

Brief to  
The Standing Senate Committee  
On Legal and Constitutional Affairs

Discussion of Bill C-19

By

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In 2005, with funding from the former Canada Firearms Centre, Dr. Deborah Doherty and Dr. Jennie Hornosty undertook a research study<sup>1</sup> that included an investigation into firearms victimization of abused rural women in Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick. This research is considered a significant addition to the growing body of literature on family violence since relatively few early studies dealt specifically with family violence in a rural context. None had examined extensively the social and cultural context of firearms in rural homes and the impact this may have on women dealing with abuse. We thank you for the opportunity to comment on the significance of our domestic violence research findings in relation to Bill C-19.

We have attached a modified executive summary of the study so we will not describe the research methodology at this time (Appendix A). The purpose of the study was to examine the extent to which abused rural women self-identified as being impacted by firearms victimization, the nature and forms of that victimization, the cultural context in which firearms misuse was occurring and how this impacts on the nature and consequences of victimization. While we recognize that we cannot generalize our findings to the entire population, the findings reinforce what we learned in the survey, and our earlier research<sup>2</sup> – that the prevalence of firearms in rural homes generally and their association with intimidation and control of women experiencing family violence is undeniable.

We recognize that it is the intention of the government to repeal the long gun registry with the belief that other measures in the area of firearms control are sufficient to ensure public safety on our streets and in our communities by preventing firearms from falling into the hands of dangerous people and by setting tough consequences if they do. In light of the documented reality of domestic violence situations in rural homes that are likely to involve firearms victimization, we do not see how the elimination of the registry will ensure the safety of these families. Without the registry a licensed individual may acquire an unlimited number of guns without any flags being raised. Moreover, without gun owner accountability and a direct link to the owner, the task of enforcement of court ordered firearms prohibitions, something we have recommended in all domestic cases, would become long and tedious – if not impossible. It would also impede the ability of police to take preventative action, such as removing all firearms in situations where there is domestic violence.

Our study shows that abused women living with firearms in the home were fearful for their own safety, along with the well-being of their children, pets<sup>3</sup>, family, and property. Many were concerned their partner would commit suicide. These women were more likely to express concern for their safety when their partner had not registered the firearms. The elimination of the registry would likely contribute to a greater sense of fear by abused rural women given that none of the long guns in their home would be known to the police.

The focus of our study was on family violence in rural communities – not the gun registry. However, we must emphasize that in situations of domestic discord and abuse, our research shows that long guns can and do serve as dangerous weapons of intimidation and control. It is therefore important to have legislation that, although imperfect, provides some potential protection for women in violent relationships. No doubt the vast majority of long gun owners are law-abiding citizens. Yet, we found that there is a widespread normative acceptance of long guns in rural communities and that this contributes to a cavalier attitude toward firearms misuse that can result in a lack of attention to the safety of abused women. As well, many studies have

shown that the mere presence of firearms in homes experiencing domestic violence should be considered a red flag that the violence could escalate into lethality<sup>4</sup>. Without the long gun registry, a critical tool for assessing this risk would be missing.

The long gun registry, like any tool to combat domestic violence, is not a panacea, but it is an important, and we would suggest a necessary, tool in reducing victimization. Elimination of the registry may give rise to an increase in the fear experienced by abused rural women and it most certainly will undermine the ability of the police to identify and remove long guns when they are dealing with domestic violence situations. We fear that this could contribute to an increase in firearms homicides of a domestic nature, particularly in rural homes and small towns where long guns are commonplace<sup>5</sup>.

The findings of our research study have made a significant contribution to evidence-based research on family violence in rural communities. We believe that they also provide the necessary information for championing better-informed intervention strategies and response options for police and service delivery agents who respond to family violence. Based on our research, we do not believe that these strategies will be effective without the long gun registry.

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<sup>1</sup> Doherty, D. and Hornosty, J., 2008, [Exploring the Links: Firearms, Family Violence, and Animal Abuse in Rural Communities](#), Fredericton, University of New Brunswick, (Final Report to the Canada Firearms Centre, Ottawa, Ontario). It is important to emphasize that although the Canada Firearms Centre agreed to fund our proposed research, they in no way dictated the nature and direction of the research. The research questions, the instruments, the data, the analysis and the final report belonged solely to researchers.

<sup>2</sup> We have been conducting research in New Brunswick on family violence on the farm and in rural communities since 1994. Our earlier studies also explored the many systemic and structural barriers experienced by abused rural women such as traditional, conservative family values, a submissive role for women, and stigma for women who report abuse. Other barriers include social and geographic isolation, a paucity of social services, poverty, inadequate transportation, and a lack of privacy. As well, women expressed concerns about police response times in rural areas, the widespread use of scanners, and a general lack of trust of police and the justice system to take them seriously and to protect them if they disclose. See Hornosty, J., and Doherty, D. (2003) “*Responding to wife abuse in farm and rural communities: Searching for solutions that work*”. In R. Blake & A. Nurse (eds.), [The Trajectories of Rural Life: New Perspectives on Rural Canada](#). (pp.37-53). Regina: Canadian Plains Research Centre.

<sup>3</sup> Our study found that 45% of the women surveyed said that their partner had deliberately threatened to harm their pets/farm animal and, of those, 41 percent said partners deliberately harmed or killed their pets. Sixty-four percent of women in homes with firearms expressed concern firearms were used to harm the animal. Twenty-seven percent of the women with pets said they were more reluctant to get help for fear the abuser would harm their animal.

<sup>4</sup> J.C. Campbell, D.W. Webster, J. Koziol-McLain, et al., “*Risk Factors for Femicide Within Physically Abusive Intimate Relationships: Results from a Multi-site Case Control Study*”, [American Journal of Public Health](#) 93, 2003, pp.1089-1097.

<sup>5</sup> New Brunswick has one of the highest rates of firearms ownership among all the provinces, and one of the highest rates of firearms deaths. See Kwing Hung, “Firearms Statistics Updated Tables,” January 2006. Nationally, only about 20% of domestic homicides are committed with firearms. See Statistics Canada, 2009, “*Family violence in Canada, a statistical profile*.” However, in a study of domestic homicides in New Brunswick, Dr. Doherty notes that over the past 20 years over 50% of the deaths of women at the hands of their partners have occurred with firearms – almost all of them long guns. Over 40% of these deaths have been murder-suicides. See Doherty, D., 2010, [Prevention of Domestic Homicides in Rural Communities](#), Paper presented to the Canadian Conference on the Prevention of Domestic Homicides, Calgary, Alberta.