



# BRIEFING

## **PRIORITIES FOR THE 2021 FEDERAL ELECTION**

### **Firearms Policy**

#### **Opportunity**

Firearms policy is highly politicized, creating extreme polarization that prevents meaningful public discourse about violence and the illegal use of firearms in Canada. There is a tremendous opportunity for political parties to bypass a referendum on firearm bans and other unnecessary restrictions on law-abiding firearms owners, and commit to taking a strong position and action on organized crime, gangs, and other illegal firearms activities. Furthermore, there is a need for the Government of Canada to take a leadership role in addressing the associated root causes of firearms-related crime.

#### **Responsibility**

Public Safety Canada , Canada Border Services Agency (CBSA), Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), Employment and Social Development Canada

#### **Achievability**

The Government of Canada must identify and act on the vulnerability points in the legal, policing, and social systems that are contributing the most to violence, violent crime, and the supply of illegal firearms. Short-term actions can be taken to better understand these vulnerabilities, better integrate and coordinate among policing and firearms agencies to flag potential firearms-related issues, and ensure full prosecution and stiffer penalties for violent firearm offences through the justice system. While these measures will help contain violence, gun violence, and organized crime in the short-term, there is a need for immediate and sustained investments in programming and policies that will tackle the ‘upstream’ social determinants to help with prevention. Concurrent actions to tackle the issues of today, while preventing the issues of tomorrow, is the only way to have the significant and long-term success Canadians are seeking.

#### **Background**

- There are 3 main types of firearms licences in Canada (non-restricted, restricted, prohibited).
- Restricted and prohibited firearms are already required to be registered with the RCMP, and their use is significantly constrained through strict regulation.
- Firearm ownership and related activities are becoming increasingly popular in Canada:
  - 2.2 million licensed firearms owners;
  - More than 1 million restricted firearms (2019);
  - Approximately 4,500 firearm and ammunition businesses; and
  - Approximately 1,400 shooting ranges.
- Firearms ownership requires demonstrated competency well beyond many activities:
  - Required to pass (minimum 80%) both a written and practical test following the completion of the mandatory Canadian Firearms Safety Course (non-restricted) and the additional Canadian Restricted Firearms Safety Course (restricted).
- Firearms owners are one of the most vetted segments of society in Canada:
  - All firearms licence applicants are subject to a background check by the RCMP.
  - Licence holders undergo daily ‘continuous eligibility’ screening.

- In 2019, more than 474,000 individuals were prohibited from possessing firearms in Canada.
- Licences are refused or revoked for reasons including court-order prohibition/probation, domestic violence, mental health, a potential risk to self and others, and violent behaviour:
  - 13,464 revocations between 2015 and 2019; and
  - 4,049 licence applications refused between 2015 and 2019.
- Common statistics about firearms are misleading and purposely exaggerate Canada's 'gun problem':
  - Using 2013, the year of lowest incidence in most firearms violence categories during the past 50 years, as a statistical benchmark is inappropriate to establish trends.
  - Long-term trends show overall firearms-related crime is on the decline in Canada.
- That said, the firearms community only supports responsible ownership and use, and is firmly opposed to any level of firearms violence.
- Arbitrary classification and general firearm bans are becoming increasingly common around the world based on emotional social responses to the appearance or perception of a firearm rather than its form or function.
- Firearm bans are a drastic policy tool that will have significant impacts on law-abiding citizens without a significant reduction in violent crime or illegal firearms. Criminals will still get guns.
- Illicit firearms are generally sourced from cross-border smuggling (mostly U.S.) or diversion from the legal market in Canada (straw purchases, theft, illegal manufacturing from parts), but specific contributions from each pathway are uncertain.
- Policing services have suggested that there is not enough capacity, coordination, and proper protocols in the existing system to ensure large and unusual purchases (like straw purchases) are flagged and monitored.
- It has been suggested that there is not enough capacity in the justice system to fully prosecute criminals.
- Firearms policy must be evidence-based and demonstrate that it will keep Canadians safe.

### **Proposed Solutions**

- Identify and fully evaluate vulnerability points in our legal, policing, and social systems that are limiting our effectiveness in preventing violence, organized crime, and the supply of illegal firearms.
- Make an immediate and sustained investment in programming and policies to tackle 'upstream' social determinants (i.e. root causes) of firearms-related crime (e.g. programs targeting at-risk youth, enhanced support for mental health).
- Ensure full prosecution and increase penalties for violent firearm offences to more effectively deter these activities.
- Invest in the CBSA to ensure they have the resources needed to prevent cross-border smuggling of firearms.
- Invest in actions to address gangs and organized crime.
- Facilitate better coordination and integration of policing, firearms agencies, and industry related to capacity, jurisdiction, information sharing, and tools to identify large and unusual purchases.
- Facilitate consistency in the definitions and methodology used by policing and firearms agencies when documenting gun violence and illegal firearm activities.
- Engage the firearms industry in meaningful discussions to identify retail vulnerabilities and develop creative strategies to address them.
- Ensure that classification or re-classification of firearms is consistent, transparent, and evidence-based. Allow for full public consultation and include an appeal system.
- Rescind blanket model-based firearm bans, especially where the function of those firearms is reasonable and proportionate for hunting and sport shooting.

### **Benefits**

There is minimal short- or long-term benefit of focusing new actions on the law-abiding firearms community. This strategy is divisive and takes the focus away from the real problems of gangs, organized crime, and other illegal firearm activities (theft, straw purchasing, cross-border smuggling). Far greater benefits for public safety can be achieved through immediate and sustained investment in the root causes of organized crime and firearms-related violence. A full evaluation of, and investment in, the vulnerabilities in our policing and justice systems will allow

us to determine prioritized and targeted solutions to reduce illicit firearms and criminal violence associated with firearms. The Government of Canada must play a leadership role in reducing firearms violence in Canada by ensuring that the energy, time and resourcing goes into strong measures that will have the greatest benefit for public safety.