

GUN VIOLENCE

Excerpt from Justice Ministries' Report adopted by the 2021 General Assembly

Recent mass shootings in places around the world, including those mentioned above and elsewhere, along with a rise in gun-related crime in Canada led Justice Ministries in 2019 and 2020 to review The Presbyterian Church in Canada's position on guns and gun violence. This section of our report was originally written in January and February of 2020 and was finished before the horrific mass shooting that took the lives of 22 people in Nova Scotia on April 18–19, 2020. The shooting in Nova Scotia is the worst mass shooting Canada has seen, surpassing in numbers even the École Polytechnique killing of 14 women on December 6, 1989. The section on gun violence has been revised and expanded in light of this violence.

What has the church said?

Currently, The Presbyterian Church in Canada has several basic positions on gun control and no fully articulated position yet developed on gun violence more broadly. On gun control, the church has affirmed through the voice of the General Assembly in 1973 and 1976 respectively that:

- The sale of firearms should be strictly regulated. (A&P 1973, p. 278–79, 283, 40),
- Owners of firearms should be licensed and should be obliged to take training in the safe use of firearms before a license is granted. (A&P 1976, p. 436, 470, 60).

It further affirmed through the voice of the General Assembly in 2006 (A&P 2006, p. 286, 21) that in order to reduce the contribution of trade in small arms to fueling and prolonging conflict, international criteria should be established in which nations:

- Adopt global transfer principles or criteria that would prevent the shipment of small arms to countries at war or where there are serious human rights violations or to countries in which such arms are likely to undermine security and development efforts.
- Agree to strengthen and harmonize national regulations on small arms that would include prohibiting possession of semi-automatic and automatic rifles, machine guns and all light weapons by those other than authorized entities.
- Include small arms as part of the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms to promote greater transparency.

The Presbyterian Church in Canada has also affirmed the principles of the Arms Trade Treaty, which is designed to prevent the export of any weapons, including small arms, to countries with gross human rights violations. In 2013 General Assembly commended the Government of Canada for voting in favour of the Arms Trade Treaty (the treaty sets universal regulations for the cross-border transfer of weapons) and urged the government to sign and ratify the Treaty. (A&P 2013, p. 289–90, 24) and then again in 2017 urged the Government of Canada to sign and ratify the treaty (which Canada did in 2019.). Lastly, the guidelines governing the church's investments outlined in "Statement of Investment Policies and Procedures for the Consolidated Portfolio of The Presbyterian Church in Canada", prohibit investing in "the manufacture, sale or distribution of arms, weapons or military equipment of any nature."

Thus it is already the stated position of The Presbyterian Church in Canada that the sale of firearms be strictly regulated, that licensing and safety training for gun ownership be mandatory and that international criteria should be developed to strengthen and harmonize national regulations, including here in Canada, which would prohibit individuals from possessing semi-automatic and automatic rifles.

Working from an understanding that the arc of the Biblical account of violence pushes toward reducing violence and living instead in right relation with God, each other and the earth, the church has spoken often on armed violence abroad but has also affirmed its stance on the regulation of small arms (which include such weapons as handguns, shotguns, semi-automatic rifles and automatic firearms such as machine guns) in all nations, including our own. Additionally, the church has consistently called for improved relations between people and between nations – relationships which, as the church has said, should be characterized by justice and peace (A&P 1991, p. 299–331, 56–57; A&P 1992, p. 323–31, 41). Means to reduce violence and create right relations such that the conditions for violence to happen are not ripe can take the shape of practices such as gun control (reducing access to violent weapons) and preventative programs, policies or social practices that address the root causes of gun control (creating right relations).

Kinds of gun violence and influencing factors

Typically, there are different, though related, factors driving mass shootings than those that drive other kinds of gun violence. Discussing those factors is outside the scope of this report. That said, there are some common factors observed among those who commit mass shootings that can be summed up in this quote from Natasha Bhuyan’s “Don’t blame mental illness for mass shootings” in American Academy for Family Physicians, *Fresh Perspectives* (Wednesday, September 18, 2019): “Ninety-seven percent of mass shooters are male. The overwhelming majority are white. Beyond that, mass shooters share weaker links. They have beliefs ranging from misogyny to white supremacy. Some are seeking revenge. Many have a history of domestic violence.” The perpetrator in the Nova Scotia shooting displayed several of these characteristics. News reports have since indicated that the shootings began with an attack on his common-law partner, over an argument about celebrating their anniversary. They also add that at least twice prior to the shooting neighbours reported the gunman for domestic violence or for owning illegal guns and uttering threats. These reports appear not to have been taken seriously, which is too often the case with reports involving domestic violence.

