Firearm Homicide in Canada: Extent, Comparison and Solutions

by
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Ethics Statement

The author, whose name appears on the title page of this work, has obtained, for the research described in this work, either:

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Abstract

Canada has an elevated rate of firearm homicide relative to comparable countries. The causes of this high rate are not entirely clear, but a very high level of civilian firearm ownership, along with a rise in gang culture and associated violence, appear to be potential culprits, at least in part. Despite a general lack of consensus on appropriate policies, this project analyzes several policy options aimed at reducing the rate of homicides committed with firearms in Canada. These policies are a grandparented handgun ban, the re-introduction of the so-called long gun registry, a national buyback accompanied by a time disincentive, and the government’s proposed Bill C-71. Ultimately, Bill C-71 is held to be the most viable policy option, owing primarily to its focus on background checks and firearm purchase records.

Keywords: Canada; firearm; homicide; policy; gun; control
Dedication

I dedicate this project to Dr. Colin Campbell, and to Dr. Curt Griffiths, who are two people who have provided encouragement to me and have helped shaped my academic career thus far.
I would like to acknowledge my supervisor on this project, Maureen Maloney, for her support, insight and patience in helping me complete it.
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<tr>
<td>ATT</td>
<td>Authorization to Transport</td>
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<tr>
<td>CFO</td>
<td>Chief Firearm Officer</td>
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<td>CMA</td>
<td>Census Metropolitan Area</td>
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<td>FAC</td>
<td>Firearm Acquisition Certificate</td>
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<td>ICVS</td>
<td>International Crime Victims Survey</td>
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<tr>
<td>NFA</td>
<td>National Firearms Agreement (Australia)</td>
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<td>PAL</td>
<td>Possession and Acquisition License</td>
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**Glossary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tr>
<td>Automatic</td>
<td>Any firearm that fires bullets continuously as long as the trigger is held down.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Barrel</td>
<td>A component of a firearm; the straight tube through which the high-pressure gas is introduced to propel a projectile (bullet) out the end (muzzle) at a high velocity.</td>
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<tr>
<td>C-17</td>
<td>A bill passed by the government of Brian Mulroney in 1991, arguably in response to the Ecole Polytechnique massacre in 1989. Among other things, it instituted mandatory safety training, restricted the granting of FACs (requiring a photo, two references, and a 28-day waiting period), introduced safe storage rules, and also introduced a ban on high-capacity magazines.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-51</td>
<td>A bill passed by the government of Pierre Trudeau in 1977. Among other things, it prohibited all automatic firearms, introduced the requirement for FACs, and also introduced CFOs in the provinces.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-68</td>
<td>A bill passed by the government of Jean Chretien in 1995. It introduced the main components of today’s firearm regime. Among other things, it abolished the FAC system, replacing it with the current licensing system. It also required that all guns be registered, including long guns. Most of these requirements were introduced via the Firearms Act.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-71</td>
<td>A bill that has been introduced by the government of Justin Trudeau in 2018. Among other things, it proposes to strengthen background checks for firearm purchasers, requires retailers to maintain records of all firearm sales for at least 20 years, and tightens restrictions on the ATT.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Calibre</td>
<td>A measurement of the approximate internal diameter of the gun barrel, or of the projectile that it shoots. It can be expressed either in metric or American. Thus, a .45 calibre refers to a weapon with a diameter of approximately 0.45 inches, while a 9 mm refers to a weapon with a diameter of approximately 9 millimeters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canadian Firearms Program</td>
<td>A program within the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, responsible for the licensing and regulating of firearms in Canada.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carbine</td>
<td>A long gun, but with a barrel that is shorter than the typical rifle or shotgun. It may fire the same ammunition</td>
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## Cartridge
A common type of ammunition with the following integral parts: the bullet (the actual projectile), propellant (typically gunpowder), a casing that holds the bullet and propellant in place, and a primer with which to ignite the propellant and thereby fire the bullet.

## Centre-fire
A type of cartridge, wherein the primer is located in the centre of the cartridge case head. Centre-fire cartridges typically refer to "larger," more powerful ammunition; their counterpart, rimfire cartridges, are typically used only in the .22 calibre or lower.

## Chief Firearms Officer
An official who is responsible for the decision-making and administrative work related to licences, authorizations to transport and authorizations to carry, and transfers of firearms by individuals and businesses. There is a CFO for every province and territory.

## Firearm Acquisition Certificate
A firearm license, issued in Canada between the late 1970s and 1995, where they were replaced with the modern licensing requirements of the PAL.

## Firearms Act
A major law, passed in 1995 under Bill C-68, which created the infrastructure for much of the current Canadian firearms regime.

## Handgun
A type of firearm that can be operated with one hand. They are typically short-barrelled, and typically fall under the category of either a revolver, or a semi-automatic pistol. Contrast with long gun.

## Long Gun
A type of firearm that is designed to be operated with both hands. It is typically long-barreled, and it designed to be braced against the shoulder while fired. Long guns are typically rifles or shotguns. Contrast with handgun.

## Magazine
Any device in a firearm that is designed to hold the bullets that are fired and feed them into the chamber. It can be detachable or integral to the firearm's construction.

## Minor's License
A type of firearms license available to individuals between 12 and 18 years old. Such a license does not allow the bearer to purchase or to own firearms, but it does allow them to borrow non-restricted firearms for select purposes, such as hunting or safety training.

## Non-Restricted Firearm
A category of firearm in Canada, introduced in 1968. A person is required to have a license to acquire a non-
restricted firearm, but they are not required to register them since 2012. Non-restricted firearms typically comprise long guns that are not semi-automatic or automatic, unless they are rimfire weapons.

Possession and Acquisition License

A license that all Canadian gun owners must possess. It is obtained by undertaking a safety course, followed by a background check and the testimony of two references, at the discretion of the CFO. A PAL may cover only non-restricted firearms, or both non-restricted and restricted, depending on which of these categorizations the prospective bearer opted to apply for.

Prohibited Firearm

A category of firearm in Canada, introduced in 1968. These firearms are illegal to acquire or to possess, with narrow exceptions (such as having a grandparented prohibited firearm). Typically, they include all automatic weapons, extremely short-barreled handguns, almost all .25 and .32 calibre handguns, sawed-off long guns, converted automatics, and various firearms specifically prohibited under legislation.

Restricted Firearm

A category of firearm in Canada, introduced in 1968. A person is required to have a license to acquire a restricted firearm and is also required to individually register each one that he / she owns. Restricted firearms include all handguns that are not prohibited, long guns that are both centrefire and semi-automatic that are not prohibited, and various firearms specifically declared restricted under legislation.

Revolver

A handgun that fires cartridges located in a rotating cylinder, which must be manually emptied after firing. It may be either single action (meaning that the hammer must be manually cocked back before each shot) or double action (meaning that the act of pulling the trigger cocks the hammer back before each shot, and then releases it to fire). Although a double action can be fired as quickly as the trigger is pulled, it is not typically classified as semi-automatic, since it is not the energy of the discharge that puts the next round into place, but rather the manual action of pulling the trigger.

Rifle

A long gun designed for long-range, accurate shooting; it is characterized by a “rifled” barrel; the helical grooves cut into the barrel serve to “spin” the round and thereby increase accuracy.

Rimfire

A type of cartridge that is fired by the firing pin striking the rim of the cartridge. .22 calibre cartridges (a relatively
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sawed-off Firearm</td>
<td>A long-gun with a significantly shorter barrel than is the norm. Such a weapon may have been illegally modified or may be designed in such a fashion. They are often prohibited in Canada, although some exceptions exist.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semi-automatic</td>
<td>Any firearm that not only fires a bullet each time the trigger is pulled, but also performs all functions necessary to fire another; this typically includes ejecting the spent casing and inserting a new bullet into the chamber. Effectively, such a firearm will fire as quickly as the user can pull the trigger.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shotgun</td>
<td>A long gun which fires a number of smooth, spherical pellets called shot from a cartridge, as opposed to a single bullet, although it can also fire a solid projectile called a slug. Many shotguns do not have rifled barrels, thus distinguishing them from rifles. They have a significantly reduced range compared to rifles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Straw Purchase</td>
<td>A purchase of a firearm (although it may be of other items as well) by somebody legally permitted to purchase it, but on behalf of somebody who is prohibited from purchasing it. Subsequently, the firearm is illegally delivered to the prohibited would-be owner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submachine gun</td>
<td>A magazine-fed, automatic carbine designed to fire handgun ammunition, but typically with a barrel length and overall length that falls between a handgun and a long gun.</td>
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Preface

On July 22, 2018, a young man with a troubled history of mental health issues walked onto the busy Danforth Avenue in Toronto. He began shooting with a .40 Smith & Wesson semiautomatic handgun, firing at passing vehicles, pedestrians on foot, and through the windows of restaurants. His choice of victims was seemingly both random and purposeful, assuring some potential victims that he meant them no harm, while shooting at others without any apparent concern over gender, age, or any other distinction. He was confronted by police, exchanged gunfire with them, and fled the area with the officers in hot pursuit. He committed suicide almost immediately afterwards. Two people were killed, including a child, and more than a dozen others injured.

This incident proved to be a catalyst for significant public discussion on the problems of firearm violence in Canada. Although mass shootings tend to provoke significant public attention, the question of whether this will lead to any policy change remains open. Mass shootings are actually quite anomalous in the grinding mundanity of firearm homicide trends; most of the hundreds of firearm homicides committed in Canada annually occur in less dramatic contexts, shorn of the publicity and news value of the Toronto shooting. They risk becoming routine or mundane, whether they are of young men dying in gang-related retaliation, people dying at the hands of a vindictive or abusive ex-partner (or current partner), or simply people with easy access to firearms killing or maiming in the context of a heated moment. Such incidents, tragic though they may well be, do not tend to affect most people, and as such do not tend to occupy a prominent place in people’s minds. It is the jarring intrusion of firearm violence into day-to-day life, with outdoor diners and families enjoying a warm summer evening suddenly fleeing gunfire and death, that provokes the reaction we have seen.

Yet, despite the lack of public awareness or even concern, firearm violence in Canada exacts a grim toll annually. With rates far in excess of virtually every western nation aside from the United States, it is worth hoping this tragedy can stimulate honest conversation, take advantage of a brief policy window and produce effective, evidence-based policy that can build off existing policy and address these systemic issues.
Introduction

Although the definitions of public policy as a discipline abound, there are commonalities to be found between them. Primary among them is the notion that public policy exists as a means for governments or other authorized bodies to undertake actions, in a systematic fashion, to achieve objectives. One of the key objectives guiding policy has been the prevention of premature death. Public policy and its outputs have been involved in this to a huge degree. The preservation of life by the avoidance of unnatural death has been one of the key areas with which public policy and governments concern themselves.

Of all its myriad forms and types, arguably the premature death that excites the public the most is homicide. It represents a major fear of members of the public, who are often known to overestimate the prevalence of violent crime generally, and of their likelihood of falling victim to it. (Ekos, 2017) It is also very traumatic to society, creating secondary victimization far beyond the person or people who initially died. (Van Wijk et al, 2016, 145) All homicide is undesirable, of course, but is particularly egregious, arguably, when committed with firearms. Their ability to deliver death impersonally and with ease, along with the higher possibility of collateral damage, make firearms’ damage a particularly pressing social issue, given their inherent dangerousness.

