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Submission to the Standing Committee on Public Safety and National Security from Dr. Najma Ahmed, Canadian Doctors for Protection from Guns

On behalf of Canadian Doctors for Protection from Guns, I am pleased to submit this written brief as part of the Committee's current study on gun violence. Thank you for taking the time to discuss this important issue.

Canadian Doctors for Protection from Guns (CDPG) is a grassroots, non-profit organization concerned about the increasing public health impact of firearms. We represent physicians working in collaboration with nurses, paramedics, rehabilitation specialists, psychologists, researchers, and other front-line health care professionals. We have all witnessed first-hand the emotional and physical trauma and devastation caused by guns.

I am Chief of the Department of Surgery at St. Michael's Hospital where I have practiced surgery for 20 years and Professor of Surgery at the University of Toronto. I have treated many patients who have suffered gunshot wounds and consoled many of their families, as have my colleagues in CDPG. I have seen young men, caught in the traps set by poverty, racism and lack of opportunity, women living and dying in domestic violence situations, young children suffering from unintentional shootings, and have cared for families whose loved one has died from suicide by gun.

Injuries from guns are unlike any other injuries that physicians treat. Bullets act like missiles, tearing apart and shredding all manner of tissues in their path. Many patients with gun shot wounds do not survive to arrive to hospital. Many patients who survive have serious and life-threatening injuries. These patients require many, many operations and hundreds of units of blood to stem the hemorrhage caused by bullets. At St. Michael's Hospital, our teams have operated on patients 10-15 times over the first many weeks and then an additional 5-6 operations in the reconstructive phase. Many patients will spend months in hospital to regain sufficient strength to participate in rehabilitation activities. They will spend many more months, or years, in rehabilitation to gain back their physical strength.

The lives of gun shot wound patients are never the same. Their families' lives are never the same. Patients spend years in my practice, where I help them through their journey of healing and recovery. They return to hospital to seek treatment for chronic pain, chronic infections, and muscle and nerve damage. Some have permanent spinal cord and brain injuries, which will never heal completely. The emotional toll on them and their families is incalculable.

Gun injury and death are an increasing public health issue in Canada. Consider, Canada ranks 5th among 23 peer countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development for age-adjusted firearm mortality. This issue demands comprehensive, evidence-based policy that takes a harm prevention approach to reducing gun injury and death.

As the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated, focusing on evidence based preventative measures and prioritizing public well-being is the correct approach to minimize harm. A similar approach is necessary if Canadians want to reduce gun violence in our communities.

The Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada has affirmed that part of the role of a physician is to engage in advocacy on behalf of the communities that they serve. For example, physicians have advocated for safety labeling on tobacco products, seat belt laws, safer workplaces, climate change policy, and vaccinations.

Members of CDPG are content experts in this issue, and we assembled in 2019 to call on the federal government to take the following actions:

1. The introduction of legislation and other tools to reduce the prevalence of firearms, such as restrictions on gun ownership, an amnesty program to recover firearms currently in circulation, and a strategic approach to reduce the illegal sale of guns and the importation of firearms from other jurisdictions;
2. Funding and infrastructure for research on the epidemiology of firearm injury and death including the role of societal determinants such as poverty, mental illness, racial discrimination, and social isolation; as well as the effectiveness of strategies to reduce firearm related injuries and deaths.

This call is endorsed by the following 16 prominent health care associations and 3 national women's organizations:

the College of Family Physicians of Canada
Canadian Association of General Surgeons
Canadian Association of Emergency Physicians
Ontario Medical Association
Trauma Association of Canada
Canadian Critical Care Society
Canadian Anesthesiologists' Society
Canadian Neurosurgical Society
Jeunes médecins pour la santé publique
Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions
Canadian Nurses Association
Federation of Medical Women in Canada
Canadian Society of Otolaryngology Head and Neck Surgery
Canadian Psychiatric Association
BC Nurses' Union
Canadian Association of Thoracic Surgeons
National Council of Women of Canada
Canadian Federation of University Women
Women's Legal Education & Action Fund (LEAF)

In addition, in 2021 the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) updated its policy statement on firearm control. Many physicians from across the country, including many from CDPG, collaborated with the CMA to synthesize the scientific literature into an evidence-informed [policy statement](#). In its statement, the CMA supports legislative measures to reduce the prevalence of firearms through restrictions on civilian ownership, including the prohibition of the sale and possession for civilian use of all automatic and semi-automatic firearms with the capacity to kill or maim many people in a short duration of time. The statement goes on to note that, “Canada should strive to have among the lowest rates of firearm related injury and mortality worldwide.”