These factors – misogyny, white supremacy, domestic violence – are all spoken of elsewhere in this report in other contexts but it is worth drawing attention to the myriad ways in which they are linked with violence. The beliefs we allow to shape ourselves and society have direct and predictable consequences on the health of society as a whole and on the lives of all of us within it.

The rest of this report will focus on gun violence that is not linked with mass shootings; however, it is important to keep in mind the many facets of gun violence in Canada and across the world.

While the rates of gun violence leading to death in Canada are significantly lower than our southern neighbour⁴⁰ our numbers could still be greatly improved and our overall homicide numbers (of which, according to Statistics Canada, 1 in 3 typically involves a gun) are higher than other Commonwealth nations. Overall crime rates appear to be going down from the available data from Statistics Canada, yet the same data shows that within all violent crime, rates of gun-related violence rose consistently between 2013–2017. This is in contrast to the years from 2009–2013, when gun-related violence showed a steady decline. 2018 also showed a small decrease in firearm related homicides but comprehensive data was not yet available for 2019 at the time this report was initially written and so we are as yet unable to determine whether that lower number was simply a dip or the beginning of an encouraging trend. According to Statistics Canada, “In 2018, there were 249 homicides caused by a firearm (firearm-related), 18 fewer than in 2017 (Table 3a). Note: The firearm-related homicide rate (0.67 per 100,000 population)

decreased 8% from the previous year (0.73 per 100,000 population) (Chart 5). Prior to 2018, firearm-related homicide had been increasing since 2014, with gang-related violence being the primary driver. In 2018, 51% of firearm-related homicide were related to gang activity.” The statistics we found also were related specifically to homicides from guns; there is additional, regional data that seems to indicate that gun violence itself, not all of which results in homicide, continues to rise. In Toronto alone, victims of shooting-related injuries that did not result in death rose from 185 in 2018 to 248 in 2019, a substantial increase, though deaths from gun violence actually fell a bit during the same period from 51 in 2018 to 44 in 2019.

What are the causes of gun violence?

The roots of gun violence are typically complex and difficult to pin down. That complexity often leads people to turn to greater and stricter gun regulation as a means to reduce gun violence. There is certainly logic in such an approach, since in order for gun violence to occur, a perpetrator must first have access to a gun. While affirming the ongoing need for gun control and regulation, such measures are not the only means to reduce gun violence here in Canada and elsewhere. There is increasing evidence that addressing social issues such as racism, misogyny, economic and social marginalization, isolation and poverty leads to safer streets in general – including less gun violence.

There is also a growing body of evidence that in some cities and regions, urban design that intentionally segregated by race and class is a significant contributor to violence factors, including gun violence. For example, see the report at brookings.edu/blog/the-avenue/2019/08/28/to-build-safe-streets-we-need-to-address-racism-in-urban-design/. Many of these studies are looking at urban design in the United States but it would be worth considering whether problematic urban design is a contributing factor to the root causes of gun violence (poverty, social isolation and lack of connection, racism and other forms of marginalization) in Canada as well.

Society needs to change

Those who study the problem of gun violence argue that to effectively address it, significant changes to society are needed. One example of this comes out of a recent study involving six low-income neighbourhoods in the United States city of New Haven, Connecticut. The study, undertaken in 2017 by The Community Alliance for Research and Engagement at Yale School of Public Health, was meant to examine the prevalence of chronic disease and exposure to health risk factors in those neighbourhoods. The researchers purposefully included gun violence as a health risk factor and they found that while gun violence was a risk factor across the neighbourhoods, it was a significantly higher risk factor among residents of colour, with Black males aged 18 to 34 experiencing the highest risk increase.