Firearm homicide in Canada, while not occupying the same cultural space or extent as it does in the United States, still does periodically raise its head into the public consciousness. While the 1989 *Ecole Polytechnique* mass murder of 14 women remains uniquely imprinted on the Canadian consciousness, serving as the inspiration for both a nascent gun control movement and increased feminist consciousness, it is not unique. Other events, such as the 2006 shooting at Dawson College, and the 2017 mass murder at a mosque in Quebec City by a right-wing extremist, have also caused concern. 2018 also saw several significant events that pushed the issue to the forefront, (Lau, 2018) particularly a mass shooting on the streets of Toronto that killed three (including the perpetrator) and injured more than a dozen. (CTV News, 2018) Numerous levels of governments have proposed various solutions since then, (Marandola, 2018) (Hayes et al, 2018) (Westoll, Global News, 2018) and the weight of firearm violence in Canada
raises the question of what options are available to deal with this significant social problem.

Problem Statement and Research Questions

This project will deal with a simple research issue: Canada's elevated level of firearm homicide, and ways to address this problem through policy. If it were to be condensed down to a thesis statement, it would be: Analysis will demonstrate that Canada's elevated firearm homicide rates can be mitigated by an appropriate policy interventions.

There are three key research questions guiding this project forward. The first of these is: is there a correlation, or causation, between levels of firearm homicide and firearm ownership?

The second of these is: is there compelling evidence that prior policy interventions, whether in Canada or in comparable countries, have had the beneficial effect of lowering firearm homicide rates?

The third of these is: if such a prior policy intervention exists in a foreign jurisdiction, is it likely to be efficacious and feasible if implemented in the Canadian context?

Methodology

The goal of this project is to identify policy solutions for the problem posed by firearm homicide in Canada. Therefore, certain methodologies lend themselves particularly well to this goal, whereas it effectively excludes others.

This project will be comprised predominantly of two methodologies. The first of these is a jurisdictional scan, gathering relevant information through a literature review, to attempt to identify workable policies in other countries or regions, which are comparable to Canada. The second of these is a series of semi-structured interviews, conducted with people knowledgeable about firearm homicide or issues pertaining to it.
These methodologies are well suited to this project. Since this project aims to identify policy options pertaining to firearm violence, and its scope prohibits extensive exploration of original policies, reviewing existing policies is the best option available. Conversely, this project is ill-suited to the experimental method, and its lack of focus on public opinion (except as a secondary consideration) effectively disqualifies surveys or focus groups.
The Current Status of the Canadian Firearms Regime

As of 2019, all firearms in Canada are governed under the Firearms Act and various parts of the Criminal Code. Firearm regulations occur under the auspices of the Canadian Firearms Program. Within this framework, there are three divisions of classification for firearms, and every firearm must be classified in one of the three categories. These categories are: non-restricted, restricted, and prohibited. Roughly speaking, non-restricted firearms comprise most long guns that are not semi-automatic; this includes most hunting rifles and shotguns. Restricted firearms include any non-prohibited handgun, as well many centrefire rifles that have semi-automatic firing capability. Prohibited firearms refer to firearms that (with very narrow exceptions) are illegal for civilians to own in Canada. These include, but are not limited to, fully automatic weapons, firearms with extremely short barrels, most handguns chambered in .25 or .32 calibre, and other weapons designated as prohibited. (RCMP, 2016, Classes) Responsibility for this classification ultimately lies with the RCMP, which enables the force to prohibit specific weapons. At times this has caused controversy, as it did in 2014 when the federal government passed a law that allowed Cabinet to override these decisions. This was due to an RCMP decision to re-classify the CZ-858 rifle and various Swiss Arms rifles as prohibited weapons, owing to the relative ease with which they could be illegally converted to automatic fire. (Quan, 2016)

As it currently stands, any person wishing to acquire or own a firearm, or ammunition for it, must have a Possession and Acquisition License (PAL). A PAL may allow ownership of just non-restricted weapons, or both non-restricted and restricted weapons (depending on what the prospective owner chooses to sign up for), and it may be issued to a would-be firearms owner upon completion of a short course. (RCMP, 2018, Licensing) PALs must be renewed every five years. (RCMP, 2013, Frequently Asked Questions) Any firearm that is classified as prohibited or restricted must be registered; controversially, since 2012 non-restricted firearms do not need to be registered, when the so-called “long gun registry” was abolished. The registry is operated and maintained by the Registrar in the RCMP, and it comprises a component of the Canadian Firearms Program.
Many other restrictions and regulations also apply; various rules govern the manner in which firearms must be stored, can be transported, and can be used. There are many such regulations, and time considerations prevent their exhaustive chronicling here. However, several of the most significant of them are limits on magazine capacity (generally 10 rounds for a handgun magazine, and 5 rounds for a centrefire rifle magazine) (RCMP, 2015, Maximum) rules for transporting restricted or prohibited weapons (an Authorization to Transport, or ATT, is required), (RCMP, 2013, Transporting) and the prohibition of certain items or accessories (sound suppressors and armor-piercing ammunition are among the items falling under this categorization).

Much of this regime is provincially administered, via Chief Firearms Officers (CFOs). CFOs exist in every province and territory and are appointed by the province (if the province does not appoint one, a federally-appointed CFO is placed). (RCMP, 2015, Audit) They bear responsibility for much of the administration and decision-making, with probably the most relevant duty falling within their purview being the ability to decide whether to grant (or revoke) PALs for prospective or current owners. Between 2012 and 2017, an average of 773 license applications were refused each year, and an average of 2,418 licenses were revoked each year; for means of comparison, nearly 400,000 licenses were approved or renewed in 2017. CFOs are also notified by the courts of persons with prohibitions on possessing firearms in their jurisdictions; as of 2017, there were 443,043 persons thus prohibited. They are also in charge of designating instructors for the mandatory safety course that all PAL applicants must take, and in performing inspections on Canada’s estimated 1,400 shooting ranges. (RCMP, 2016, Commissioner) (RCMP, 2017, Commissioner)
The State of Firearm Homicide in Canada

I. Current Snapshot

The most recent statistics in Canada, regarding firearm homicides, are from Statistics Canada and date from 2017. In that year, there were a total of 660 homicides, of which 266 were classified as firearm-related homicides. This gives Canada an effective rate of 0.72 firearm homicides per 100,000 population. Firearm homicide rates, in this year, comprised just over 40% of the total homicides occurring in the country, a number similar to previous years, albeit slightly higher. (Statistics Canada, 2018, Homicide) The previous year, in 2016, handguns were used in between 55% and 60% of firearm homicides, with a minority committed with long guns (22%). The remaining firearm homicides were committed with either sawed-off rifles or shotguns, or “other” firearms (generally understood to mean fully automatic firearms, submachine guns, or air guns, among others). (David, 2016) (Beattie et al, 2018)

The public tends to believe that firearm homicides are closely related to gang activity, and the statistics seem to offer cautious collaboration of this notion. Gang membership has been found to strongly influence criminality and delinquency, (Tita, 2007, 4) and this extends to firearm violence. Of these 266 firearm-related homicides, a total of 52% of them are said to be related to gang activity, which totals approximately 139 gang-related firearm homicides in total. There were a total of 163 gang-related homicides in total across the country in 2017; this means that these 139 gang-related firearm homicides comprise a significant majority of gang-related homicides overall. (Other data indicate 87% of gang homicides were committed with a firearm in 2017, resulting in approximately 142. The reasons for this slight discrepancy between 139 and 142 are unknown). By comparison, only 27% of non-gang homicides were committed using firearms in 2017. Therefore, while it is fair to say that a fairly significant portion (a slight majority) of firearm-related homicides are gang related, the more striking statistic is that gang homicides overwhelmingly involve firearms. Firearm gang-related homicides have increased in recent years, rising from comprising 12% of all homicides in 2015, to 21% in 2017. (Statistics Canada, 2018, Homicide) (Beattie et al, 2018)

Location is another prism through which firearm homicides can be viewed. Taking statistics from the previous year, a significant majority (78%) of firearm homicides
in Canada in 2016 were reported in a Census Metropolitan Area, or CMA. (David, 2016) We can glean interesting information on these trends by viewing firearm homicide through the urban-rural divide, as well as regionally. Statistics seem to show that firearm homicide is generally higher in rural areas as compared to urban areas, and also that the rates of firearm homicide are lowest in Ontario and Quebec, higher in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, and higher still in the prairie provinces and British Columbia. It is also worth noting that there is a difference in the sort of weapon used; unsurprisingly, handguns are much more prevalent in urban locales, while long guns are more frequently used in firearm-related violent crime in rural locales. (Cotter, 2018) (Statistics Canada, 2018, Homicide)

It is worth noting that firearm homicide, when broken down to the provincial level, is (fortunately) rare enough that totals are small in many provinces. This means that certain provinces are susceptible to large yearly fluctuations; for example, in 2017, there were no firearm homicides committed in Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland, and the rate of firearm homicide for Manitoba more than doubled from 2016. Therefore, to provide some context, rates of firearm violence (defined as violent crimes where a firearm was present during their commission, regardless of whether the firearm was used) (Statistics Canada, 2018) are also included in the charts below, and they generally mirror the trends observed in the firearm homicide information, with a notable exception in British Columbia; its rates of firearm-related violence are actually quite low relative to other provinces, while its rate of firearm-related homicide is among the highest in the country. Other provinces, such as Nova Scotia, have similar (albeit not as stark) results. The reasons for these seeming discrepancies are unknown.
Figure 1- Firearm-Related Violent Crime Victimization, by province, 2016

Figure 2- Firearm Homicide, by province, 2017
II. Trends

The overall trend of homicides in Canada has been downward since the 1970s. From a height of 3.02 per 100,000 in 1975, homicide rates overall have been declining, reaching a minimum of 1.45 per 100,000 in 2013. (David, 2016) There has been an increase in the overall homicide rate since 2013 (admittedly, a year with a record low homicide rate); it reached 1.8 per 100,000 in 2017. It is impossible to state, at this stage, whether this represents a new trend, or merely a fluctuation. (Beattie et al, 2018)

Homicide rates by firearm in Canada have followed a similar pattern to homicides overall, albeit to a lesser extent. Here, based on data dating covering 1986 onwards, there was a peak of firearm homicides in 1991 of 0.97 per 100,000 population, and the subsequent decline brought this to an all-time low of 0.38 in 2013. (David, 2016) Meanwhile, data surrounding firearm homicides in Canada show that despite the undeniable decline since the 1980s, the overall rate has remained relatively high, relative to other western nations.

One interesting question is the incidence of firearms as a method of homicide in Canada. In 2017, 41% of all homicides in Canada were committed with some sort of

Figure 3- Weapons used in Firearm Crime, Urban/Rural and North/South
firearm, surpassing stabbings, which made up 31% of all homicides. (Homicide in Canada, 2017) Over the last three decades in Canada, firearms and stabbings as a proportion of homicides committed in Canada have been relatively steady. Both typically comprise approximately one third of all homicides in Canada, although 2017 marked a slight departure from that with firearm homicide gaining in proportion. (Statistics Canada, 2018, Homicide) Relative to other countries, this proportion is, again, quite high.

Chart 5
Homicides, by most common method, Canada, 1987 to 2017

Note: Populations are based upon July 1st estimates from Statistics Canada, Demography Division. Sources: Statistics Canada, Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Homicide Survey.

