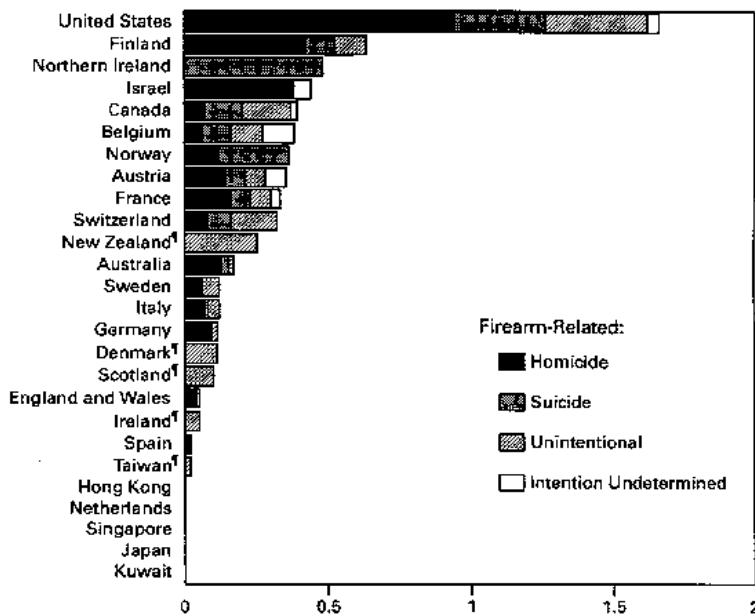


## KEEPING KIDS SAFE

Firearm are a significant cause of death and injury in Canada for children under the age of 15 and youth from 15-24. The risks are greater in areas where guns are readily available. Keeping guns away from children and reducing access for youth at risk are a key part of a community safety strategy. Safe storage is key.

A survey of 26 middle-upper income countries by the Centers for Disease Control showed that Canada is fifth among industrialized countries in the rate of children under 14 years killed with guns, following the US, Finland, Northern Ireland and Israel.

Rates of firearm-related death among children <15 years - 26 industrialized countries<sup>23</sup>



Guns are the third leading cause of death among Canadians from ages 15 - 24 following motor vehicle accidents and suicide by other means. Guns kill more youth in this age group than cancer, drowning and falls combined.<sup>24</sup> In most cases, the firearm used was easily accessible in the home. Safe storage of firearms is essential and must be enforced by making owners accountable for their guns.

Guns are frequently part of the cycle of intimidation and violence that many victims face in their homes.<sup>25</sup> Children are often victims of domestic violence; for every child who loses their life to the hand of a troubled parent with a firearm, there are many more who are threatened or live in fear. A review of children and youth gun incidents since 1991 reveals that rifles and shotguns are the firearms most often recovered, and that they usually belong to a friend or a relative.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Centers for Disease Control, "Rates of Homicide, Suicide and Firearm-Related Death Among Children in 26 Industrialized Countries" (1997).

<sup>24</sup> K. Leonard, "Firearm Deaths in Canadian Adolescents and Young Adults" (1994).

<sup>25</sup> W. Cukier, "Women and Firearms in the International Context" (Geneva: International Peace Update, Summer 2000).

<sup>26</sup> Communications Group, "Weapons Use in Canadian Schools" (Ottawa: Solicitor General Canada, 1994).

The rates of children killed with guns vary considerably within Canada. Although the numbers are very small some patterns emerge. Ontario has the lowest rate (0.2 per 100,000 compared to the national average of 0.4 per 100,000). Those of Saskatchewan (1.0 per 100,000), Alberta (0.9 per 100,000) and Manitoba (0.6 per 100,000) are considerably higher. These provinces also have higher rates of gun ownership and have hunter apprenticeship programs.

Recently a study from the Canadian Paediatric Society revealed some interesting facts about youth and firearms. Among other things, they noted that:

- In 2002, 67 youth under the age of 20 died from unintentional (accidental) and intentional injuries (suicides and homicides) caused by firearms.
- In 2002, 13% of the Canadian deaths from unintentional firearms injuries were in youth age 19 or under
- The majority of Canadian adolescent firearms deaths are suicides, accounting for 75% of all firearms deaths in 15 to 19 year-olds.
- Most Canadian firearms owners own a rifle or shotgun; only 12% own a handgun.
- A Statistics Canada study of family violence between 1991 and 1999 found that the majority of Canadian child and adolescent homicide victims are killed by family members.

In their report, the Canadian Paediatric Society came up with the following recommendations:

- Paediatricians should support legislative measures to strictly control the acquisition, ownership and storage of firearms.
- Physicians should routinely inquire about the presence of a firearm in the home and inform parents of the risks of home ownership if one is present. Physicians have an obligation to share this information with parents, until such time that an effective approach to anticipatory guidance relating to the prevention of firearm injuries is established.
- A recommendation to remove the firearm from the home should be made in cases where there are risk factors for adolescent suicide. Physicians may similarly wish to recommend the removal of the firearm from the home when there are risk factors for childhood unintentional injury or domestic violence, although the effectiveness of such a recommendation has not been evaluated.
- Firearm safety interventions that include education and environmental interventions – such as the provision of trigger locks and gun safes – would likely be more effective than an education-only program. However, our present level of evidence does not clearly indicate the best way to improve gun safety in the home.
- Childhood firearm safety education cannot be recommended at present because currently available programs have not been shown to result in behaviour change in children, and such education may have unintended negative effects, such as reduced parental vigilance. Further study is needed before the implementation of any childhood firearm safety education programs.
- The use of technological innovations, such as personalization of firearms, is a promising strategy and deserves further study. Research is also needed on the subject of Canadian youths and their acquisition of illegal firearms.
- Nonpowder firearms (air guns and BB guns) are dangerous weapons and should not be considered as toys for children or adolescents. Youths should never use these weapons unless supervised closely by an adult. Physicians assessing children with injuries caused by these guns should be aware that the pellets can cause significant internal

injury. Paintball guns should be used only in supervised arenas with proper safety gear. A nationwide policy regulating the sale and use of nonpowder firearms is needed.<sup>27</sup>

### Age of Access

The Coalition for Gun Control fought hard to get the age for FACs raised to 18 in 1991 and minors' permits were intended to accommodate exceptional cases NOT lowering provincial standards. The suggestion that the Federal Government made it necessary to introduce the hunters apprenticeship program because the minimum age for minors permits is 12, is unfounded.