The numbers the Yale study cites are stark and it goes beyond simply the number of those who die from gun violence to point out the effect gun violence has on communities and the way in which it contributes to an ongoing cycle of other risk factors for health and wellbeing even of community members who have never been shot. The word it uses to describe this is ‘trauma’ which is a word that appears elsewhere in our report this year, linked to racism, murder and disappearance of Indigenous women, girls and 2SLGBTQQIA people. (As detailed above in the second section of this report). The Yale study by Alicia Santilli et al entitled “Bridging the Response to Mass Shootings and Urban Violence: Exposure to Violence in New Haven, Connecticut”, published in the *American Journal of Public Health* in March 2017 states very clearly that trauma resulting from violence often begets more violence. In the words of the study:

Gun violence disproportionately occurs in communities experiencing social and economic inequities, including residential racial segregation and concentrated poverty. In 2015, 369 people died in mass shootings in the United States; that same year, nearly 6,000 Black men were murdered with guns. Although Black men make up only 6% of the population, they represent more than one half of gun homicide victims. [Furthermore] The impacts of gun violence extend far beyond the victim, resulting in long-term adverse effects on community well-being. More than 20% of injured trauma survivors have symptoms consistent with a diagnosis of posttraumatic stress disorder even after acute care or inpatient hospitalization. Among children, witnessing community violence is a risk factor for substance abuse, aggression, anxiety, depression and antisocial behavior. These behaviors contribute to the cycle of violence, as adolescent delinquency and substance use are predictive of violent offenses and substance use in adulthood.

As our own Canadian inquiry – the National Inquiry on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls – found, the roots of a crisis of violence are legion and manifest through targeted racism and colonialism as well as targeted social and economic marginalization. Furthermore, the crisis is compounded when communities have experienced trauma over generations and can reasonably expect – given present realities and past experience of how those realities have played out – to continue to experience such trauma. That some communities quite realistically expect and teach their children to brace for, trauma should shock the wider public and move it to action to end the cycle of trauma causing violence causing more trauma but that action has largely not been forthcoming. And so, the expectation that trauma will occur continues to shape the kinds of conversations had in communities and the ways parents raise their children.⁴¹

More study on the root causes of gun violence and what can be done to prevent it, is needed. But meanwhile, there are actions the church can take, which fall squarely within the mandate of Christians to love God and to love our neighbour as ourselves. Given the even greater prevalence of gun violence in the United States, the Presbyterian Church (USA) has tackled some of these issues already and pulled together significant resources on the matter that congregations here in Canada may find useful as well; links to these resources are included after the recommendations below.

In addition to these resources, however, we can also look at our own communities to see where there are risk factors for gun violence and how those factors could be addressed. This requires truly working to understand where and how oppression in the form of misogyny, racism, colonialism and unaddressed economic inequalities exist in our communities and our social interactions. It means looking to understand how marginalization or isolation happens and what can be done to end it. It involves seeking ways to reduce and ultimately work to eliminate poverty, as another section of this report briefly examines. In summary, it is finding means, rooted in the faith Christians profess, to truly love, in action and not simply words, each and every human.

Such love is not easy. It entails working to fundamentally transform the structures of our lives, our social relationships, our institutions and ideologies, our policies, practices and laws; everything that shapes each of us. It is only in so doing that we can end the power of violence, trauma, oppression and hate to shape our lives and futures. If we think of violence like a virus – and the various sections of this report show that it seems to spread like one – than we know from our current struggle with this pandemic that until the virus is eradicated, everyone remains at risk (though this is not to deny that some continue to be at greater risk than others).

We can no longer afford to be blind to the ways in which violent ideologies, economically violent practices and structures and colonial systems form contexts that lead, predictably, to harm and destruction. We believe that several of the recommendations put forward elsewhere in this report are good steps toward seeing the ways in which we, as individuals and as the church, can begin to address the roots of violence. In addition to those earlier recommendations that ask us to examine our practices and policies, rejecting oppressive structures, we offer the following recommendation:

Recommendation LMA-023 (adopted, p. 38)

That Moderator write the Minister of Diversity, Inclusion and Youth, the Minister of Public Safety and the Minister of Justice asking that they examine ways in which misogyny, racism and economic insecurity contribute to gun violence and that they prioritize funding for social programs aimed at ending racism, misogyny, social and economic marginalization and poverty in order to improve safety, health and wellness in communities.

Resources from Presbyterian Church (USA)

General page on Gun Violence (presbyterianmission.org/what-we-believe/gun-violence); 2010 Resource – “Gun Violence, Gospel Values: Mobilizing in Response to God’s Call” (presbyterianmission.org/wp-content/uploads/1-gun-violence-policy-2010.pdf); and Congregational Tool Kit on Gun Violence including suicide and how to respond (presbypeacefellowship.org/gun-violence).

The full report is found in The Presbyterian Church in Canada’s Acts and Proceedings 2021, pp.407-443.