated as community members rather than deviants, sit with police and other community members to simultaneously receive firm statements of the consequences of criminal life, substantive

offers of assistance, and stories of the impact of violence on other community members (Abt and Winship 2016). Combining this with Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and social programs (e.g., job programs) further increases the effectiveness of these programs. Here in Canada, for example, the Abbotsford Police Department in BC recently created the community-based PATHWAYS program, which has seen success steering at-risk youth away from violent lifestyles (Interview 10).

Given the strained relationship between some communities and the police, Violence Interruption can be a useful demand-side strategy that supplements community-based policing efforts but does not directly involve law enforcement. Here, violence interrupters (VIs), some of whom used to be in the gang lifestyle, work in their local community to deescalate conflicts and convince others to reform their lives. For example, VIs prevent retaliation after an attack by countering malicious rumours, defusing tension, and providing services to victims (Whitehill et al. 2013; Park et al. 2021). These programs are shown to reduce violence (Maguire et al. 2025) and are lower cost than buybacks, registries, and bans – they also provide employment opportunities within these communities.

Violence Interruption can also be done in hospitals: Over 50 per cent of those who suffer a violent injury will be reinjured violently (Affinati et al. 2016), and hospitals provide a window of opportunity for victims to be connected to a social support system to reduce risky behaviour such as gang involvement (Bell et al. 2018; Bonne and Dicker 2020) and possibly access therapy, substance abuse treatment, and other resources (Affinati et al. 2016). Case workers may follow victims through their healing journey and help replace lost income if the household's earning potential was compromised (Interview 11). Again, securing stable funding has been a major challenge for these programs.

In sum, tackling the supply of crime guns is extraordinarily difficult, suffers from diminishing returns, and would carry intolerable economic costs by harming trade and the free movement of people across the border. Focusing on quelling the demand for crime guns, through community policing and violence interruption programs, is thus the most promising solution. These demand-side measures are also more cost-effective and provide additional benefits for the communities affected most by gun violence. To be successful, these programs need sustained commitment and funding.

## Impact on stakeholders

Policies like the ASW ban and freeze on handguns will have significant negative impacts on Canada's community of gun owners. Part of our work has been to capture these impacts, so that the harm caused to stakeholders by these policies can be weighed against the potential benefits to public safety.

### Hunters

For many Canadians, hunting is more than a pastime. Despite the government repeatedly stating that Bill C-21 and the 2020 OIC were not aimed at targeting hunters, the hunters we spoke to, and the groups that represent them, tell a different story. From a policy perspective, this is especially concerning given the vital role that hunters and conservation groups play in providing funding for Canada's wildlife management policy, as hunting licences and tags form a major component of provincial conservation funds.

Estimates compiled by the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters (OFAH), the oldest and largest non-government fish and wildlife conservation group in Canada, found that at least 64 of the models banned in the first wave of prohibitions in May 2020 were used for hunting by their members (Interview 12; DeMille 2021). While OFAH supports parts of the legislation that will improve public safety, such as enhanced background checks or licence verification for private sale, it is still frustrated with laws that seem to increase the burden on gun owners with no safety benefit.

The second-order impacts of the ban and the handgun freeze will also negatively impact hunters in Canada. Hunters rely on businesses and ranges supported by sports shooters, since sports shooters tend to shoot more often than hunters and are thus a more reliable clientele for gun businesses and ranges. Fewer gun businesses, especially in remote and rural areas, means a barrier to access for hunters to gun stores and potentially higher prices when they do find one.

### Indigenous peoples

Indigenous peoples have been hunting, trapping, and fishing across Canada for millennia. By virtue of this, hunting and fishing rights are an important part of Indigenous cultures and are protected by treaties that have been incorporated

into Canada's constitution through Section 35 of the *Constitution Act (1982)*. Following the announcement of Bill C-21, several Indigenous groups raised concerns about the lack of Indigenous consultation and infringements on their autonomy.

Others have argued that the ASW ban is far too broad and includes firearms that are commonly used by Indigenous people for hunting and wildlife protection. This is especially true in the Arctic, where semi-automatic rifles are used for defence against large predators like polar bears.

Indigenous groups have also expressed concerns about how these policies could increase the potential for discriminatory over-policing at a time when Indigenous people are already disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system (Simpson 2023).

