

POLICY BRIEF FIREARMS



AT ISSUE

Firearms are a serious threat to public health and a significant cause of preventable death and disability for Canadian children and youth. As of 2021, Canada ranked 7th highest amongst 38 OECD countries on the rate of youth deaths (<20 years of age) from assault by firearm and 2nd highest on the rate of youth suicide deaths by firearm, behind only the United States.

The incidence of firearm-related events is not uniform across the country, with elevated rates of firearm-related violent crime and self-harm by firearm in Northern rural regions (*Table 1*). Males and individuals living in low-income neighbourhoods disproportionately experience the greatest risk of injury and death from firearms. Given these disparities it is essential that a public health approach to the legislation of firearms be adopted that is evidence-based and equity-driven.

Given the number of children and youth who survive unintentional and assaulted-related firearms discharges, it is important to strengthen surveillance and reporting on both victims and survivors of firearms-related incidents to more fully understand and respond to the immediate and long-term impacts of firearms injuries and prevention strategies in Canada.

ACCESS TO FIREARMS

The accessibility of firearms to children and youth is an important factor in adolescent suicide, unintentional firearms injury and assault. As such, the Canadian Paediatric Society recommends that firearms be kept out of homes or environments where children and adolescents live or play. Recognizing the importance of traditional Indigenous cultural and hunting practices, if a firearm is needed in the home, it is essential that it be stored:

- in a locked container and with a trigger lock,
- unloaded and separate from locked ammunition, and
- in full compliance with the Firearms Act.

Lessons to further reduce unsafe access to firearms can be learned from looking to international jurisdictions with significantly lower rates of firearms-related injury death, including the United Kingdom and New Zealand.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Adopt a public health approach to the legislation of firearms that is evidence-based and prioritizes the health and safety of children and youth.**
- 2. Improve public education on the importance of safe storage and the risks of keeping firearms in homes or environments where children and adolescents live or play.**
- 3. Increase access to appropriate mental health services for children and youth experiencing depression and suicidal ideation.**
- 4. Strengthen pathways & initiatives to reduce access to firearms for those at risk of harming themselves or others, including background checks and yellow/red flag laws.**

DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN & YOUTH

[Children and youth have developmental characteristics that put them at increased risk for firearm injury.](#) Children lack the experience, cognitive development, and impulse control to distinguish a toy gun from a real one, to understand the consequences of handling a firearm and to consistently avoid doing something they have been told not to.

Adolescents remain vulnerable to injury because they have incompletely developed self-regulation skills, including impulse control. Self-regulation skills can be particularly impaired in situations involving peers, high levels of emotion, and substance use.

INTENTIONAL SELF-HARM

Because firearms carry the [highest case-fatality rate of all suicide methods](#), the availability of a firearm in the home is a strong risk factor for adolescent suicide. According to the [Global Burden of Disease Study 2021](#), self-harm accounted for the majority (55.7%) of firearm-related deaths in Canadians under the age of 20 between 2012-2021 (*Table 2*). Suicide by firearm is much more common in males than in females. According to Statistics Canada, between 2014-2023, [93.5% of Canadians aged 10-19](#) who died by suicide using a firearm were male. Greater public education about the risks of access to firearms for children and youth struggling with their mental health, and increased supports for young people experiencing depression and suicidal ideation are needed, particularly for those living in rural and remote areas where access to appropriate mental health services is more limited.

FAMILY VIOLENCE

Firearms in the home [significantly increase the risk of fatalities](#) associated with family violence and intimate partner violence (IPV). Family violence and IPV cause suffering, physical harms, and long-lasting behavioural consequences for children and youth. The negative health consequences of childhood exposure to IPV have contributed to its [recognition in Canada as a form of child maltreatment](#). When there is concern regarding IPV or family violence, the presence of a firearm in the home should be considered a risk factor for homicide of a family member. Law enforcement, health and social services, and governments at all levels have a responsibility to reduce barriers to safely accessing services for those experiencing or are at risk of family violence.

TARGETED SCHOOL VIOLENCE

Targeted school violence refers to firearm violence in which a school is specifically selected as the site of attack. The target may be a specific individual or a group of individuals. While targeted school violence represents only a small fraction of firearm homicides in Canada, such events, including the threat of firearm violence in a school setting, have a tremendous impact on the schools and communities in which they occur. Based on typical characteristics of targeted school violence, the following interventions are recommended:

- Increased access to mental health services for children and youth experiencing depression and suicidal ideation,
- Expanded initiatives to reduce bullying rates in schools and online,
- Education and training for students and teachers to identify and report threats of violence, and
- Support for the full and effective implementation of yellow and red flag laws to reduce access to firearms for those at risk of harming themselves or others.

ANNEX

Table 1.

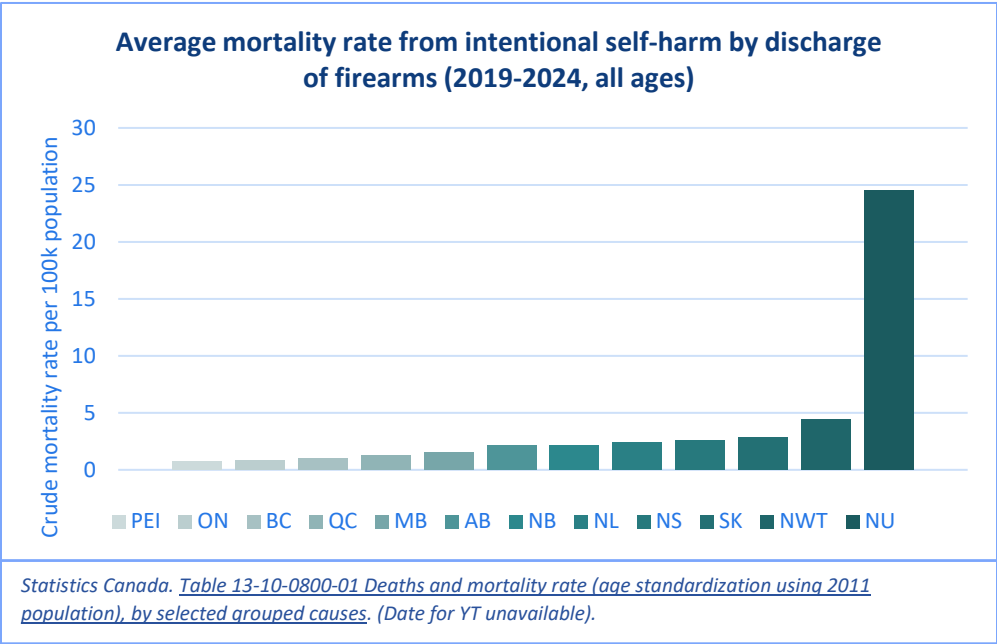


Table 2.