While shootings in cities, often involving gangs, dominate much of the discourse on the subject of gun violence these incidents are a tragic but very small proportion of the total number of gun fatalities.

According to an [Ontario study last year](#), suicides in rural communities make up the majority of gun deaths. Shootings are regularly the most common reported means of killing [women and girls](#) in Canada according to the Canadian Femicide Observatory’s annual reports. For every gun death in Canada there are many more victims whose lives are saved but suffer long-term physical and mental health [consequences](#), a 2020 study made clear.

This is unacceptable and preventable harm. Canadians need comprehensive public policy measures to address it.

What follows is a sampling of key aspects of the issues of gun violence in Canada and scientific evidence supporting the need for action.

Gun violence is a public health issue in Canada – the latest research

- As noted above, Canada ranks 5th of 23 peer countries in the OECD for age adjusted gun mortality. Our firearm mortality rate is 8 times that of the United Kingdom, and Japan, and about three times that of Australia, and the Netherlands, all countries where strict gun control legislation exists. This is how we should contextualize gun violence in Canada, not through the lens of the United States. – <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/fullarticle/2698492>
- New Canadian study from October, 2020 – “With a public health lens, the focus may be shifted to a collaborative approach to preventing firearm-related injuries and death that emphasizes targeted injury-prevention strategies, population-level interventions and system change.” Firearm-related injuries and deaths in Ontario, Canada, 2002–2016: a population-based study – <https://www.cmaj.ca/content/192/42/E1253>
- New Canadian study from July, 2020 – “Gun death statistics underestimate the extent of health losses from long-term disability”. 20% of patients with an intentional gun injury are at risk of long-term disability, and 10% of patients with unintentional injury are. <http://cmajopen.ca/content/8/3/E469.full>
- Firearm injuries are a significant and preventable cause of death in Canadian youth. <https://academic.oup.com/pch/article/23/1/35/4860345>

- Risk of firearm injuries among children and youth of immigrant families. <https://www.cmaj.ca/content/189/12/E452>
- Canadian Association of Emergency Physicians Position Statement on Gun Control. Canadian Journal of Emergency Medicine. <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/canadian-journal-of-emergency-medicine/article/caep-position-statement-on-gun-control/58A3F96DD9C7255585009B9AAD124894>
- “Controlling the flow of weapons must be a first step, but interventions that aim to change social norms around gun use, violence, and purchasing behaviour should also be developed.” International study co-led by Canadian researchers. The Lancet Public Health: Firearm mortality highest in young men, and is associated with race and education – https://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2019-05/tl-pss052019.php
- This study details the economic impacts in OECD countries, including Canada, of gun violence – <https://www.healthaffairs.org/doi/abs/10.1377/hlthaff.2019.01701>
- There are more than 150 links to sources on our website – <https://www.doctorsforprotectionfromguns.ca/further-reading.html>

Gun laws, including restricting access to specific firearms, saves lives

- This is a substantive literature review, of the correlation between stricter gun laws and reductions in gun injury and death – <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/26905895>
- Stronger gun laws have reduced homicides and suicides in Canada. The Institut national de santé publique du Québec estimates 300 lives per year were saved under the federal gun registry. https://www.inspq.qc.ca/sites/default/files/publications/2308_bill_firearms_registration_act_0.pdf
- The UK banned handguns following the Dunblane school massacre in Scotland in 1997. In the UK, there has been no school shootings and one mass shooting event since - <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2018/02/we-banned-guns-killed-school-children-dunblane-here-s-how>
- In Australia, in the 18 years before the Port Arthur massacre, there were 13 mass shootings. In 22 years following the passing of an assault weapons ban ('96-'18) there were 0 such incidents – <https://tinyurl.com/y9m3uhv7>
- Mass-shooting fatalities were 70% less likely to occur during the period in which there was an assault weapons ban in the United States, from 1994-2004. <https://journals.lww.com/jtrauma/Pages/articleviewer.aspx?year=2019&issue=01000&article=0002&type=Abstract>
- The decline in firearm-related deaths seems to have been mediated by the legal restriction of firearm availability. Firearm legislation reform in the European Union: impact on firearm

availability, firearm suicide, and homicide rates in Austria.