While the idea of exemptions for Indigenous hunters to own prohibited firearms has been raised, it is unlikely that businesses would bother stocking firearms and ammunition for firearms that could only be purchased by a small portion of the population – creating a de facto ban (Irngaut 2023).

### **Sports shooting**

Sports shooting in Canada makes up a sizable portion of the gun-owning community, with the Conference Board of Canada (2020) estimating that there were 1.4 million Canadians who participate in shooting sports as of 2018. A subset of these sports relies on handguns and semi-automatic rifles, which have been swept up in the prohibition.

These sports include groups like the International Practical Shooting Confederation (IPSC), or 3-gun leagues. Sports shooting organizations are highly regulated, often requiring additional training of their members to supplement Canada's mandatory firearm safety training, such as the IPSC "black badge" certification course.

Sports shooting organizations have been particularly hard hit by the new gun legislation. The handgun freeze and ASW bans will effectively destroy sports like IPSC. With handgun ownership frozen, there is no way to grow the sport, and current members are finding it increasingly difficult to maintain firearms as parts become scarce and expensive. Older competitors are also unable to sell or pass on their handguns when they retire from the sport, leaving many retired competitors with expensive handguns that are now valueless.

## Collectors, re-enactors, and Canada's heritage

A significant subset of Canadian firearms owners participate in historical shooting competitions or as re-enactors and living history enthusiasts. These enthusiasts play an important role in keeping part of Canada's heritage alive and preserving knowledge and techniques for future generations, something UNESCO labels as intangible cultural heritage.

For example, Cowboy Action shooting is an international sport with 112,000 registered worldwide members of the Single Action Shooting Society (SASS). SASS has 18 associated clubs in Canada that run dozens of events annually. All firearms used are "single-action" – they require some manual action to cycle each round, as opposed to semi-automatic firearms, which load a new round automatically into the chamber after firing. Despite using antiquated firearms, these groups have also been impacted by the handgun freeze, which paints with a very broad brush.

Historical re-enactors dress in period-appropriate attire and may use classic black powder muzzle-loading long guns and pistols. This community preserves history through re-enactment, passing it on to the next generation. The firearms they use are single-shot and incredibly slow to reload – even a highly skilled user could only be expected to fire three rounds per minute. Regardless, under Canadian law, reproductions of muzzle-loading handguns are regulated as stringently as modern handguns, and their sale has been frozen.

## Businesses and the economy

Canada has no large-scale firearm manufacturers, and the industry is subject to strict regulation under the *Firearms Act* (1995). Firearm-related businesses in Canada consist primarily of retailers and a small number of manufacturers, many of which are small or medium-sized enterprises serving rural and remote communities (Schwartz 2025). Still, prior to the prohibitions, hunting and sports shooting contributed almost \$6 billion to Canada's economy in any given year (Conference Board of Canada 2020).

During our research, business owners reported significant losses following the ASW ban and handgun freeze, which has left the viability of their businesses in question. When Ottawa brought in the freeze, businesses were stuck overnight with significant amounts of inventory (some reported as

high as \$750,000 worth) that they could no longer sell, and had to pay to store. Further, given that handgun owners in Canada must maintain a membership at a range, many shooting ranges were kept afloat by owners of these firearms and may close.

“ *Gun law changes have exacerbated existing divisions between East and West, as well as urban and rural, at a time when Canadian unity is more important than ever.* ”

## Conclusion

Our research offers an initial evaluation of Canada’s gun law changes since 2019. We find little evidence that these measures will improve public safety and identify harms to communities, the economy, and the preservation of Canadian heritage.

Indeed, the gun law changes have exacerbated existing divisions between East and West, as well as urban and rural, at a time when Canadian unity is more important than ever. At the time of publication, for example, there is mounting opposition to the government’s newly launched ASW buyback, including from police forces, police unions, and provincial and territorial governments across the country.

We recommend that the federal government:

### *Treat causes and manage symptoms*

- Invest in intelligence and firearm tracing to make gun smuggling more difficult and costly.
- Provide sustainable long-term funding across levels of government for community policing initiatives and violence interruption programs, including hospital-based violence interruption. These programs are more cost-effective than gun bans and buybacks, and provide positive externalities, such as increased employment for communities where violence is concentrated.

- Work closely with the United States to encourage increased enforcement on rogue American gun dealers and improve our tracing capabilities.