The federal law is designed to accommodate exceptional circumstances where giving children access to guns is necessary (particularly in terms of aboriginal hunting traditions in the far north), not to promote access to firearms via the hunters apprenticeship program.

### Training for Kids: Safety or Promotion?

There is no evidence that training programs increase safety for children particularly at a young age.<sup>28</sup> According to groups such as the Canadian Pediatric Society (CPS) and the Canadian Association for Adolescent Health (CAAH), the most effective strategy for keeping children safe is to keep guns away from them.

The 2001 study "Seeing Is Believing: What Do Boys Do When They Find a Real Gun," conducted by Jackman, Farah, Kellermann and Simon, suggested that most young boys who discover a concealed firearm are likely to handle it and even pull the trigger. The study once again underscores the fact that firearms education does not increase children's safety: as an estimated 90% of the kids said they had received some instruction in the issue of gun safety prior to the study.

The National Rifle Association in the US has a well established training program for kids - Eddie the Eagle. The NRA actually advertises that trigger locks are dangerous and that training is the solution. A number of researchers have shown that:

- there is no evidence that these training programs are effective;
- the NRA's Eddie the Eagle program, like the tobacco lobby's Joe Camel program, is part of a comprehensive attempt to market guns for kids. One of the children involved in the recent shootings in Jonesboro, Arkansas was an Eddie the Eagle graduate.

The Canadian gun lobby has also been clear about its objectives to promote interest in guns among children and some groups (notably the National Firearms Association) have even argued that guns should not be stored safely, rather children should be "gun proofed." In an interview on CBC in 2000, Dr. Jules Sobrian, President of the Responsible Gun Owners of Ontario argued, like the NRA, that trigger locks were dangerous and, instead, that children should be trained. Federal law requires that guns be stored unloaded and secured when they are not in use.

Training can create a false sense of security. American studies show, in fact, that gun owners who have taken safety training programs are less likely to store their guns safely. Children cannot be supervised 24 hours a day and the developmental characteristics (maturity,

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<sup>27</sup> Frappier, J-Y, Leonard, K, Sacks, D. "Youth and Firearms in Canada", Canadian Paediatric Society, Paediatric and Child Health, 2005.

<sup>28</sup> K. Leonard, "Firearm Safety Training for School-age Children" (1999).

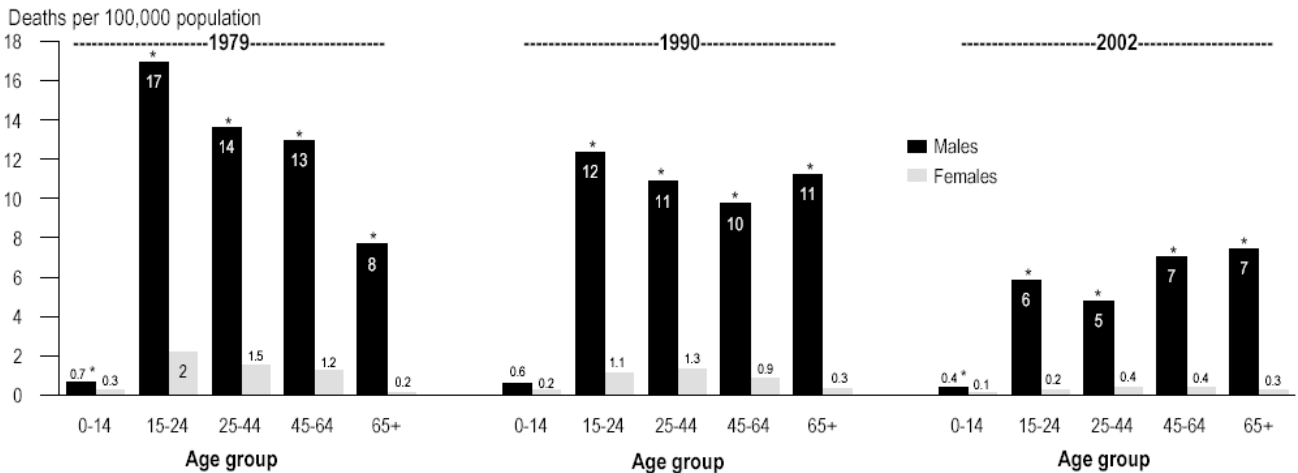
responsibility, reliability, ability to distinguish fantasy from reality, understanding of consequences, etc.) vary greatly.

The cost of gun death, injury and crime involving children and youth in Canada is enormous. Many of these tragedies are preventable but a concerted and coordinated effort is required to stop the escalation of gun violence. As one group on the forefront of youth issues expressed: "Individually and collectively, we are all responsible for making the change. Punishment is an end. Prevention is a beginning."

### Trends

The good news is that with progressive tightening of gun laws there have been significant improvements in the safety of youth.

Rate of death from injury involving firearm—by sex and age group



Data source: Canadian Mortality Database  
 \*Significantly higher than rate for females ( $p < 0.05$ )

Source: Wilkins, K., "Deaths Involving Firearms", Analytical Studies and Report, Statistics Canada, June, 2005.