



OPINION

It's not us, it's you: America's guns kill Canadians

A 'Canada First' approach needs domestic measures and border controls.

BY WENDY CUKIER

The recent trade war and persisting threats of annexation from United States President Donald Trump have highlighted the intricate and now-difficult relationship that Canada shares with the U.S. Much attention has been focused on the imaginary threats that Canada poses, but in many respects, the opposite is true.

Not only is the flow of hate-filled U.S. rhetoric, misinformation, and right-wing media seeding discord and security threats, but legally imported and smuggled American guns also account for most of the firearms seized in crime in this country, and most of the weapons used to kill and injure Canadians. Since 2003, the number of semi-automatic firearms legally imported



While we are re-examining our once-close relationship with the U.S., we ought to also determine new ways of preventing these weapons of violence from moving across the border, writes Wendy Cukier. *Unsplash photograph by seeetz*

from the U.S. has skyrocketed by more than 900 per cent. Canada is the largest importer of American hunting rifles, and has been ranked second only to the U.S. among developed countries in guns per capita.

Where there are more guns, there are more deaths. In 2023, there were 17,927 murders with guns in the U.S. compared to 289 in Canada. Access to guns is the key differentiator. The rates of murders without guns are almost identical (1.2 per 100,000), but the rate of murders with guns is six times higher (4.3 versus 0.72 per 100,000). In 2020, after the deadliest mass shooting in our history, the government took action through the banning of military style semi-automatic firearms; banning the import, transfer, and sale of handguns; strengthening licensing provisions; and improving border controls. A recent announcement

shows progress on the buyback of assault style semi-automatics, as well as regulations essential to reducing the public safety risks particularly in terms of intimate partner violence. Despite delays due to pressure from both pro and anti-gun-control advocates, the final result focuses on banning firearms where the danger outweighs the utility, without impinging on Indigenous hunting rights or firearms "reasonably" used in hunting.

While the profile in different communities varies, nationally, the majority of firearms recovered in crime were at one time legally owned in Canada. In 2022, the known firearms used in gun-related homicides had initially been obtained legally in about half of cases. Rifles or shotguns were slightly more likely to be of legal origin (58 per cent) than handguns (49 per

cent). Among incidents in which the firearm had initially been obtained legally, the accused was the legal firearm owner in 44 per cent of cases. Legal guns account for the most murders of women, suicides, and mass shootings. Legal ownership of handguns has tripled since 2003 to more than one million. Canadian responses to the problem of firearms are rooted deeply in our nation's values: respecting legitimate uses of firearms and Indigenous rights, but focusing on reducing the risks and threats to public safety.

Domestic action is simply not enough anymore. American firearm culture—especially fuelled by the National Rifle Association and other right-wing special interest groups—has spilled north of the border. American gun lobby groups are also actively consorting and colluding with their Canadian



Wendy Cukier is president of the Coalition for Gun Control. *Handout photograph*

counterparts to relax legislation, and to promote foreign notions like “arming for self protection.” While legally owned firearms equally account for the guns recovered in crime nationally, smuggled guns from the U.S. are a major part of the problem. There are a plethora of examples when it comes to the challenges of the world’s longest undefended border, and the skill of criminals in smuggling firearms. Last year alone, more than 600 guns were seized—and

that is only the tip of the iceberg. In one high-profile case, millions of dollars in gold bars were stolen from Toronto Pearson airport, with the sale of the stolen gold going specifically to purchase guns in the U.S. to be smuggled back into Canada and sold for profit on the black market.

As we re-examine our once-close relationship with America, we ought to also determine new ways of preventing these weapons of violence

from moving across our border. Trump has made apparent his desire for annexation, contingent on movement on key issues surrounding the border. For a country living in a glass house, they ought to refrain from throwing stones, especially as American firearms spill into both Canada and Mexico, and fuel conflicts worldwide. Gun smuggling and trafficking from the U.S. is tied to the illegal drug trade that is dominating the media landscape.

Just as with the trade threats to our Canadian companies and workers, and menacing snickers of annexation from Trump, public safety is not a partisan issue. Lawmakers of all stripes must come together to protect Canadians. Our strong gun controls, coupled with strong border controls, are needed to stem firearm deaths and crime.

*Wendy Cukier is president of the Coalition for Gun Control.
The Hill Times*