Figure 4- Methods of Homicide in Canada, 1987 to 2017
When looking more closely at the firearm homicides themselves, there is a very interesting trend that has been ongoing for more than forty years, and that is the increasing prevalence of handguns for use in homicides in Canada. Beginning in 1974, handguns typically accounted for approximately 25% to 33% of all firearm homicides in a given year, and this ratio remained fairly steady until the late 1980s. The situation changed, with handguns comprising approximately half of all firearm homicides, eventually comprising a majority by the late 1990s. The old ratio was reversed; now handguns consistently comprise a majority of firearm homicides. (David, 2016) (Hung, 2006, 13)
Figure 6 - Firearm Homicides in Canada, by Firearm, 1961 to 2017

The reasons behind this striking trend may lie with gang violence. Evidence suggests that gang homicides are increasingly becoming a problem in Canada; gang-related homicides have risen since the early 1990s, increasing as much as eight times between 1992 and 2008. From a rate of 0.05 per 100,000 population in 1992, it steadily increased throughout the 1990s, reaching a peak of 0.41 per 100,000 population in 2008. After a subsequent decline, a new spike during the years 2015 – 2016 saw the rate rise once again to the levels of 2008. (David, 2016) It is worth noting that part of this apparent increase can be attributed to changes in the methods of reporting; however, much of the literature and expert opinion are in sync that gang homicide has risen significantly during this period. (Statistics Canada, 2018, Homicide) (David, 2016) This rise in gang homicides is relevant given the fact that gang homicides feature firearms disproportionately and that their perpetrators tend to utilize handguns as their firearm of choice.
III. International Comparison

As previously stated, the firearm issue in Canada is naturally compared to that of the United States, and it is probably not a particularly useful comparison, due to the outlier status of the United States in this regard. To gain a clearer picture, it is necessary to compare Canada with other similar nations, in part by looking at the nature of firearm proliferation. This is important for both gaining a clear understanding of the parameters of the issue, and because of the nature of gun ownership and its relationship with firearm homicide. It is worth noting that firearm ownership statistics are notoriously difficult to estimate; due to the potentially illegal nature of many firearms, and the logistical difficulties in trying to estimate possession rates among an entire population, such estimates may vary drastically.

According to the most recently available estimates from 2017, there are approximately 12.7 million firearms in private hands in Canada, which translates out to a rate of approximately 34.7 per 100 persons. (Alpers & Rossetti, 2018) As of 2016, there were just over 2.1 million PAL licenses in Canada (in addition to just under 10,000 Minor’s Licenses), and in that same year, a total of 397,755 PALs were either issued or renewed. (RCMP, 2017, Commissioner) Currently, only restricted or prohibited firearms are registered; there were 1,090,430 such firearms registered in 2017. Prior to the scrapping of the long-gun registry, there were a total of 7,646,699 firearms registered in
total, in 2010. This number reflects the difficulty in estimating total firearms; the estimate of 12.7 million includes firearms held illicitly, or those that are unregistered. Notably, other estimates suggest that there could be as many as 21 million firearms in Canada, although this estimate is fairly described as an outlier. Total numbers of handguns are similarly difficult to estimate, but estimates fall between at least 861,850 and 1.1 million. (Maccharles, 2018) (Alpers & Rossetti, 2018) They are held by a total of 292,701 owners, according to the RCMP. (Maccharles, 2018) This leaves a remainder of between 100,000 and 230,000 other restricted or prohibited long guns.

Long-term trends among firearm possession in Canada are difficult to estimate with any confidence. Nevertheless, evidence suggests an increase in the overall level of civilian-owned firearms since 2011, when 8.6 million firearms (both legally and illegally) were reported in civilian hands. (Alpers & Rossetti, 2018) Elsewhere, one interesting trend seems to be that even in the face of rising civilian-owned firearm rates, the rate of household ownership has dropped, (Boyd, 2003, 474) falling from approximately 31% in 1989 to 15.5% in 2005. (Alpers & Rossetti, 2018) This is also backed up by the findings of one National Post article- this found that the average gun owner owned 4.14 firearms in 2010, up from 3.72 in 2006. (Davis, 2012) Therefore, preliminary evidence suggests that fewer and fewer people are accruing more and more firearms.

Internationally, Canada’s firearm ownership rates are very high. Although Canada’s rate of firearm possession (34.7 per 100 people) falls far short of that of the United States (120.48), its rate is surpassed only by the United States, Yemen (52.8), Serbia (39.1), and Montenegro (39.1). (Alpers & Rossetti, 2018) It is worth noting that the data from 2017 were unusually high relative to previous years’ rates, reflecting a possible fluctuation. Whatever the year, however, Canada is certainly among the top nations in the world in terms of civilian firearm ownership.
Figure 8- Firearm Ownership by Country, 2017

People may intuitively perceive that firearm ownership is likely to be correlated with firearm homicide. As already stated, Canada experienced 266 firearm homicides in 2016, for a total of 0.72 per 100,000 population. As with firearm possession as a related variable, Canada’s rate of firearm homicide does pale in comparison to the United States but is still high relative to other developed countries. (Alpers & Rossetti, 2018) It is worth pointing out that although 2017 has marked an unusually high estimate for Canada, Canada consistently has among the highest rates of firearm homicide in the developed world. Therefore, although these rates do fluctuate, as it currently stands Canada has a firearm homicide rate that surpasses many other “developed” countries, and in some cases surpasses them dramatically, and this has been the case for at least the last 15 years.
Figure 9- Firearm Homicide Rate by Country, 2000 to 2016
Literature Review

I. Firearm Proliferation and Homicide Rates

The question of influences on firearm homicide rates is a contentious one. One of the most controversial aspects of this debate is also one of its most basic aspects; the question of whether the proliferation or ownership of firearms is likely to cause higher rates of firearm homicide. A simple and intuitively basic question on its surface, this has become a hotly debated point, particularly in the United States, where many firearms advocates insist that the opposite is true. (Bangalore & Messerli, 2013, 873) According to this line of thought, widespread firearm ownership does not lead to higher rates of firearm-related homicide and may even lead to lower rates of firearm homicide, due mainly to deterrence.

One academic article that seeks to gain insight into this question was written by Bangalore and Messerli in 2013. In it, the authors take data from 27 “developed” countries and compare their rates of firearm ownership (defined as the number of guns per 100 people) against firearm death rates (including accidental shootings, suicides, and homicides, as well as those whose intent is unknown). It must be noted that they are not specifically measuring firearm homicides, but it seems safe to conclude that this still represents a viable starting point. They also look at mental illness in the population (defined as major depressive disorders per 100,000 persons), and the crime rate per 100,000 persons. Overall, with no evidence of multicollinearity, they find that firearm prevalence is a significant predictor of firearm-related deaths, with a strong correlation between these two variables. Although the authors are quick to stress that correlation does not necessarily equal causation, they state that their paper does appear to offer evidence that “abundant gun availability facilitates firearm-related deaths.” (Bangalore & Messerli, 2013, 875)

Much of the literature pertaining to firearms comes from the United States, and levels of firearm ownership vary drastically among American states. One 2007 study by Miller, Azrael and Hemenway attempts to look at the effects of firearm proliferation on the firearm homicide rate. Notably, this study controls for many other variables that may be at work in determining homicide rates, such as unemployment, resource deprivation (which operates based on a measure combining many factors, including income
inequality) and more. It is also worth noting that this study views firearm proliferation differently than the last one; rather than simply firearms per capita, the study looks at it from the perspective of the percentage of the population purporting to live in a household with firearms. The study found significant correlation between firearm ownership and the firearm homicide rate, although not with the overall homicide rate in general. (Miller et al, 2007, 661) Other observations included the risk being particularly acute for women, and speculation that legal effects of the firearms regime carry over into the illegal world, with firearm abundance and ease of access being mirrored in the black market. (Miller et al, 2007, 661)

This study's findings are backed up by another 2015 study by Monuteaux et al that seeks to test this relationship by looking at American states' levels of household firearm ownership and correlate it with a number of crimes, including that of homicide. This study also finds a significant association between the level of firearms and that of firearm homicide; interestingly, this study also finds that this association applies to the homicide rate generally. In addition to this, other firearm-related crimes (for example, robbery) also share in this association. (Monuteaux et al, 2015, 210)

It is fair to say that, overall, there is a consensus in the literature that availability of firearms is positively correlated with the level of firearm homicide rate. Certainly, at any rate, the idea of firearms serving as deterrent appears erroneous. This is communicated very clearly in a review of the literature written by Stroebe, who (among other things) looks at available studies concerned with firearm availability and homicide. He finds, with a few exceptions, the evidence points to a positive correlation. Several things are worth noting in the Stroebe study; this study focuses extensively on the danger to family members of having firearms in the household, correctly identifying the fact that most homicides are committed by an acquaintance or a family member. The study also attacks the idea of firearms being useful for self-defence. (Stroebe, 2013, 719)

The Stroebe study contemplates the question of this positive correlation and identifies three potential reasons highlighted in the literature; the first is that guns are more lethal, so a greater proportion of would-be murderers are successful in their endeavor. A slightly different take is that people with lethal intent are more likely to utilize a firearm if it is available. Lastly, some studies suggest reverse causation; in other
words, people purchase firearms for self-defense, and it is pre-existing high levels of homicide that lead them to this decision. (Stroebe, 2013, 715)

Another study that reviews a significant amount of literature is that of Hepburn and Hemenway. This paper reviews various studies, including individual-level and ecological ones, and finds that the finding of a positive correlation between firearm availability and homicide is a remarkably consistent theme. This link is true in many different locales and situations; it is true in terms of analyzing households (households with firearms are at greater risk of homicide than those without) and it is also true in terms of nations (nations with higher levels of firearm ownership are at a greater risk of homicide). The authors also look at the issue of the United States in particular, finding increased support for this thesis within America on a state-by-state level. (Hepburn & Hemenway, 2004, 417)

One study that applied a fresh perspective while looking at this issue was put out in 2012 by Altheimer and Boswell. They look at the issue of firearm availability and its effects on the homicide rate, but also include the question of culture as a key part of the analysis. Specifically, the authors looked at 43 nations, and grouped them into three distinct groups: namely, eastern European, Latin American, and western. They look at the level of firearm ownership, and the homicide rate, while controlling many significant variables.

Their results are quite interesting; in short, the effect of a proliferation of firearms appears to have distinctly different impacts on homicide depending on the region. For western nations, high levels of firearms were shown to reduce the overall level of homicide, but to increase firearm homicide specifically. In the case of Latin American nations, both firearm homicide and homicides in general were positively correlated with the level of firearms, whereas in eastern European nations both of these homicide indicators were negatively correlated with the level of firearms. The authors believe that this is tied to the way the firearms are viewed in the relevant cultures, and how these views impact their use; whereas in eastern Europe they are used primarily for self-defense in the context of weak state power, in Latin America they are infused with machismo and are used primarily as purveyors of violence. (Altheimer & Boswell, 2012, 689)
A similarly nuanced picture is present in an article by John van Kasteren. In it, individual and aggregated data from the International Crime Victims Survey (ICVS) on gun ownership and victimization shows that handgun ownership is positively correlated with violent crime victimization, but interestingly, not with non-violent, property crimes; here, this trend is reversed. (Van Kasteren, 2014, 53)

Overall, a rough consensus does seem to be present, that firearm proliferation (translating into firearm availability) does tend to be positively correlated with the firearm homicide rate. One potential reason is that firearms’ uniquely destructive power serves to increase lethality of existing violence; in the United States, rates of many violent crimes (robbery, assault, etc.) are comparable to other developed nations, but these crimes have a far greater lethal potential with the proliferation of firearms. Reducing overall violence, the book suggests, is best dealt with in terms of social interventions targeting poverty, inequality, and other “macro” factors. Gun control, on the other hand, serves as a harm reduction measure designed to not necessarily reduce violence overall, but to reduce its lethality and impact. (Cook & Ludwig, 29 – 30)

II. Impacts of Policy Interventions on Firearm Homicide Rates

While it may be fair to say that something approaching a consensus exists in literature that the overall level of firearm proliferation (or availability) is positively correlated with firearm homicides, (Tita, 2007, 11) arguably the more important question is how this situation can be impacted by policy interventions. Put another way, what sort of laws or policy moves are likely to reduce gun homicides?

