

Recommendation 1: The UN and member states should encourage the active participation of Non-Governmental Organizations aimed at improving public safety to provide essential expertise and help mobilize support for the initiatives. For example, NGOs can assist in examining risk assessment in screening firearms owners, developing training and education programs for the public, gun owners, and professionals to increase compliance and awareness (ie. by collecting, analyzing and disseminating data).

The Canadian Experience

Canada is a gun owning country. Roughly 26% of households have at least one firearm and in some communities, particularly the north, as many as two thirds of households have firearms. It is therefore essential to emphasize that firearms regulation is not firearms abolition. While opponents of regulation will suggest that any efforts to improve controls are part of a hidden agenda, in Canada, we believe that firearms serve many legitimate purposes and the focus of our efforts has been to reduce their misuse.

Compared to many countries, Canada is quite safe. However, when seen in the context of some other industrialized countries, it is apparent that we can do better. It is also apparent that Canada's new law, passed two years ago, simply brings us in line with many other countries which license firearm owners and track guns. The international perspective has been invaluable in providing us with information about approaches that work and again I wish to underscore the importance of what the United Nations Commission on Crime Prevention and Criminal Justice is doing.

As true in many other countries, public debate over gun control was sparked by a horrific tragedy. On December 6, 1989 a man walked into a Montreal Engineering University - l'École Polytechnique - systematically separated the men from the women and shot 28 people, killing fourteen young women with a semi-automatic military weapon. But while the Montreal massacre galvanized public opinion, Canada's NGOs were concerned about more than the deaths of 14 women, they were concerned about the 1400 Canadians killed each year with guns. The debate was framed in a variety of ways; for some it was about controlling crime, for some it was about reducing suicide, for some it was about countering violence against women, for some it was about keeping children safe, for some it was about preventing people from ruining their lives through impulsive actions, for others it was about countering the culture of violence and reinforcing positive values. Still others were concerned about fundamental human rights to safety and security. The victims of gun violence and their families played a critical role in focusing public attention on what was really at stake. Regardless of the perspective however, what linked all these groups was an understanding that while one must deal effectively with the primary causes of violence, one must also deal with the agent. In this case the agent was the firearm itself.