



Public Safety
Canada

Sécurité publique
Canada

Buyback Program Awareness Campaign

Executive Summary

Prepared for Public Safety Canada

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May 2023

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Executive summary

Background and objectives

The Minister of Public Safety's mandate letter outlined the Government's commitment to take action to further reduce firearms-related violence, including by banning assault-style firearms and implementing an amnesty and buyback program. On May 1, 2020, the Government of Canada announced the prohibition of over 1,500 models of assault-style firearms and certain components of some newly prohibited firearms. These models represent nine categories of firearms and two types identified by characteristic. To promote this mandate, Public Safety Canada will be launching a national marketing campaign targeting firearms owners to continue to raise awareness and understanding about their responsibilities to come into compliance with the law related to the ban on assault-style firearms, the buyback program, and to encourage participation in the program.

In support of this and future firearm-related campaigns, Public Safety Canada set out to conduct research with firearms owners. This research project was comprised of quantitative and qualitative phases, each with specific objectives:

- One round of eight success check online focus groups was conducted among firearm owners. These explored reactions to digital ads and social media posts aimed at raising awareness of the buyback program and preparing owners to participate in it.
- A tracking survey of 2,000 firearm owners in Canada to explore how awareness, perceptions and opinions about the buyback program have evolved from the previous survey of firearms owners conducted in the spring of 2022.

This research project had two key research objectives:

- A. Tracking research with firearms owners to help segment the audience and inform the public awareness campaign to meet the needs of the target audience of firearms owners and to measure how attitudes have changed over the past year. This study also explored attitudes towards the buyback program among the subset of firearms owners who could be eligible for the program.
- B. Qualitative focus group research with firearms owners to help understand how firearms owners perceive the buyback program, including their intent to participate, as well as their reactions to digital ads to help fine tune the direction of the campaign's concepts and messaging.

Methodology

Quantitative Phase – Survey of Firearm Owners: A 15-minute online survey of 2,000 firearms owners across Canada was conducted from March 16 to March 31, 2023. The survey included a diverse sample of current firearm owners (gender, geographic location, urban/rural split). NOTE: As the online survey uses an opt-in panel, this is a non-probability sample, and no margin of sampling error is calculated. More details on the methodology are provided in Appendix A.

Qualitative Phase – Success Check Focus Groups: Eight online focus groups were conducted in October 2022. The groups were conducted using the Zoom platform and were entirely composed of Canadians who

own firearms. Each session consisted of 6 to 8 participants and lasted about 90 minutes. Environics recruited participants via industry-standard methods to ensure participation in all the sessions across all regions. Participants were offered a \$100 incentive to thank them for their time.

One-to-two sessions were conducted with gun owners from each of the following regions: Ontario (October 11 and 13), British Columbia (October 11), Atlantic Canada (October 12), Manitoba/Saskatchewan (October 12), Alberta (October 13), and Quebec (two on October 15).

Statement of Limitations: Qualitative research provides insight into the range of opinions held within a population, rather than the weights of the opinions held as measured in a quantitative study. The results of this type of research should be viewed as indicative rather than projectable to the population.

Contract value

The contract value was \$158,856.08 (including HST).

Key findings

Quantitative phase

Firearms ownership

- About half of firearm owners currently own one firearm. Among those who report currently owning more than one firearm, over one quarter say they currently own two firearms.
- Six in ten firearm owners own a rifle; about half owns a shotgun. About two in ten own a revolver, handgun, or semi-automatic long gun.
- Half of firearm owners have owned their firearms for more than five years. Less than one in ten has owned their firearms for less than a year.
- Most firearm owners have obtained their firearms by purchasing from a retailer. One third inherited them from a family member or friend. Two in ten purchased their firearms from an individual.
- Most firearms owners use their firearms less than once a month and 13 percent never use them at all. One quarter are more frequent users.
- Three quarters of firearm owners currently have a valid up to date Possession and Acquisition Licence (PAL); Over half of firearm owners previously had a valid Restricted Possession and Acquisition Licence (RPAL).
- The main reasons for owning firearms are target shooting for sport, hunting for food or sport, or for safety/protection/self-defence.
- Government websites are the main avenue firearms owners turn to for information or news, followed by family and friends, or firearms in-store sales outlets.

Perceptions of regulations

- The vast majority of firearms owners are at least somewhat familiar with firearms regulations, with half claiming to be very familiar.
- Three in ten firearm owners believe the regulations are too strict and almost two in ten report that regulations are not strict enough and about half say the regulations strike the right balance. Perceptions that regulations are too strict or not strict enough have both increased in the past year.
- Most firearm owners believe that almost all types of firearms should be legal in most cases. A plurality now believes that semi-automatic handguns should be illegal in all or most cases.
- Half of firearm owners have heard a lot about banning assault-style firearms, and a smaller proportion of less than four in ten has heard a lot about the buyback program. Across all eleven initiatives, about one-third or more firearm owners have heard at least a bit about them.
- Large majorities of firearm owners continue to support all eleven of the proposed measures to address firearms-related violence in Canada, though support for many policies has declined since 2022.

Attitudes towards firearms violence

- Most firearms owners are at least somewhat concerned that firearms-related violence is a threat to public safety in their local community, however, this concern has declined over the past year. Firearm owners are more likely to believe that firearms-related violence is a threat to public safety outside of their local community, than within it.
- Most firearms owners think inner cities have the highest rate of firearms violence in Canada. Just ten percent think small towns and rural areas have the highest rates.
- Firearm owners feel the biggest causes of gun violence are gang violence, organized crime and general criminal activity. They increasingly also mention mental health and accidents.
- There has been a significant decline over the past year in firearm owners' rating of the performance of the government's performance on introducing measures to address gun-related violence. One half now rates it as good or excellent.