On this topic the literature is significantly less unanimous. One significant study conducted in this area was by Santaella-Tonorio et al, conducted in 2016. This study attempts to track the effects of numerous firearm laws enacted between 1950 and 2014. Specifically, they look at a total of 130 studies of various firearm control laws passed in various countries, and the changes or effects that these studies noted. While fully conceding the variation in quality of the original studies as a major point of weakness, the authors still reported a general (but by no means unanimous) finding that the introduction of firearm control legislation seems to be correlated with a decline in firearm homicide rates.
These authors also drew some conclusions from the weight of this review; specifically, they found that gun control laws tended to be more effective when they were wholesale, meaning when they addressed multiple aspects of firearm access and ownership. (Santaella-Tonorio, 2016, 152) This same finding also observed when multiple laws were enacted at the same time, which combined had the same effect. In terms of the laws themselves, they found that laws targeting background checks and safe storage of firearms were particularly effective, and this was especially pronounced for intimate partner homicides and accidental deaths and injuries to children. On the other hand, laws banning specific types of guns tended to be ineffective. (Santaella-Tonorio, 2016, 152)

The continued ambiguity in conclusively determining the effectiveness of specific pieces of legislation is demonstrated quite nicely in a 2012 article by Langmann. In it, the author attempts to ascertain the effects of the three major pieces of Canadian firearms legislation since the Second World War; Bill C-51 in 1977, Bill C-17 in 1991, and Bill C-68 in 1995. The paper uses three major methodologies. The first is an interrupted time-series regression analysis to check for immediate impacts, the second is an autoregressive integrated moving average (ARIMA) analysis, and the third is Joinpoint regression software analysis (this particular tool is valuable in that it can more accurately pinpoint the exact time of a change). The author looks at the homicide rate, in addition to various factors that the literature deems relevant to homicide rates. Ultimately, all three statistics methods fail to find any significant impact, finding instead that median age is the most relevant factor. (Langmann, 2012, 2303 – 2314) It is worth noting that this study only looked at four years after the passage of these bills, which seems too short to draw inferences (Bill C-17, for example, was implemented over several years after its passage in 1991). (RCMP, 2016, History) Also, this study looked at homicide generally, not on firearm homicide specifically. However, this study still highlights the difficulties in crafting appropriate legislation.

Two other studies build on this theme. The first, by Leenaars and Lester in 2001, also looks at one of these three bills, Bill C-51 in 1977. Interestingly, these authors do find a statistically significant relationship between it and a general drop in homicide, but not a specific drop in firearm homicide. (Leenaars & Lester, 2001, 292) Notably, this study looked at the years 1969 to 1985 (or 7 years before and after the bill), and they also concede that it is likely that other factors are at work and causing these results. In a
similar vein, a study conducted by McPhedran et al in 2011, compares the decline in homicide rates of Canada and Australia between 1979 and 2007 and New Zealand between 1986 and 2007, and ultimately concludes that the country’s firearm regimes are ineffective at predicting changes in the firearm homicide rate; they differ significantly from each other, and their “strength” does not seem to be tied to the homicide rate. (McPhedran et al, 2011, 353) The authors instead suggest that societal factors are more likely the cause of these changes. Both of these studies show the extreme difficulty in proving the positive effects of gun control legislation.

Similar findings are drawn by another study by one of the same authors looking specifically at the impact of legislation on firearm homicides of women in the context of domestic violence. The study focuses on the 1995 Bill, and ultimately finds little to no evidence of any impact. The study suggests that the 1977 law is the one bill that may have had an impact; the authors theorize that this may be because this law focused extensively on background checks, given that past behavior is a very strong predictor of future behavior. (McPhedran & Mauser, 2013, 880)

An opposing perspective can be had from one study focusing on Bill C-17 from 1991. This study examined a time period of 7 years before and after the Bill and used a linear regression analysis to analyze them. It found significant decreases in firearm homicide and suicide in the aftermath of the Bill’s passage. Interestingly, the study also spoke to the concept of displacement: the idea that being deprived of firearms will simply push people to use other tools to accomplish their goals. There was support for this idea in terms of suicide (while firearm suicide declined, suicide by other methods rose to comprise a greater proportion of all suicides), but not for homicide; while homicides as a whole declined, the proportion of homicides using firearms did not, suggesting that perhaps other factors are at play to explain the decline of firearm homicide rates. (Bridges, 2004, 824) The author found similar results the same year, in a slightly expanded study looking at these trends over a longer time, and with all three bills in mind. (Bridges & Kunselman, 2004)

Elsewhere, a study published in The Atlantic found that assault weapons bans, safe storage requirements, and trigger lock requirements were all negatively correlated with firearm death rates. (Florida, 2011).
Case Studies

I. Australia

As is well reported by international media, the reform of firearms laws in Australia was spurred by the Port Arthur massacre in 1996, where a mentally disturbed young man ran amok with a semi-automatic rifle, killing 35 people and wounding many others, before being apprehended. Australia had experienced mass shootings before; in fact, there were a total of 13 mass shootings that occurred in Australia between 1979 and 1996, killing a total of 112 people. (Chapman et al, 2016, 294) The Port Arthur massacre, however, caused a particularly intense public outcry. (Webster, 2016, 279) As a result, bipartisanship was effectively achieved, with the conservative Prime Minister, John Howard, leading the effort. It culminated in the National Firearms Agreement of 1996, which introduced new firearms regulations and laws. (Webster, 2016, 279)

Primary among these were heavy restrictions on rapid-fire (semi-automatic) long guns, in addition to pump action shotguns. This arose as a result of the use of these types of firearms in many of the mass shootings detailed above. (Chapman et al, 2016, 292) Notably, handguns were already heavily restricted prior to the introduction of the NFA in 1996. However, the law also had other, less publicized aspects; it mandated the registration of firearms, the licensing of all firearm owners, and tightened requirements to legally own a firearm. It also established rules for storing firearms, minimum waiting periods, and other details pertaining to documenting purchases and transfers. (Webster, 2016, 279)

The results were outwardly impressive. To urge compliance, the 8 governments in Australia introduced a mandatory buyback program beginning January 1, 1997, wherein they purchased the newly illegal firearms from their formerly legal owners at market price, and then destroyed them. To fund this (the cost was approximately $500 million), the government introduced a temporary tax hike. After a nine-month grace period, heavy criminal penalties began to be applied to continued ownership of these illegal weapons. Over 650,000 were surrendered. (Chapman et al, 2016, 292) As of 2016, just over 3 million firearms are estimated to be in civilians’ hands in Australia, which translates out to a per capita rate of approximately 13.7 per 100 people. (Alpers & Rossetti, 2018)
Attempting to ascertain the results of these efforts, however, is somewhat more complicated. There have been no mass shootings (according to the accepted definition of there being 5 or more victims in the incident) since the laws’ passage in 1996. (Chapman et al, 2016, 292) However, firearm homicide was already on a statistically downward trend in Australia and had been since at least the 1980s. (Chapman et al, 2016, 296) In fact, evidence seems to bear out the effectiveness of this legislation’s effect on suicide, rather than on homicide. Multiple studies have concluded that it is impossible to definitively say if the NFA had a real effect on firearm homicide rates. (Chapman et al, 2016, 298) (Lee & Suardi, 2010, 76) (Baker & McPhedran, 2006, 463) Another study, by some of the same authors, is more optimistic, suggesting that these laws may be responsible for an accelerated rate of the pre-existing decline of firearm homicide; however, they are still ultimately unable to reach statistical significance. (Chapman et al, 2006, 367) Similarly, one study expands this by focusing on the state of Victoria specifically, which implemented its own firearm laws in 1988, and compares it with Australia post-NFA; declines in firearm deaths of all sorts were noted, but statistical significance can be reached only for firearm suicides. (Ozanne-Smith et al, 2004, 280)

II. United Kingdom

The change in firearms laws in the United Kingdom bore many similarities to that of Australia, occurring around the same time and being spurred on by high-profile incidents of gun violence. They primarily take the form of three major amendments to the Firearms Act, the first of which was after a tragic incident in the village of Hungerford in 1987, when an antisocial young man killed 16 people with a semi-automatic rifle. As a result of this, and the outcry it provoked, an amendment was made, banning the possession of semi-automatic rifles, of the sort the perpetrator legally owned. (Squires, 2015, 32)

The second of these inciting incidents was even more traumatic, and it involved a man entering a primary school in the town of Dunblane in 1996 and opening fire in the gymnasium with two handguns, killing 16 students and a teacher. Most of the dead were around 5 years of age. This event had a transformative effect on the national conversation around firearms in the United Kingdom, creating a situation ripe for far-reaching change. This change was enacted in the course of two amendments (one, the Firearms (Amendment) Act 1997, in the final days of the Major government, the second,
the *Firearms (Amendment) (No. 2) Act 1997*, in the early days of the Blair government; the first banned ownership of all handguns except for those in .22 calibre, while the second banned these as well. This had the effect of giving the United Kingdom one of the strictest gun control laws in the western world. (Squires, 2015, 32) As of 2017, there are an estimated 3.26 million firearms in the hands of civilians in the United Kingdom, which translates to a rate of 5.03 per 100 people. (Alpers & Rossetti, 2018)

There appears to be a relative dearth of studies looking at the statistical significance of these reforms, adding a major element of difficulty to any attempt to judge their effectiveness. As the Australian case demonstrates, it is extremely difficult to demonstrate a cause and effect relationship between any factor with a complex phenomenon like firearm homicide. However, by judging several long-term trends, it is possible to at least observe correlations between these reforms and the current status of firearm homicide in the UK.

This assessment stems from the trends in firearm homicide in the UK. Firearm homicide in the UK has always been low relative to North America or many places in continental Europe, and so identifying trends can be challenging, particularly with a relatively small population of firearm homicides to analyze. In one publication that examines firearm homicide in England and Wales between 1990 and 2010, the total number of firearm-involved homicides never once rose above 100 annually. Throughout the 1990s, annual firearm homicides ranged between 50 and 75 consistently, and this number spiked above 75 for the years 2001 – 2005, peaking at 97 in 2001/02. This number subsequently fell sharply back to the levels of the 1990s, and has fallen further in the successive decade, to a low of 19 in the 2014/2015 year. (Berman, 2012) (Allen & Audickas, 2018) These figures are in keeping with general homicide rates in the United Kingdom, although it departs slightly from the Canadian and American experience by showing an essentially continuous increase from at least the early 1970s until the early 2000s, and then dropping rapidly. (Flatley, 2018) In contrast, this decline began approximately 10 years earlier in the US and Canada.

It is important to consider another major factor in firearm homicide trends in the United Kingdom, and this is the proportion of homicides committed using firearms. Unsurprisingly, these are consistently lower than the Canadian numbers; between 1990 and 2010, this would fluctuate between 6% and 12%; subsequently, the proportion has
fallen sharply, resting between 3% and 6% over the following several years. (Office for National Statistics, 2018) (Allen & Audickas, 2018) (Berman, 2012)

These data are relatively ambiguous and present a challenge in attempting to draw any sort of conclusion. It is problematic to credit the decline in the firearm homicide rate in the UK to firearm law reforms, given that the change occurred more than 10 years after the laws' passage. The same is true for firearms as a tool for committing murder, as the overall proportions of homicides committed using firearms remained within a familiar range many years after the enactment of these laws. However, it is equally fallacious to declare them ineffective, or a failure; whatever delay may have occurred, the fact is that the last five to ten years have seen a significant and (thus far) continuing decline in the commission of firearm homicides. At the very least it can be said that a correlation exists, and certainly that the idea of gun control giving a free hand to criminals to drive up firearm homicide rates has not occurred in England and Wales (the brief spike in the period 1997 – 2003 notwithstanding).
Firearm Homicide: Analysis of Causation and Impact

It is necessary to investigate causation to determine policy options. More specifically, identifying underlying characteristics and influences on the phenomenon of firearm homicide in Canada will provide a basis by which to evaluate potential policies. This can be done by both expanding on themes identified in the literature review, as well as presenting new ones.

