

How dangerous are gun owners?
Gary Mauser

Are you a threat to public safety? The police think you are.

Every night, the police check all licensed firearms owners. As if that was not enough, the RCMP encourages officers to check before attending a call to see if anyone has a firearms licence at their destination. Licence information is made readily available on the Canadian Police Information Centre (CPIC) virtually without restriction through the portal to the Canadian Firearms Registry Online (CFRO). Typically, police are required to apply to court for a warrant to access important personal information on law-abiding Canadians. But not for firearms owners. The RCMP justifies routine access to information about firearms licences by arguing that merely owning a gun poses a threat to public safety. The police say they need to know who has guns. To make this claim, the RCMP must ignore strong evidence that this policy is wrong headed.

By making firearms licenses habitually available on CPIC, the RCMP encourages police officers to treat law-abiding citizens the same way they would treat dangerous criminals. Doing so violates basic principles of policing as well as good sense. This practice grew out of the gratuitous attack on the firearms community by the Liberal government in Bill C-68 in the 1990s. Not only does allowing access to firearms licences on CPIC systematically subject respectable citizens to police heavy-handedness (thereby jeopardizing public cooperation, or worse), it misleads police officers by confusing upstanding citizens with dangerous offenders. Even worse: encouraging police officers to consult CFRO before attending a call endangers them by falsely implying that virtually all firearms, including those held by violent criminals, are listed in CFRO. This is downright dangerous.

Ordinary law-abiding gun owners are solid middle-class Canadians who make an important contribution to their communities. (See my recent Mackenzie Institute paper). My analysis of Statistics Canada data shows that law-abiding gun owners are far less prone to violence than other Canadians. As I reported to Parliament, Canadians who have a firearms licence are less than one-third as likely to commit murder as other Canadians (Mauser 2012).

Despite the non-violent nature of most licensed gun owners, it is still conceivable that those who the police come in contact with could be violent. The police primarily visit residences where there is a problem. Police say all gun owners are dangerous – all gun owners, licensed or not. This is understandable because predicting who is likely to be violent is exceptionally difficult and guns are potentially dangerous.

The police argue that, “more information is better,” saying it is important to have as much knowledge as possible before an officer shows up at a door. This is a delusion: more information is not always better. The challenge of sorting and evaluating complex information increases exponentially as the number and variety of facts that must be considered increases. It is not an exaggeration to point out that police risk being

overwhelmed with information that may be irrelevant or misleading. Police require the best information available, not mere volume. CPIC is a portal for many databases, including the CFRO and a variety of criminal record databases. The simplicity of PAL data makes it appear to be easier to understand than criminal records; criminal records are complex and confusing. Ease of use does not mean importance.

Are Possession and Acquisition Licence holders a hazard to police?

The Chiefs of Police claim licensed gun owners are more dangerous than other Canadians. But are they? What do the statistics say about the likelihood of licensed gun owners shooting police officers? The Police have never produced any pertinent statistics to support the claim that licensed gun owners pose a threat to police. In truth, they cannot. Statistics Canada has never published any statistics on how many of the murderers of police officers held a firearms licence.

Despite the generally low homicide rate among law-abiding firearms owners, PAL holders might still be uniquely dangerous in the specific context of a police contact. Police are called for domestic disputes, rowdy parties and burglaries as well as other situations when they may encounter emotionally distraught people. Domestic calls can be violent.

To know if law-abiding firearms owners pose a risk to police, it is necessary to examine police killings specifically to discover the number of murderers who hold a firearms licence. Only in this way can it be determined just how often licensed gun owners have shot and killed law enforcement officers.

This article presents what I found when I submitted a Special Request to Statistics Canada asking that they examine the homicide statistics and report to me how many police officers were victims of firearm-related homicide between 1997 and 2013, and, how many accused held a valid firearm licence or FAC. (When I made this request, 2013 was the most recent year data were available). According to Statistics Canada, there were 18 police officers shot to death during this 17-year period, and of these, three murderers held a firearms licence (a PAL, POL or FAC). None of these shootings involved suicides or off-duty murders, according to Statistics Canada.

Table 1. Police officers victim of homicide (1997-2013)

<u>Firearm licence</u>	<u>Total</u>
Yes	3
No	14
Unknown	1
Total	18

Source: Special Request, Statistics Canada,
Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, Homicide Survey

Even though the bulk of these police-officer shootings involved illegal firearms (15 out of 18), the police are not wrong in thinking that licence holders are a potential threat. Three licensees out of 18 police murders are three too many. While virtually all licence holders are pacific, the screening done by the Canada Firearms Centre is not perfect; it cannot weed out all criminally violent people.

However, placing this statistic into a broader perspective, we see that there was an annual murder rate of 0.009 police members per 100,000 licence holders over the 17-year period between 1997 and 2013. (Three murders of law enforcement officers out of approximately 2 million firearm licence holders.) In other words, about one in 10,000,000 PAL holder shoots and kills a police officer each year.

Comparing PAL holders with the general Canadian population shows that PAL holders pose approximately the same level of threat to police as the typical Canadian. According to the Officer Down Memorial Page, 40 Canadian law enforcement officers died while on duty as a result of an assault of some kind, including attacks with a firearm, knife or automobile between 1997 and 2013. Twenty of these deaths involved shooting, and an additional 20 involved another type of assault. If we take 27.1 million as the average annual Canadian population over the age of 15 during this time period, then the annual murder rate for police officers is 0.009 per 100,000 people in the adult population over this time period. In other words, about one in 10,000,000 adults; the same as PAL holders.

Table 2. Police Officer's deaths on duty

	Total	Murdered by gun fire	Murdered by other assault	Total murdered
1997	11	3	0	3
1998	6	0	2	2
1999	6	0	3	3
2000	9	0	2	2
2001	7	2	0	2
2002	12	1	3	4
2003	6	0	0	0
2004	7	1	3	4
2005	11	5	0	5
2006	6	3	1	4
2007	4	3	1	4
2008	2	0	0	0
2009	4	0	1	1
2010	7	1	0	1
2011	3	0	2	2
2012	5	0	1	1
2013	6	1	1	2
Total	112	20	20	40

Source: <http://canada.odmp.org/year.php?year=2004>

To conclude, the statistics show that PAL holders pose the same level of threat to police, as does the typical Canadian. About 1 in 10,000,000 Canadians each year is accused of murdering a police officer – PAL holder or not. These statistics undercut the police practice of routinely relying upon PALs to indicate dangerousness when going on call. No police lives are saved by checking the CFRO before going on a call. Consequently, the CFRO should be disconnected from CPIC, since it serves no practical purpose and is dangerously misleading. Access should be placed under warrant as with all other individual information on law-abiding Canadians.

The police should always assume that a weapon could be present when attending a residence where a person is distraught or agitated. Normal households contain a wide variety of items that could be used as a weapon by a violent person – such as kitchen knives. This is not to deny that PAL information might be useful in cases where police have other evidence that a person might be dangerous or distraught. Even incomplete information could be helpful to police officers. But in those cases, a warrant should be required for access to the CFRO database.

References

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