Attitudes towards participation in the buyback program

- Six in ten find it at least somewhat clear which firearms are eligible for compensation in the buyback program. One third find it unclear.
- One third of firearm owners report that they probably or definitely own any of the newly prohibited firearms that could qualify for the buyback program. This is a significant drop since 2022.
- Almost half of those who may own prohibited firearms currently own just one; two in ten own two.

- Less than half of those owners with prohibited firearms would now willingly participate in a buyback program—a sharp decline over the past year. Another third would participate, but only because it was mandatory; one in ten would refuse to participate at all.
- The main motivations for taking part in the buyback program are the financial compensation and wanting to comply with the law and avoid legal penalties.
- The small number who would refuse to participate in the buyback program give a variety of reasons for their refusal.

Implementation of the buyback program

- The two elements that owners of prohibited firearms consider to be the most important to include in a buyback program are direct deposit payments, and convenient drop-off options for returning firearms.
- Most owners of prohibited firearms would prefer to register for a buyback program completely online, though an increasing minority would prefer to do so over the phone.
- A large majority would prefer to turn in their prohibited firearms in person. Just two in ten would prefer a virtual online process.
- Most would prefer to dispose of their newly prohibited firearms by surrendering them for compensation or returning them to the manufacturer.
- Those turning in their prohibited firearms as part of a buyback program would prefer to do so in a local police station or a local RCMP station.

Profile of firearms owners - values

- Firearm owners have a mix of views on a series of statements that measure core values. Agreement is highest on the importance of protecting traditional values, but most also agree that post-secondary education should be free and accessible to everyone, and that climate change is an important issue and that we need to do more to protect the environment. Two thirds believe that owning a firearm is a privilege, not a right.

Qualitative phase

Introduction of assault-style firearms ban and buyback program

- Most firearms owners had at least a passing familiarity with the ban on assault-style firearms and the buyback program, however, those who used their guns infrequently were less likely to know about these regulatory changes.
- Many participants were also aware of more recent new regulations and restrictions around handguns in Canada.

Reaction to creatives

- Participants found all forms of advertising they were shown (digital, print, and social media) to be clear and easy to understand. They had no difficulty interpreting the messages being conveyed by the ads.
- Some words and phrases in the ads were found to be objectionable or stigmatizing to firearms owners. Ads with wording like “Coming soon” or “Buyback is coming” seemed ominous to some firearms owners, often tying back to an underlying concern about future expansion of the ban to include other types of firearms.
- Some participants objected to phrasing about “disposing” of weapons, feeling that this was disrespectful to firearms owners who invest in and care for these personal possessions. For some, the directive to “take part” was bothersome because the ban is not voluntary.
- Participants strongly preferred messages that were more direct and factual. For example, participants tended to favour the headline “Do you own a firearm? Get the facts.” They often interpreted other messages to be judgmental towards firearms owners.
- The clear black-on-white style of the ads in all formats was found to be visually effective, and recognizable as government messaging.
- Participants had little to say about the specific imagery or iconography in the ads, and often did not recognize the gun components used for visual effect in the ads.
- Participants had many suggestions for content they would like to see or would expect to see on the buyback program’s website. Frequent suggestions included robust search capability to help firearms owners check to see if their guns are eligible for buyback, information about buyback compensation amounts, instructions for participating in the program, and details about the penalties for not abiding by the ban on assault-style firearms.

Opinions about buyback

- Most firearms owners in the focus groups held a negative opinion towards the ban on assault-style firearms and were sceptical about the buyback program. Despite this general negativity, most indicated that they would comply with the ban if it affected them, because they would not want to risk their ability to legally own and use other firearms.
- Preference for participating buyback or disabling prohibited firearms was largely personal. Those who frequently used their firearms tended to favour the idea of buyback if the compensation would help them buy a new legal firearm, while those who owned their firearms for more sentimental reasons were more open to the idea of decommissioning them.
- Though most of the firearms owners in the groups did not own any guns affected by the ban, many had sympathy for affected owners and felt it was unfair to target people who had initially acquired their guns legally. Often, the ban and the buyback program were seen as wasteful because the policy isn’t aimed at stopping illegal gun smuggling and sales. Most firearms owners did not see themselves or their peers as a major factor in gun crimes in Canada—this perception was tied to a common assessment that the program would be ultimately ineffective at reducing gun crime.

- Some firearms owners also expressed fears that bans would expand over time and eventually impact their firearms outside of the ban. These concerns were most prominent among avid owners who frequently use their firearms for recreational purposes and see these activities as an important aspect of their lifestyle.
- Another common point of criticism was a general assumption that the amounts offered for the buyback program would not fairly compensate owners who may have spent large amounts of money acquiring and personalizing their firearms.
- A minority of firearms owners in each group did express moderate support for the ban and the buyback program. For these owners, the banned firearms were seen to be unnecessary for normal use.

Political neutrality statement and contact information

I hereby certify as senior officer of Environics that the deliverables fully comply with the Government of Canada political neutrality requirements outlined in the Communications Policy of the Government of Canada, and Procedures for Planning and Contracting Public Opinion Research. Specifically, the deliverables do not include information on electoral voting intentions, political party preferences, standings with the electorate, or ratings of the performance of a political party or its leaders.

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