It is unsurprising to observe that firearms in general, and particularly their effects, remain an issue fraught with emotional power. Much of this stems from the continuing association in the minds of many people between firearms and criminality, which contrasts with the experience of law-abiding owners who resent what they see as an unfair bias against them enjoying the legal, recreational use of firearms. This leads to very important questions about the legal status of firearms used in homicides. When a firearm homicide occurs, is the firearm in question in the hand of its legal owner? Or, to phrase the issue in another fashion, are illegal, criminal firearms at the root of firearm homicide, and are lawfully held firearms also problematic?

This question can prove difficult to approach, let alone answer, due to the ambiguity involved. Many firearms used in firearm homicides are unknown, or are not located, (only 34% of firearms used in a homicide were recovered in 2016) (Statistics Canada, 2018, Firearm-Related) and so this must be considered throughout. In terms of the legality of firearms and their owners, one way to consider this issue is the following: there is either a) a registered firearm being used by its lawful owner, b) a registered firearm being used by somebody other than its lawful owner, or c) a firearm that is unregistered. Therefore, it is beneficial to examine the status of the perpetrator. Data pertaining to this aspect of firearm homicide are difficult to locate; however, one study looking at homicide in 2003 did so, using data from 1997 – 2003. Although admittedly dated, this data is still useful. According to this data, approximately 80% of persons accused of a firearm-related homicide did not have a Possession and Acquisition License (PAL). (Dauvergne, 2003, 8)

The alternate way to analyze the problem is to look at the question of the status of these firearms themselves. Dauvergne found that between 1997 and 2003, 46% of firearms used in homicides in Canada had their registration status confirmed; of these,
only 14% of them were registered. (Dauvergne, 2003, 8) While this is seemingly very relevant, it also highlights the dangers of drawing conclusions; more than half of these firearms were unable to be traced, and this means that this study’s conclusions apply to only a minority of the firearms used in homicides. However, it is worth noting that other sources also support the idea that most crimes are not committed with legally-owned firearms. (Public Safety Canada, 2018) (Tita, 2007, 20)

The question of firearms’ legal status raises an interesting point in the analysis, and that is the “sourcing” of these firearms. If a firearm is obtained by somebody illegally, there are two main ways that this could occur; the firearm was either a) smuggled into the country illicitly, or b) stolen from a lawful source in the country (a licensed gun owner, a police officer, etc). It has been widely accepted and believed for many years in Canada that most of Canada’s illegal firearms are smuggled in from the United States. (Interview- Irwin Cohen) However, recent literature has been calling attention to the phenomenon of firearms that are stolen from a lawful owner. Here, as with many other aspects of firearms crime, the numbers are difficult to determine, or even to estimate, and raise similar problems identified earlier. One study, for example, looks at the Toronto Police Service’s figures; in 2006, the Toronto Police recovered 327 handguns used in a crime, and of the 181 that were successfully traced to their first retail sale, 120 originated in the United States. (Cook et al, 2009, 273) At almost exactly two thirds, this seems very relevant, but is tempered by the fact that, again, many of these firearms are unable to be properly sourced, and that they apply to handguns specifically and to crime generally, not specifically homicide. Nationally, 2,863 “crime guns” were seized in Canada in 2007, and of these, 710 of them (24.8%) had a known source. Of these 710, 386 of them (54.4%) were smuggled (with Florida and Washington state alone accounting for 153 of them). (Cook et al, 2009, 274) This same study also indicates that crime guns, and smuggled firearms in general, are disproportionately handguns or other restricted/prohibited weapons, which is logical in view of the involvement of criminal interests in smuggling, and the role of handguns in gang homicides. (Cook et al, 2009, 274 – 275) Elsewhere, other sources indicate that restricted handguns are in fact a minority of firearms seized by Canadian authorities; this seeming discrepancy could probably be attributed to the nebulousness of the term “crime gun” as well as the broader, less urban scope of the Canada-wide situation. (RCMP, 2016, Commissioner)
The research indicates that a sizeable proportion of Canadian crime guns originate from domestic sources, generally through theft from lawful owners. Once again, numbers are difficult to estimate with any certainty, although the police report an increase of break and enters to steal a firearm; the total number of recorded incidents rose from 673 in 2010 to 1,175 in 2017 (Public Safety Canada, 2018). This represents a significant concern to the police, who report more than 10,000 firearms listed as missing or stolen in Alberta alone, with 1,300 firearms reported stolen in the province in the year 2015. (McConnell & Fitzpatrick, 2016) However, it is precisely this concern that makes the data problematic, as these numbers may reflect not so much an increase in firearm thefts as a newly heightened police priority of increased reporting. Regardless of this, firearm theft is clearly a serious issue. It is important to note that at least some literature clearly supports the idea of firearm theft being linked to increased incidents of firearm crime in the vicinity, including firearm homicide. (Khalil, 2017, 342)

In short, due to the nature of the issue, it is extraordinarily hard to confidently assess the role of smuggling, or of Canadian-sourced illegal firearms. Various anecdotes or snapshots provide convincing pictures, but not sufficiently convincing to give certainty that any one policy is ideal. Law enforcement agencies have a difficult time in identifying the origin of many seized firearms, and that of those that they are able to identify, there is evidence of firearms sourced from both smuggling and from within Canada. Looking at the numbers of stolen firearms identified by many police agencies (which must necessarily be taken as a minimum, given the virtual certainty of other, undetected and unreported offences) demonstrates clearly the pivotal role that legal firearms can play in the propagation of the supply of illegal firearms. Although it is tempting to dismiss the fact that legal firearms and their owners contribute to the issue of firearm homicide, and instead blame criminals and gangs, the fact remains that law-abiding citizens and the guns that they possess lawfully do contribute to firearm homicides, albeit unwittingly, and perhaps in a secondary nature to smugglers and gangs.

In terms of the causes of firearm homicide, it would be remiss to fail to mention the impact and contribution of cultural factors. On the surface, this would seem to be an obvious point to make; discussions around American gun violence make frequent reference to the concept of the “gun culture” in that country. (McLean, 2015, 233) Yet, aside from a general sense that Americans “love” guns, and that this represents an
aspect of their culture, this is rarely explored further. Similarly, Canada also has a gun culture, albeit in a different way than the United States.

Cultural attitudes towards firearms, of course, can be either positive or negative. In Canada, gun culture is unsurprisingly distinct from that of the United States, and there is some evidence that it has been diverging further in recent years. The decline in firearm ownership (taken as a percentage of households), the sizeable majority of Canadians in favor of stricter firearms control in surveys, and the incremental move towards stricter gun control since 1977 indicate this; one author sums this up by indicating that we, as a culture, are simply less tolerant of the presence of firearms in our daily lives, and the damage that they can cause. (Boyd, 2003, 474)

Boyd holds up culture as the likely cause of declining homicides rates, as opposed to the alternate explanation of demographic shift. The latter perspective attributes the declining rates of violence in general to changing demographics. (Sheptycki, 2009, 317) An increasingly aging population means that, by extension, there are fewer young men present in society, and young men are statistically disproportionately the perpetrators (and often, the victims) of firearm homicide. However, Boyd disputes this by pointing out that in addition to homicide with firearms, suicides with firearms have greatly decreased as well; unlike homicides by firearm, suicides by firearm are not closely tied to young men. (Boyd, 2003, 474) Therefore, there is clearly something else at work.

Also acknowledged, however, is the presence of two competing trends; an overall declining rate of homicide over the past 30 years, which has begun to be offset by a gradual increase in homicide since 2013. Much of this appears to be being driven by firearm homicide. Related to this is the increasing prevalence of handguns as the apparent weapon of choice with regards to firearm homicides. Some aspects of the literature address this; although Canada is a culture and a society that, on the whole, is increasingly rejecting the necessity or acceptability of firearms in daily life (Sheptycki, 2009, 332), this does not necessarily apply to every strata of society. Specifically, Sheptycki refers to the phenomenon of certain segments of society (in his case, young men who are often economically marginalized and at the lower end of the criminal hierarchy) who are increasingly, the evidence suggests, carrying and using firearms as a
matter of routine. (Sheptycki, 2009) This is reflected by the documented increase of gang homicides.

This phenomenon is referred to, in the Sheptycki article and elsewhere, as “pistolization.” This is defined as the “taken for granted cultural practise of carrying a handgun as an accoutrement of everyday life.” (Cukier & Sheptycki, 2012, 3) Although accepting that the Canadian culture as a whole has not undergone pistolization, (Cukier & Sheptycki, 2012, 8), this does not preclude its existence, or emergence, in certain segments of the culture as a whole.

Gun culture as an explaining factor also differs greatly within Canada. The concept of cultural distinctions mediating the use of firearms in a society has been broached previously, (Altheimer & Boswell, 2012), and this same logic also applies to different Canadian regions. One study, for example, indicates that there is a difference in attitudes towards firearms and their purpose between east and west; the concept of owning a gun (although not carrying a gun) for protection was much more frequently observed in the prairie provinces as compared with Ontario or the Maritimes. (Pare & Korosec, 2014, 835). This is intuitively in keeping with previous statistics showing higher levels of firearm ownership, and of firearm-related violent crime, in these regions.
Policy Options: Descriptions and Criteria

This project aims to evaluate a total of four policy options, with the goal of identifying which one is likely to perform best in terms of attaining the goal of reducing the total number of firearm homicides in Canada. It is important to recognize this as a longer-term goal; as the literature reviews make abundantly clear, firearm homicide is a very complicated phenomenon, and expecting an instantaneous resolution, or even alleviation, of it due to the passage of a particular policy is most likely misguided; the example of the United Kingdom is instructive, where the firearm homicide rate increased for six years after the introduction of their policies before beginning the decline which continues to this day. These policies are not exhaustive; many other policies, for example regulations that require firearms owners to store their firearms at a secure gun club rather than at home, are unexplored here due to time constraints, and should by no means be discounted.

Two absent categories of potential policy considerations should be noted. In terms of illegal firearms, targeted, intelligence-led policing remains one of the most vital measures that can be taken to counteract them. (Interview-Irwin Cohen) (Brookman & Maguire, 2004, 374 – 375) This is particularly pertinent in the case of gangs, and the violence that they cause. However, specific questions of the nature of policing, the organization of dedicated units, and other related questions transcend the scope of this project. The absence of police enforcement among the options suggested here should by no means be interpreted as denial of its fundamental value and importance.

The same is true of social interventions. One major perspective is that the most effective way to deal with violence in general is to have dedicated groups diagnose the social causes of a region’s violence, address those risk factors with targeted, multi-sector interventions that aim for long-term approaches. Such an approach has been adopted by the city of Glasgow with very promising results. (Interview-Irwin Waller) Although policing and firearms regulation may play a role in this, such a role is typically secondary, or at most a supporting one. In a similar vein to policing, this is itself a huge subject in the literature, and it entirely beyond this project’s ability to investigate or draw any conclusions on. This project concerns itself primarily with regulations and changes to the regulatory regime surrounding firearms in Canada but does not seek to argue that
any policy prescribed should supplant or replace police interdiction, social interventions, or other beneficial policies similarly recognized in the literature.