#### *Improve data and enhance transparency*

- Enhanced background checks, record-keeping requirements for gun shops and private transfers, and red flag laws can help to combat straw purchasing and gun violence. However, more transparency is required to allow experts outside of government to provide oversight.
- Anonymized data should be published regularly on how often red flag petitions are brought before the courts, the number of firearms seizures that result, and the outcomes of cases to allow evaluators to assess the effectiveness of these policies and prevent abuse. Further, Ottawa should make it easy to access data on firearms licence revocations to ensure that individuals are not being denied licences for minor indiscretions in their distant past.

#### *Reevaluate the Firearms Classification System*

- The ASW ban demonstrates the way in which firearm classification has been politicized in Canada. While the Carney government has pledged to reevaluate this system, it is not clear that the government intends to do this in a way that is transparent or evidence-based. For example, a recent report by the government's Expert Advisory Panel on Firearms lacked any clear methodology and did not make the names of the so-called experts public, raising serious concerns about the validity of the process.
- The government should pursue a transparent and evidence-based classification system, such as the one used by Czechia.
- The government should reverse the ASW ban. Semi-automatic firearms with detachable low-capacity magazines in the hands of regulated individuals do not pose a threat to public safety, and are useful tools for sports shooters, hunters, collectors, and Indigenous and northern Canadians.

### *Thaw the handgun freeze*

- Handguns in Canada have been tightly regulated for decades, and the handgun freeze does not add any additional public safety benefit.
- The freeze causes observable harm to communities of sports shooters, collectors, and historical re-enactors, and has shuttered businesses and ranges.

### *Keep fighting Privately Manufactured Firearms (PMFs)*

- The government should continue its efforts to fight the proliferation of 3D-printed PMFs and provide additional resources to the courts and police to deal with the more onerous paperwork requirements these threats impose on an already overwhelmed justice system.

Absent a change in course, Canada's firearms policies will continue to impose real social, economic, and cultural costs while failing to meaningfully improve public safety. By misdirecting resources toward lawful ownership, these measures risk deepening regional divisions and further eroding confidence in the regulatory system. An evidence-based, transparent, and targeted approach is necessary to avoid entrenching ineffective policy and lasting public distrust. [MLI](#)

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## Interviews

Interview 1 – Senior Police Officer interview, Lower Mainland, BC, June 27, 2024.

Interview 2 – Police Officer interview, Gatineau, QC, June 5, 2024.

Interview 3 – Police Officer interview, Saskatchewan, October 18, 2024.

Interview 4 – Police Officer interview, Saskatchewan, October 15, 2024.

Interview 5 – Senior Police Officer interview, Lower Mainland, BC, August 26, 2024.

Interview 6 – Interview with Marcell Wilson, Community Worker, March 05, 2024.

Interview 7 – Interview with a Law Enforcement Officer in Abbotsford, September 20, 2024.

Interview 8 – Interview with a Law Enforcement Official in Alberta, July 26, 2024.

Interview 9 – Interview with a Law Enforcement Officer in Alberta, May 30, 2024.

Interview 10 – Interview with a community worker in Manitoba, July 2, 2025.

Interview 11 – Interview with worker from Sunnybrook BRAVE program, June 13, 2025.

Interview 12 – Interview with Mark Ryckman, Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters. (OFAH), June 26, 2025.

## Appendix A

### Legend: Decoding the FPEF

#### Logic: Strong, Moderate, Poor

- *Strong*: There is a clear logical link between the problem and the proposed policy solution. The logical assumptions upon which the solution rests are valid.
- *Moderate*: There is a clear logical link between the problem and the proposed policy solution. Some of the logical assumptions upon which the solution rests are valid, while others may not be.
- *Weak*: There is a disconnect between the problem and proposed solution. The logical assumptions upon which the solution rests are faulty.

#### Evidence: Strong, Moderate, Limited

- *Strong*: The preponderance of scholarly evidence suggests that this policy will be effective.
- *Moderate*: There is some evidence that this policy may be effective.
- *Limited*: There is little to no evidence that this policy may be effective.

#### Harm: Likely, Potential, Unlikely

- *Likely*: There is clear evidence that this policy will cause harm to a stakeholder group.
- *Potential*: There is potential for a policy to cause harm to a stakeholder group, but it is unclear.
- *Unlikely*: There is potential harm to a stakeholder group from this policy.

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