

Canadian Firearms Centre  
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Created to implement and administer Canada's 1995 Firearms Act, the Canadian Firearms Centre (CFC) is a branch of Department of Justice Canada. The CFC is responsible for: licensing firearm owners; registering all firearms; coordinating with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), the provincial police forces, and Canadian Customs and Revenue Agency; and coordinating with provincial and territorial Chief Firearms Officers. The Act does not generally apply to military or police personnel.

In principle, the Canadian federal government enacts criminal law, and the provincial/territorial governments are responsible for enforcing it. Many Canadians, particularly rural and Western Canadians, oppose licensing and registration. The provinces of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba refused to co-operate with the CFC, forcing the CFC to directly administer the program in these provinces. Few hunting or shooting organizations agree with the Firearms Act or co-operate with the CFC.

Between 1977 and 1995 a police-issued Firearms Acquisition Certificate (FAC) was required to acquire a firearm. Obtaining an FAC required passing a firearm safety course and a police background check. A license was not required to possess a firearm. The 1995 legislation mandated licenses for all firearm owners. Handguns have been registered since 1934. Registration of long arms began in 1998, and is to be completed in 2003.

The complexity of the 1995 law motivated the Justice Department to create a sprawling bureaucracy. In addition to the main office in Ottawa, the CFC has five other centers, including one for Quebec residents. The CFC quickly grew to 1,744 paid full-time positions by July 2000. This does not include an unknown number of part time employees.

The CFC is has been plagued with serious problems. Originally budgeted at US\$ 55 million, the government is known to have spent more than US\$ 550 million on registering firearms by 2001. A 1999 review by PriceWaterhouse found the CFC to have exceeded its budget, to have a high error rate and unusually slow processing times. Average waits for licenses are over 6 months. In 2001, despite the huge backlog of applications, the CFC began to cut staff.

In a move to curb spiraling costs, in 2001 the government announced its intention to privatise many aspects of the CFC. This move will conveniently place the CFC outside the scrutiny of Canada's Auditor General. Critics claim that privatisation will lead to a lack of accountability, result in high costs for firearm licenses and further abuses of civil liberties. In 2001, a review by the Privacy Commissioner found that the CFC violated the Privacy Act due to unwarranted personal questions on applications.

In January 2001, the CFC announced that over 2 million owners were licensed, or had applied for a licence, out of an estimated 2.4 million gun owners, and that there were 1.7 million firearms registered. In 1998, the CFC estimated there were over 3.5 million firearm owners. In 1998, the RCMP reported there were 272,837 people licensed, and 1,204,998 firearms registered. Survey estimates of Canadian gun ownership vary widely from 2.4 million to over 5 million gun owners and between 6 million and 20 million firearms. The large majority of gun owners are hunters who own rifles or shotguns; few Canadians own handguns.

The RCMP has declined to take responsibility for enforcing the firearm legislation. In 2001, the CFC formed the National Weapons Enforcement Support Team, NWEST, to assist the police enforce the firearm laws. Critics claim NWEST would focus on enforcing registration not illegal trafficking and smuggling.

## References

For more information, contact the Canadian Firearms Centre or its chief critic, Garry Breitkreuz, MP.

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