The last observation that needs to be addressed is that of enforcement of these provisions generally. It goes without saying that without proper enforcement, many policies are effectively useless. One criticism of the Canadian firearms system overall is that it has numerous good and effective policies and structures in place, but insufficient means of enforcement. Arguments about the manner with which these regulations and rules are enforced are similarly beyond this project’s scope, and the assumption going forward should be that recognized best practises ought to be followed, both with the current regime, as well as the policy prescription that this project ultimately proposes. (Interview, Wayne Rideout)

The first of these policies to be explored is a handgun ban. This policy has been particularly prominent since the tragic Toronto shooting, and has a direct precedent in the case of the United Kingdom. One thing to consider is the mechanics of a handgun ban, specifically the issue of grandparenting. Grandparenting was implemented in the case of certain types of firearms that were banned (classified as prohibited) as a result of the 1995 firearm law changes; put simply, owners were allowed to retain their (now) prohibited firearms if they were acquired legally prior to the rule change, but were not allowed to import any more into Canada, and were also not allowed to sell or gift them to anybody without a similarly grandparented status. (RCMP, 2017, Prohibited) Grandparenting is an established, reasonable practise that is in fact also being proposed for Bill C-71’s ban on certain (now) restricted rifles, should the bill pass. (RCMP, 2018, Swiss) For the purposes of this study, the handgun ban policy option will assume the grandparenting of handguns, to make the process more palatable to the public.

The second of these policies is Bill C-71. This bill, currently being considered, proposes a number of changes to the law, of which three main changes will be considered for the purposes of this project. It strengthens background checks for purchasers (assessing the person’s entire life history for red flags, as opposed to only five years currently), it requires retailers that sell firearms to maintain records of all such sales for 20 years, and imposes a new requirement for a separate Authorization to Transport (ATT) for a firearm owner transporting his / her firearm to a location other than
to their shooting range. (Tasker, 2018) (Bill C-71) These are the three main aspects of this law which will be considered for this as a policy option.

The third policy option is influenced by some of the ideas present in “nudge theory.” Nudge theory, at its simplest core, is a concept of governing in a less coercive way, typically by means of using incentives (“choice architecture”) to influence people’s voluntary decisions. (Kosters & van der Heijden, 2015) This policy option consists of two key recommendations. The first of these is a voluntary buyback program, and the second of these is an increase in the frequency of license renewal. Although this does depart from some key aspects of nudge theory, at the core of this concept is the idea of trying to influence individuals’ behavior through non-coercive means, and without bringing criminal law to bear.

The fourth and final policy option is to bring back the long gun registry. This registry, set up in the aftermath of the 1995 reforms, was controversially dismantled by the Conservative government in 2012, fulfilling one of their campaign promises.

Criteria

In order to properly evaluate these policies, it is important to determine the criteria by which they will be assessed. The first criterion is public security. For the purposes of this study, security is interchangeable with effectiveness, since effectiveness would be measured by a reduction in the number of firearm homicides per capita, which is representative of an increase in security for communities. It is not analyzed according to the degree or amount of change, since such numbers are very difficult to estimate with confidence. Rather, it is judged according to the degree that the policy focuses on acute or crucial factors that contribute to firearm homicides in Canada.

The second criterion is cost. Cost remains a significant consideration for any policy. Cost is considered from two perspectives: the cost to implement the policy, and then the likely cost to maintain it during its lifetime.

The third criterion to consider is that of freedom. Unlike Americans, Canadians do not have a constitutional right to own firearms; the Supreme Court of Canada has said this explicitly, (R v Hasselwander) and the government has seen fit to maintain this status quo. However, it is generally an acceptable principle that any policy should impair
people’s freedom of action as minimally as possible while still accomplishing its main objective. It is important to note that firearm ownership is in no way inherently sinister or suggestive of criminality, and that firearms continue to play a significant and perfectly legal role in many thousands of Canadians’ leisure time, outdoors activities, and occupations or livelihoods. These owners use their firearms lawfully and without incident the vast majority of the time, and any policy implemented should be very careful to not unduly penalize law-abiding people. This is relevant because violations of firearm regulations can bring criminal charges and criminalizing otherwise law-abiding populations is an outcome with socially deleterious consequences. (Hoskins, 2018)

Freedom is measured, broadly speaking, with two distinct aspects; the first is the total number of people or groups likely to be affected, and the second is the seriousness or severity of the infringement on these peoples’ or groups’ freedom.

The fourth criterion is stakeholder acceptance. Public acceptance of any policy is worthy of consideration, and this is particularly noteworthy where firearms are concerned. There are nearly two million Canadians with PAL licenses, meaning that these policies may affect a significant minority of the Canadian population. Although a majority of Canadians have consistently shown themselves to be in favor of stricter gun control generally, a significant minority (often seen to comprise approximately one third of many surveys) oppose many of these policies.

The last of these criteria is administrative complexity. Administrative complexity essentially seeks to understand the difficulty of both implementing and administering any policy that is recommended. It consists of two dimensions; the first is that of initially setting up and ensuring the policy becomes operational, whereas the second refers to maintaining that operationality. Additionally, administrative complexity can also be estimated from a quick glance at the various levels of government, or alternatively, the number of different groups or institutions, that are involved in operating and maintaining a policy, although these tend to be relatively constant in terms of firearms regulation.
Analysis

1. Handgun Ban

A handgun ban has been widely discussed, although a recent report seems to indicate that the federal government is tending away from imposing an outright ban, in favor of strengthening existing regulations. (MacCharles, 2018) In terms of the criteria, this policy option generates mixed results.

From a cost perspective, it seems logical to conclude that costs would be (relatively) minimal. In terms of implementation, handguns are already registered by law, and the extent of enforcing this grandparented ban would consist mostly of creating a new category of license. Aside from potentially requiring additional personnel (the tracking and eventual destruction of more than 860,000 handguns, even granted that it would occur over a lengthy time period, would pose a significant logistical challenge), it seems that the administration of this policy could be generally accomplished with existing structures and resources. There has been discussion about the potential vast costs surrounding the government’s proposed handgun ban, but these costs are mostly tied to buying back the handguns, which is not being proposed for (this) policy option.

Closely tied into this is the idea of the administrative complexity of this policy. It requires a degree of coordination between various levels of government; federal lawmakers, provincial administrators, and law enforcement that may fall under the jurisdiction of either federal, provincial, or municipal authorities, depending on the area. However, this arrangement is the norm for most areas of firearm regulation in Canada, (Auditor General, 2002) so although it is important to be cognizant of this aspect of it, this aspect is unlikely to prove a significantly negative force. This administrative complexity is difficult to estimate; on the one hand, as previously mentioned, handguns are already registered, so this aspect of the implementation of this policy promises to be of relative ease. However, experience suggests the process of having handgun owners apply to have their handguns grandparented (as many would certainly do) would pose a significant logistical challenge. This is evidenced by the long gun registry; one of the major cost issues was a high rate of error or omission on the relevant forms, as well as significant numbers of owners waiting until the last minute to register their weapons, all of which caused significant delays and cost overruns. (Auditor General, 2002)
Additionally, the administration of this policy does pose a challenge due mainly to its length; this policy will occur over many years, and it requires vigorous and proactive oversight and follow-up, to ensure that handguns are removed and destroyed from civilian hands.

Stakeholder acceptance can be estimated quite accurately, as polls have been conducted on this very policy. The results are relatively encouraging; one poll, for instance, suggests that approximately two thirds of the respondents support such a policy; of the respondents, this number combines those who are “in favour,” (48%) and those who are “somewhat in favour” (19%). However, although undeniably many Canadians are at least somewhat supportive of banning handguns, 31% of them are not (of whom 21% opposed the ban, and 10% somewhat opposed the ban). (Flanagan, 2018) At nearly a third of the polled population, this is a minority, but it is a very significant minority. Although the Canadian population can be said to be broadly supportive, it is far from unanimous, and significant contingents remain opposed. It is also worth noting that there are anecdotal indications to suggest that Canadians who are opposed to firearm regulations or restrictions may prove a particularly dedicated cohort; one CBC story notes that an e-Petition in opposition to Bill C-71 is among the largest in Parliament’s history, with over 86,000 signatures. (Tasker, 2018)

A handgun ban seems inherently relatively weak on the criterion of freedom, but this is ameliorated by grandparenting this ban into place. There are many Canadians who have handguns registered to them, and these persons would not find their lawfully acquired and held property taken, (although this would impact their ability to pursue their activities— the purchasing of additional firearms— in the future). Furthermore, handguns do represent a relatively “niche” aspect of firearms culture in Canada. Handgun owners represent a relatively small fraction of the more than 2 million licensed firearm owners, and the approximately 860,000 to 1.1 million handguns a negligible portion of the 12.7 million privately owned firearms in Canada. Similarly, handguns’ utilities are quite limited; they are used (lawfully) almost exclusively for target shooting or collecting, unlike long guns, which may be used additionally for hunting, pest control, and more (although a narrow exception to this analysis exists in the case of certain private security guards licensed to carry handguns on duty). (Montgomery & Griffiths, 2016) It can be said that this represents a moderate impact on people’s freedom, but that this moderate impact is further limited to a relatively small population.
Finally, the most important aspect to consider is the simple question of its effectiveness. By both observing other jurisdictions, as well as looking at how this policy aligns with the literature, we can gain an understanding as the likely effect of this policy. The literature has demonstrated that the relationship between policies involving restricting access to certain types of firearms undertaken in the United Kingdom and in Australia, and a decline in firearm homicide rates, is murky; both have seen significant declines in the rates of firearm homicide, but this decline in the United Kingdom was significantly belated, whereas in Australia, this decline had already begun prior to the introduction of these laws. There has been a general, and often quite striking, decline in violent crime around the western world over the past 30 years, and it is hard to unambiguously argue any cause for it. Additionally, the grandparenting of these handguns would impact the effectiveness of this policy, simply by virtue of the time factor involved. It is also worth noting that the literature is somewhat conflicted on the effectiveness of banning certain types of firearms.

However, other two other factors suggest a more beneficial outcome. Handguns have a unique connection with gangs and gang violence; homicides by gangs are disproportionately committed using handguns, and gang homicides per capita have seen a sustained and continuing rise since the early 1990s. Firearm homicides in Canada generally also disproportionately fall under that category, with handguns being used in a majority of the cases, so a policy that targets handguns specifically effectively targets crime guns by virtue of its focus. Additionally, the argument that it will only penalize law-abiding gun owners loses much of its potency when the issue of rising domestically-sourced crime guns is considered; opinion in 2018 broadly accepts the idea that a significant portion of crime guns are domestically sourced. (Interview, Wayne Rideout, 2018) (Tita, 2007, 6) (Interview, Irwin Cohen, 2018) Although smuggling from the United States is always a factor to consider, removing or significantly curtailing a major point of origin for handguns being used in crimes remains an advisable policy.

The second factor is the simple fact that this will move directly to reduce the total number of handguns in circulation. One of the most inescapable conclusions of the literature review is that firearm homicides share a roughly positive correlation with the total number of firearms available in a country per capita. By moving to take these handguns, which are disproportionately favored by criminals and gangs, and remove them from public circulation, this policy could have a very positive impact, even granting
that the grandparenting in of existing handguns mean that this is likely to a multi-decade process.

II. Re-Introduce the Long Gun Registry

Among the most contentious gun control efforts adopted by the Canadian government in recent decades was the long gun registry, whereby all rifles and shotguns (including those classified as non-restricted weapons) had to be registered with the Canadian Firearms Registry, which was administered by the RCMP. It was controversial throughout its existence, in part due to the perception of inflated costs and punitive focus on lawfully held weapons, and the non-restricted component of the registry was scrapped in 2012 by the government of Stephen Harper.