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/17766767/>

- (U.S.) States with more permissive gun laws and greater gun ownership had higher rates of mass shootings. <https://www.bmj.com/content/364/bmj.l542>

Reducing gender-based violence through gun control

Common sense gun restrictions are a gender issue. We have witnessed targeted attacks on women in mass shootings in Canada, but much of the killing of women and girls – and their intimidation – come from intimate partner violence and being in environments with guns.

- Keeping a gun in the home is a risk factor for spousal homicide – https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/58A3F96DD9C7255585009B9AAD124894/S1481803500010939a.pdf/caep_position_statement_on_gun_control.pdf
- The Canadian Femicide Observatory reported that in 2019, guns were the most common reported method used in the killing of women and girls – <https://www.femicideinCanada.ca/callitfemicide2019.pdf/>
- The Office of the Federal Ombudsman for Victims of Crime, in its submission in support of a ban on handguns and assault weapons, urged policy makers to take into consideration the link between firearms and gender-based violence - <https://www.victimfirst.gc.ca/vv/VC-CV/index.html>.
- “The Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists of Canada, in their Intimate Partner Violence Consensus Statement, recommended that when there is concern regarding IPV or family violence, the presence of a firearm in the home must be determined and, if present, should be considered a risk factor for homicide of a family member.” <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15999433>

Preventing suicide by means restriction

Too often, the discourse on guns fails to consider suicides, largely because suicide is a private family matter. Suicide is often an impulsive act; when it comes to suicide, means matter: 90% of people who attempt suicide by gun will die, whereas if less lethal means are used, the majority of patients survive and can benefit from a mental health intervention. Most people who survive a suicide attempt do not repeat it.

- This Canadian study referenced above indicates the large majority of gun deaths are suicides, and can be prevented – <https://www.cmaj.ca/content/192/42/E1253>
- The Canadian Pediatric Society notes the strong correlation between access to firearms and risk of completed suicide. <https://www.cps.ca/en/documents/position/the-prevention-of-firearm-injuries-in-canadian-youth>.

- An extensive 2016 international study examining the impact of gun laws on gun injury and death, indicates a consistent, significant drop in suicides correlated with stronger gun laws - <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6283012/figure/MXV012F4/>.
- Significant policy action in Canada is associated with reducing suicide and saving lives: up to 250 people (from wider study noted earlier) per year following the implementation of Bill C-68 - https://www.inspq.qc.ca/sites/default/files/publications/2308_bill_firearms_registration_act_0.pdf
- Gun reform in Switzerland also led to a reduction in suicides - <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/23897090>.

Guns and hate

It is important to note that the combination of hate and guns is a toxic mix – one that threatens public health and well-being of Canadians.

- Experts including the Canadian Anti-Hate Network have [detailed](#) the ongoing risks to society if governments fail to stop hate and strengthen gun control. Indeed, the 2017 tragedy at the Islamic Cultural Centre is not an isolated event in Canada; gun violence motivated by hate resulted in the two worst mass shootings in our country's history – École Polytechnique and Portapique,
- Recent news reports have noted the [amassing](#) of [guns](#) by extremist groups, an alarming development.

CDPG recommendations

Among CDPG's recommendations for the reduction of gun injury and death in Canada are:

- A national ban on handguns
- A red flag law backed by supports for women confronting abuse and for those dealing with mental health challenges
- The creation of a national firearms research and policy centre
- A national strategy backed by appropriate funds to address social determinants of gun violence, including poverty, education, and racism
- Legislation to enshrine the 2019 Order-in-Council ban on semi-automatic assault weapons, including an effective buyback program, and evergreening mechanism to prevent similar guns from coming to market
- Measures to prevent the smuggling of firearms from other countries
- Restrictions on the number of firearms and amount of ammunition any one person can possess
- A harm-reduction approach to the advertisement and sale of guns

We would be pleased to review the evidence with you or answer any questions you may have. More information about CDPG is available at www.doctorsforprotectionfromguns.ca. If there is any additional information that we may be able to provide to you, please let us know. You may contact me at Najma.Ahmed@unityhealth.to. We look forward to collaborating on evidence- based policies that will improve public health and safety.