



**PRESENTATION ON BILL C-71 TO SENATE COMMITTEE
MARCH 18, 2019**

Women's Shelters Canada (WSC) is a national non-profit network representing Violence Against Women (VAW) shelters and transition houses.

According to the most recent report of the Canadian Femicide Observatory, 148 women were killed in Canada in 2018. The most common method used when a woman or girl was killed was shooting (34%). We know that most of the women killed with guns in Canada were killed with legally owned rifles and shotguns.

The most recent 2017 Statistics Canada homicide report found that the national increase in homicides committed with a firearm was evident in rural areas (Beattie et al., 2018). This increase is largely attributable to gun violence in the rural areas of the Prairie provinces (Beattie et al., 2018). Intimate partner violence rates among the provinces were highest in Saskatchewan (682 victims per 100,000 people) and Manitoba (599 per 100,000 people).

As a national network, part of our work involves understanding the unique regional contexts where VAW shelters are located including rural, remote and northern areas. In our conversations with rural VAW shelters, we have heard that rural women are fearful for their safety in homes where firearms are present, that firearms are often not safely stored or locked away, and that they impact women's ability to seek help and supports to flee domestic violence.

These realities were documented in a study conducted by the Public Legal Education and Information Service of New Brunswick (PLEIS-NB) in collaboration with the Department of Sociology at the University of New Brunswick. The study revealed that 25% of women surveyed lived in a household with firearms, 72 percent of which were long guns. Two-thirds of the women with firearms in their home (66 percent) said knowing firearms were present made them more fearful for their safety and well-being, and 70 percent said it affected their decisions whether to tell others about or seek help for the abuse they received.

Firearms cause harm to Canadian women in ways other than by death and injury. Every year in Canada, more than 100,000 women and children leave their homes to seek safety in a shelter. On any given night in Canada, some 3,500 women and 2,750 children sleep in shelters to escape abuse.

Alberta shelters remember far too well a tragic incident whereby a little boy was sobbing “Daddy’s going to kill me”, clutching the door jam of the women’s shelter, crying that he didn’t want to go with Dad on a court ordered visit. The father filed the gun in front of him, took him back to his mother at the end of the visit, shot little Alex, then his mother, then himself. The police had received numerous complaints from the family that the father had guns but nothing was done. Despite the fact that this case occurred some time ago, the shelter workers remain haunted by it. How many times must this play out across the country. Hundreds of innocent women and children murdered.

Our Alberta member, the Alberta Council for Women’s Shelters, has been tracking the percentage of women facing severe or extreme levels of danger according to their Danger Assessment (DA). The DA measures the risk of a woman being murdered by her intimate partner. This percentage has been steadily increasing over the past seven years from 54% in 2011/12 to 64.8% in 2017/18. Today almost two thirds of the women in Alberta who complete the Danger Assessment are in this category. Among other factors, this means increased numbers of women are being threatened with a gun or subjected to strangulation.

In Women’s Shelters Canada annual survey, we ask shelters to report data on a specific 24-hour period. One of the questions is, to your knowledge how many women currently residing at the shelter have been threatened by a gun. Since the survey began five years ago, the average number of shelters that have responded is 230 and the average number of women staying at the shelter that had been threatened by a gun is 100. The link between guns and violence against women is clear as is the link between guns and the instance of lethality for victims of domestic violence.

It is for these reasons that we strongly believe that Bill C-71 is an important first step forward in reducing the number of women and children who are victims of femicide in Canada. Strong licensing provisions are critical to reducing violence against women. Although some may believe that enhanced background checks will not improve public safety, this is not the experience of shelters across the country and there is significant evidence to contradict this position. Prior violence and crime is a strong predictor of future violence, and enhancing the background checks involved in obtaining a licence is a well accepted method of reducing gun crime.

The issue of VAW is complex as are the mechanisms and tools to reduce it and eventual bring an end to it. The adoption of Bill C-71 however, is an important step. Preventing and reducing the rates of VAW will only happen through incremental change and the adoption of Bill C-71 is one piece of this incremental change.

Finally, we support the Coalition for Gun Control’s recommendations to this committee that calls for the restoration of strict authorizations to transport and that the clause that extends the authorization to transport through the province in which the owner resides be stricken.