Despite the extensive media coverage of the costs associated with the long-gun registry, these costs are surprisingly difficult to quantify. There are numerous reasons for this, but one of the most significant reasons lies in the details; the Canadian Firearms Registry is a component of the Canadian Firearms Program, and these two things are seemingly often conflated. Much was made of the $2 billion price tag attached to it, for example, but this is the total amount spent on the Program as a whole, not just on the Registry. (CBC, 2004) The fees paid range on everything from paying staffers, to paying for public relations programs, meaning that any total cost estimate even of the Program generally must be used carefully. (CBC, 2009)

Figures on the registry itself are difficult to come by. Much of the costs appear to have arisen due to technological issues; in 2006 the Auditor-General said that the computerized system had cost approximately $90 million thus far, whereas a CBC report refers to $227 million for “computer costs” in 2002 (CBC, 2009). It can be difficult to ascertain if a cost, for example, is purely what was spent on the IT side of the program, or if the cost spent on the “registry” includes costs beyond pure technology, such as paying staffers. There are also frequent contradictions (for example, the Auditor General notes that the cost of the Canadian Firearms Registration System was alternately stated to be $13.5 million or $20 million in 1997/98) (Auditor General, 2002) or large variations over time (CBC reports that costs of the registry have averaged $33 million per year but were as high as $48 million in one year). (CBC, 2009)
Beyond the sensationalistic reporting on this, however, it is important to note several things. The first is that while implementation of the computerized system was challenging and costly, this cost seems to have fallen; upon the integration of the CFP into the RCMP in 2006, IT related issues comprised around 50% of program expenditures, and three years later, this had fallen to between 21% and 27%, well within industry standards. (RCMP, 2010, Evaluation) Secondly, the high costs of implementing the system seem tied to the difficulties in accommodating the requirements of the program with technology available in the late 1990s. It is unlikely that such high implementation costs would be incurred again, due to both significantly improved technological capacity, and also the current existence of a computerized registry, that would only have to be expanded to cover non-restricted weapons.

Ultimately, due to the probability of reduced implementation costs, we can arguably get better results from looking at costs related to the specific long-gun component of the registry. One estimate, made in 2011, suggested that by scrapping the long-gun registry, the government would save between $1 million and $4 million per year. (CBC, 2011) Elsewhere, Quebec has taken up the initiative and has set up a provincial long-gun registry, with that cost estimated at $20 million. The government estimates approximately 1.6 million long guns in Quebec (Valiente, 2018), so a very rough estimate could be perhaps between $100 million and $200 million to set up a nationwide long-gun registry, with a yearly cost of maintenance of between $1 and $4 million.

Administrative complexity poses an obstacle similar to the first policy proposal. This program is a federal one, which is nevertheless administered by provincial firearms offices, and is enforced by law enforcement from a wide variety of jurisdictions. The broader issue here is the question of implementing this program; since it revolves around a function no longer performed, it seems unlikely that it could be implemented and administered through existing structures and personnel. Implementing it could see a duplication of much of the difficulty that occurred the first time around, whereas the administration of it, once it became functional, seems likely to be significantly less arduous.

Stakeholder acceptance also poses an interesting question. A majority of Canadians have shown themselves to be generally in favor of stricter firearms control,
and it therefore seems reasonable to assume that this positive outlook will extend to re-establishing the long gun registry. However, many people seem to have a uniquely negative perspective on the long gun registry, perhaps due to the extensive negative media coverage about excessive costs and waste. Besides being vehemently opposed by most gun owners, at least one survey indicates that a significant proportion of Canadians (38% in 2009) supported the idea of scrapping the registry. Other surveys show nearly half of Canadians in favor of scrapping it. (Kilpatrick, 2010) (Angus Reid, 2010) On the other hand, other surveys show the familiar figure of approximately two thirds of Canadians supporting the long-gun registry. (Ipsos, 2010) Conflicting information such as this shows the difficulty in estimating this criterion. It is also worth noting now, however, that the current Liberal government of Justin Trudeau has repeatedly and explicitly promised not to bring back this registry, with PM Trudeau personally saying “we committed to not restore a long-gun registry and we’re not restoring a long-gun registry. It’s that simple.” (Bronskill, 2018) Going against such an unambiguous promise may create a backlash on principle.

It is worth noting that this policy does not involve the outright banning of any firearms, nor does it require the removal of peoples’ lawfully obtained property. Conversely, however, this policy does affect a significant number of people, since non-restricted firearms comprise a significant majority of all firearms in Canada. Furthermore, as has been stated previously, long guns in Canada are used for a wide variety of activities beyond collecting or target shooting, and therefore can be said to play a larger role in the lives and recreational pastimes of their owners. Ultimately, however, the requirement to register firearms cannot be described as onerous; it does not affect owners beyond the slight inconvenience of having to fill out the necessary paperwork, and to renew it as may be required. In short, it has a low-to-moderate effect, but on a fairly significant population.

As with all aspects of the long gun registry, the ultimate question of its effectiveness is a difficult one. During its existence, many people and groups had sharply conflicting views between them and within their ranks, notably many police officers. (CBC, 2010) (Carlson, 2011) As elsewhere, the relationship between any regulation and lower firearm homicide rates is unclear. In this case, however, a helpful relationship to study is the requirement to register firearms and the percentage of crime guns originating in the jurisdiction with the regulation in place; theoretically, high
proportions of out-of-state crime guns mean that these firearms are difficult to come by in the jurisdiction in question. There are isolated pieces of literature that do indicate a benefit here; for example, one study finds that the existence of regulations (including registration) does seem to make it more difficult for in-state firearms to be used in crime. (Webster et al, 2001) There is some support for this idea within Canada, as well, with a study finding that of stolen firearms in Quebec, registered firearms are typically recovered more quickly by police than non-registered firearms, and “travel” less far between the initial location of the theft and their point of seizure. However, the reasons behind these findings are uncertain. (Morselli & Blais, 2014) On the other hand, a different study found that of eight tested variables, registration was not one of the four that ultimately was found to be independently associated with significantly lower percentages of in-state guns. (Collins et al, 2018)

It is also worth noting that most of these studies are specifically focused on the registration of handguns, not long guns. Other major weaknesses of this policy proposal include its focus on long guns, which all evidence suggests play a secondary role in crime and firearm homicides (albeit an important secondary role); additionally, this policy does not prevent people from acquiring firearms, not does it reduce the number of firearms in circulation. This weakness is demonstrated in the studies mentioned earlier; whether the firearms originated from in or out of state, they still ultimately found their way into that state for use in crime, supporting the idea of a black market both amorphous and versatile. Lastly, a relevant consideration is the simple fact that widespread avoidance or failure to comply is likely; an example of this can be looked at in Quebec, which has set up a provincial long-gun registry; one day after the deadline of January 29, 2019, barely 25% of long guns in the province have been properly registered. (Montreal Gazette, 2019) It was widely believed that the long-gun registry significantly underestimated the total number of firearms in Canada, and that the remaining registries continue to do so today.

III. Voluntary Buyback and Non-Coercive Compliance

Spurred on by the Australian example, gun buybacks have become a popular method in dealing with firearm violence. Certain questions remain outstanding in these cases. One particularly sensitive issue is what to do with the firearms that are collected; simply destroying them without checking the firearm for involvement in crimes is
counterproductive to public safety, whereas performing these checks could discourage criminals from turning these firearms in, undermining the purpose of the buyback. Other questions such as the length of time the buyback is in force for, the messaging surrounding it, and other concerns are also pertinent here. (Interview- Irwin Cohen) Nevertheless, there are numerous examples of buybacks generating significant returns, in some cases the voluntary surrender of many thousands of firearms.

Coupled with this is a policy to increase frequency of license renewal. Presently, a PAL must be renewed every five years, but in this policy option, it would be instead an annual commitment. Central to this idea is the concept of casual gun ownership. People who are actively involved in communities of sport shooters, collectors, or gun clubs are intuitively likely to strongly value this status and be unwilling to turn in their firearms but also be more likely to take pains to abide by relevant laws and regulations to protect this valued status. On the other hand, people who are in possession of firearms by whatever means, but without a strong interest or investment in the subculture or lifestyle, are more likely to ignore or be genuinely ignorant of safety regulations such as safe storage, thereby presenting a greater danger; these people, hopefully, would be persuaded by more strenuous requirements to voluntarily rid themselves of their firearms, which are not held with significant value by them anyway.

Cost is a significant stumbling block for this policy option, and this cost lies primarily in the issue of a buyback. As has been stated previously, here are currently more than 860,000 registered handguns privately owned in Canada, and possibly many more. Many handguns retail at very significant prices; some estimates suggest that attempts to buy back these handguns alone could run as high as $2 billion. (MacCharles, 2018) Although not all handguns would be turned in under a voluntary buyback, the price could still be quite high, and of course, the fact that this buyback is not restricted to handguns specifically, but would likely include other firearms as well, could drive the price still higher.

This would be offset by the licensing fees, assuming widespread compliance. Between 2013 and 2017, there were an average of 255,299 license renewals per year (RCMP, 2017, Commissioner); the cost of a license renewal is $60 to $80 (depending on restricted / prohibited status), (RCMP, 2018, Renewing) which works out to between $15.318 million and $20.424 million per year; by increasing this obligation fivefold,
revenues of between $76.59 million and $102.12 million per year could be generated. However, even the most generous estimate and the assumption of widespread compliance offer only a fraction of this total cost, and widespread compliance is by no means assured.

Administrative complexity could be safely assumed to be of moderate importance here. The question of increasing the fees for license renewal is easily accomplished with existing structures. A gun buyback, however, does pose somewhat greater difficulty. Gun buybacks have been successfully operated in Canada before, but there were often local or provincial initiatives. A federal gun buyback program would require a greater degree of coordination, and although there is no way to guarantee the ultimate form of administration that it would take, it seems likely that provincial firearms officers would oversee this initiative, or at least its administration. Therefore, implementing this policy could pose a challenge, although the impact in terms of administrating it is less clear.

Stakeholder acceptance here is somewhat difficult to estimate with certainty, since there have been no surveys or polling done on this particular issue. As has been previously mentioned, however, the Canadian public has generally shown themselves to be in favor of tighter firearm restrictions. These numbers came from the survey pertaining to banning handguns, and so it seems unlikely that they would object to a policy that is much less stringent and represents an almost entirely voluntary effort. Therefore, we can safely assume that public support for this particular proposal would be very high, or at the very least many would not object.

This policy also greatly respects the freedom and autonomy of Canadians, by not banning or significantly restricting their ability to utilize and own firearms. The increased obligations for license renewal do represent a limitation on freedom to an extent, but this is minor relative to a complete ban, though not inconsiderable. It is, however, entirely within the realm of what is palatable. Although this could be said to impact many people, it does so in a relatively small fashion.

The effectiveness of the buyback aspect of this policy option is quite clear. There is a fair degree of evidence that suggests that gun buybacks typically do not see statistically significant drops in levels of gun violence. Studies of gun buybacks in Boston, Massachusetts (Braga & Wintemute, 2013), and in other American cities
(Phillips et al., 2013, 248) generally failed to prove a relationship between the buyback and any observed improvement in firearm violence. Australia provides at least one case that has been heralded as having led to statistically significant declines in firearm homicides (albeit to a lesser extent than firearm suicides, and with significant caveats and much conflicting evidence). (Leigh & Neill, 2010) It is worth noting that this buyback was ultimately backed up with a legal mandate prohibiting many of the firearms in question. Issues are common in the literature, including that of people taking their financial compensation and using it to update their arsenal to replace the firearms they turned in with newer ones. (Bandeira, 218) It seems inescapable that buybacks that are purely voluntary fundamentally fail to reduce the criminal use of firearms in the commission of homicides; as a recent Toronto gun buyback demonstrated, such efforts generally come up with “usually old hunting guns the owner no longer uses, or inherited guns the recipient doesn’t know what to do with.” (Rogers, 2013) This is not a negative outcome in and of itself (such firearms could still lead to accidents or be used in spontaneous outbursts of domestic violence), but it does not strike at the heart of the problem.

The other aspect of this policy also promises difficulty; compliance with various gun control policies is always a challenging issue, and experience suggests that many gun owners would likely view the obligation of annual license renewals as excessively onerous and hence this effect could be counterproductive. In the case of the Canadian Firearms Program, the federal government has in the past been compelled to remove or reduce various fees to ensure greater compliance. (Auditor General, 2002) Compliance has been an issue with gun control measures, particularly those that are seen as illegitimate by the target population, and although such predictions are on some level speculative, it seems likely that this would be viewed similarly, and encourage widespread evasion.

**IV. Bill C-71**

Bill C-71 is the Liberal government’s response to the issue of firearm violence generally and (thus far) represents the extent of the regulations they intend to impose. For the purposes of this analysis, we will reduce Bill C-71 to three of the key regulations proposed in it, that were outlined previously.
The costs in this policy option are all relatively minimal. These three key options are essentially strengthening or extending existing regulations, and thus will likely not require significant costs beyond those required for current operation. One of the only aspects that may cause higher costs, the requirement for retailers to document gun sales, will mostly impact upon those retailers themselves, although some degree of cost may be involved in enforcing these new regulations.

Administrative complexity is also likely a more minor issue. As with the criteria of cost, this criterion can largely be accomplished with existing structures, meaning that administration can essentially occur under the current model. There is little need to overhaul or revamp anything, resulting in administrative complexity that is largely unchanged.

Stakeholder acceptance here is not known with certainty but can be inferred with a reasonable degree of confidence. As with the previous policy option, the Canadian public, of whom either a majority or at least a significant plurality are willing to support stringent gun control such as bans, is unlikely to object to a policy that is quite inoffensive when compared with some of the previous options. These reforms to not reflect any radical change, and instead represent moderate adjustments on the existing firearms regime, which has a strong degree of legitimacy among the Canadian population. Such a policy as Bill C-71 is likely to be perceived as very reasonable.

In terms of freedom, this policy generally does not impact people’s freedom of choice and action particularly heavily. Notably the only policy that impacts the day-to-day activities of firearm owners is the new requirements for an ATT, but the important thing to remember here is that there is an exception to this requirement for transport between the owner’s residence and their gun club / shooting range; as Minister Ralph Goodale pointed out, such trips account for nearly 95% of ATT uses, and therefore this change impacts only very slightly. (Tasker, 2018) The policy does impact firearm owners at purchase, and some people may object to a strengthened government mandate to investigate somebody’s background, but these changes’ impact on freedom of movement and of decision remain quite small.

Finally, effectiveness is once again quite difficult to estimate with certainty, but the most relevant aspect of this proposed law is its focus on enhancing background
checks. Past behavior has shown to be among the best predictors of future behavior, and unsurprisingly, background checks repeatedly show themselves as among the most effective forms of gun control available, achieving a rare degree of (relative) consensus in the literature on this point. Many studies back this up; findings suggest that “more extensive” background checks are associated with reductions in firearm homicide (Sen & Panjamapirom, 2012), that universal background checks can lead to reductions in homicide rates (Vernick et al, 2017), and that background checks conducted by local authorities are associated with lower levels of firearm homicide (Sumner et al, 2008). Background checks are recognized as effective, including under unusually rigorous standards of evidence (Sherman, 2001), although some studies report mixed results (Gius, 2015), or entirely contrary results (Kagawa et al, 2018). Generally, however, background checks are among the most effective policies at reducing gun violence, and the fact that this Bill strengthens background checks considerably is a significant point in its favor. It also focuses on creating records of firearms sales; the illegal firearms market can be heavily dominated by a relatively small number of sellers, and capacity to trace firearms back to their source is a vital aspect of investigating firearms crime and trafficking. (Interview- Wayne Rideout) A step in this direction, even if it represents only a start, counts in its favor as well.

However, it is important to realize that this policy ultimately does not remove any firearms from circulation. While improving background checks and improving record keeping are positive steps, the firearms are still present in many cases; while some people may be prevented from acquiring them, straw purchasing, thefts, and the illegal firearms market show the challenge here. In this vein, it has been criticized for being an overly timid, conservative approach to a significant problem.
Decision

The difficulty inherent in this analysis lies in firearm homicide’s nature as a phenomenon. As has been previously stated, it is a very complex and multifaceted problem. Both key elements of the available literature as well as expert opinion on the subject believe strongly in the concept of a holistic approach, or a unified series of actions that target multiple areas of the gun issue simultaneously. Any of these policies, enacted completely in isolation, cannot be said to be guaranteed to succeed at lowering the rate of firearm homicides, or perhaps even to stand a reasonable chance of success at all.

However, the other side of this fact is that these policies all contain positive elements, or certain elements that should be included in any sort of comprehensive, holistic package. Such a hypothetical package should have multiple aspects, all striking at various points of this overall social issue. Each of these policies, in isolation, could be said to represent a component of a wholesale intervention, of the kind described in the article by Santaella-Tonorio. The goal of this project is to attempt to identify which of these individual policies, whether in isolation or together with others, is most effectively in concert with the accepted literature, and which one most accurately addresses the unique characteristics and variables of firearm homicide in its Canadian context. It is, in other words, the policy best suited to implementation in Canada, or more colloquially, the policy that provides more “bang for the buck.”

The suitability should be identified via the literature; the literature is ambiguous, however, on precisely how best to approach this issue. Aside from a rough consensus that gun control is often effective in reducing rates of firearm homicide and that there is a positive correlation between the number of firearms and the firearm homicide rate, findings on specific policy options are often maddeningly vague or contradictory. This does not suggest, however, that policy options are ineffective, or that firearm restrictions are unjustified. By taking the existing consensus in the literature and studying the nature and characteristics of Canadian firearm homicides, it is possible to approximate these characteristics and variables, and thereby to approximate which policy would be likely to be successful.
Based on these criteria, the analysis demonstrates that the policy best suited for implementation is Bill C-71. This option would represent a laudable and entirely reasonable step forward in the efforts to reduce Canada’s firearm homicide rate.
Future Research

Due to a variety of unavoidable factors, this project was unable to cover all potential ground. Time constraints, economic considerations, and concerns over scope creep all demanded a more limited approach. However, there were certain aspects that were either cut out entirely, or were only touched upon briefly, that offer fascinating future avenues of study in this field. It is the hope of the author that future researchers could pursue them.

The first of these is the question of First Nations peoples in Canada. Statistics show a tragic disparity between First Nations and non-First Nations people in terms of crime, both as victims and as perpetrators. (Dept. of Justice, 2017) The antecedents or causes of this sad state of affairs are many and complicated, and it would be very interesting to ascertain if these disparities extend to firearm homicide specifically. Certain aspects of the Firearms Act are adapted for First Nations people, (RCMP, 2018, Indigenous) and these differences in regulation could also prove interesting.

The second lies in the question of reverse causation. While this was touched upon briefly, it remains a very interesting question, particularly when correlations between firearm proliferation and homicide or violence fail to line up, in certain cases, as predicted. Questions of reverse causation tend to be related to most arguments about alleged benefits of firearm ownership, and while the data on the whole fails to back up this line of reasoning, it similarly fails to entirely debunk it. More clarification on this point would be welcome.

Finally, this project suffered due to a lack of government voices. While the actual structures and regimes of government were studied and considered, a major weakness lies in the unfamiliarity of the day-to-day enforcement of these measures and regulations. Interviews with Chief Firearms Officers, or with other people similarly engaged in working with provisions of the Firearms Act, would have provided a valuable insight into the strengths and weaknesses of current and hypothetical approaches.
Conclusion

The issue of firearm homicides has been steadily increasing in the public view in recent years. High-profile shootings have played a part, but so have the more mundane acts; “tit-for-tat” gang shootings, domestic violence killings, and other such homicides with a firearm as the weapon. The public has become increasingly aware of the role that firearms play in Canada’s criminal underworld as well as their presence in the everyday lives of many of its citizens.

Firearm homicide in Canada is quite high by the standards of the developed world, aside from the United States, and has consistently been so for at least the past twenty years, including at its low points. This convenient comparison with the United States can provide a false sense of confidence, creating an unwarranted complacency in the status quo. This status quo, however, is unwarranted.

Evidence also suggests the emergence of a strident form of gun culture in Canada. The accumulation of more and more firearms by fewer and fewer people in the population, along with the huge proliferation of restricted weapons over the past two decades represent a worrying trend. (Naumetz, 2018) (Naumetz, 2017) Coupled with pistolization and a rising gang culture that embraces it, this effectively sets the stage for serious problems down the road. It must be reiterated that firearm ownership in itself is neither criminal nor suggestive of it, and there is nothing deviant or antisocial in an interest of firearms, or an enjoyment of hunting, target shooting, collecting them, or any other legal use. However, the expanding stockpiles of weapons that are both exceptionally lethal and useless for hunting and most other outdoor activities, along with an expansion of their presence in everyday life are both trends that we are compelled to stand firmly against, by virtue of their impacts on public health.

By adopting this policy, the hope is that we can recover ground lost to gun violence. Neither policy is likely to be quick or 100% effective. Firearm homicides are unlikely to ever completely disappear, and there will always remain a hardcore criminal contingent that will arm itself. Nevertheless, these policies show serious promise in reducing the sustained high level of firearm homicides and should be considered accordingly.
References


Santaella-Tonorio, Julian; Cerda, Magdalena; Villaveces, Andres & Galea, Sandro. (2016). What Do We Know About the Association Between Firearm Legislation and Firearm-Related Injuries? Epidemiologic Reviews 38, 140 – 157.


## Appendix.

### Supplementary Data on Firearms in Canada

Canadian Firearm Ownership and Licensing by Province

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PALs / 100</th>
<th>Restricted Guns / 100</th>
<th>Registered Guns / 100</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yukon: 20.0</td>
<td>Yukon: 7.3</td>
<td>Yukon: 73.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newfoundland: 14.4</td>
<td>Alberta: 4.2</td>
<td>NWT: 44.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NWT: 13.3</td>
<td>Saskatchewan: 4.1</td>
<td>Saskatchewan: 41.37</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nunavut: 10.2</td>
<td>NWT: 3.6</td>
<td>Newfoundland: 40.12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Saskatchewan: 9.4</td>
<td>British Columbia: 3.4</td>
<td>New Brunswick: 38.09</td>
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<tr>
<td>New Brunswick: 9.1</td>
<td>Canada: 2.4</td>
<td>Nunavut: 36.78</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nova Scotia: 7.9</td>
<td>Manitoba: 2.4</td>
<td>Nova Scotia: 32.74</td>
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<td>Nova Scotia: 2.4</td>
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<td>Ontario: 2.2</td>
<td>Alberta: 26.75</td>
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<tr>
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<td>PEI: 1.7</td>
<td>British Columbia: 20.64</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Canada: 5.9</strong></td>
<td>Newfoundland: 1.4</td>
<td>Ontario: 17.65</td>
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<td>Quebec: 1.0</td>
<td>PEI: 16.73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEI: 4.3</td>
<td>Nunavut: 1.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Law Enforcement Dangers: Police Officers Killed via Gunshot by Country, 2000 – 2018

- **United States:** 917
- **Canada:** 26
- **Germany:** 17
- **Australia:** 8
- **Belgium:** 8
- **United Kingdom:** 7
- **Austria:** 7
- **Netherlands:** 3

Source: Torrey Janzen, independent research