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## ARTICLE

Lessons From Canada's Gun Control Push: When 'Voluntary' Isn't Really Voluntary





BY PNW STAFF FEBRUARY 06, 2026

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Canada's long-running effort to rein in firearms ownership has entered a strange and revealing phase--one that should concern not only gun owners, but anyone uneasy with government power stretching beyond practical limits. At the center is Ottawa's so-called "assault-style firearms compensation program," a policy described as voluntary, yet backed by the threat of up to five years in prison for noncompliance. That tension alone raises an unavoidable question: voluntary for whom, exactly?

Since May 2020, thousands of firearms have been reclassified as prohibited by order-in-council, a legal mechanism that bypasses full parliamentary debate. Gun owners were told they could turn in affected firearms for compensation. But as the amnesty deadline has been pushed back--now to October 2026--the reality has become clearer. Participation may be optional, but obedience is mandatory. Fail to surrender or deactivate a prohibited firearm, and criminal charges await.



To be fair, many Canadians who support stricter gun laws do so from understandable concerns. Canada, like any nation, wants to reduce violence and prevent mass shootings. For citizens who don't own firearms, the idea of fewer guns can feel like a straightforward path to safety. And it's true that policy debates should take seriously the fears of communities traumatized by violence. But policy still has to work--and it has to respect basic principles of fairness and proportionality.



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More troubling is who the policy actually targets. Criminals, by definition, do not follow firearm regulations. Illegal guns used in crimes are overwhelmingly smuggled or already prohibited. They are not registered hunting or sport firearms sitting in safes. A buyback program does nothing to change that reality. Instead, it places law-abiding citizens--many of whom have complied with licensing, storage, and background checks for years--at risk of imprisonment for paperwork violations or noncompliance with shifting definitions.



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The proposed jail time is not a small detail. Five years in prison is a serious penalty, more commonly associated with violent offenses. Applying that threat to people whose only "crime" is retaining property they legally purchased years ago blurs the line between public safety policy and coercive enforcement. Even Canadians who favor gun control should pause at the idea that peaceful citizens could face incarceration over administrative noncompliance.

Provincial resistance has only underscored the program's fragility. Several provinces, including Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Ontario, have stated they will not assist in enforcing the ban. This leaves federal authorities with the daunting task of implementation on their own--an expensive and politically fraught proposition. When enforcement depends on bureaucracy rather than cooperation, legitimacy erodes quickly.

Supporters of the policy insist this is not confiscation. They emphasize compensation and claim hunting rifles are unaffected. Yet exceptions for Indigenous hunting rights reveal a deeper inconsistency: if certain prohibited firearms remain acceptable for hunting in some contexts, the argument that these weapons are inherently too dangerous becomes harder to sustain. The policy appears driven less by function than by classification.

Beyond enforcement challenges, the cost of the program has become another quiet but mounting concern. Ottawa initially projected the buyback would cost a few hundred million dollars, but more recent estimates have ballooned into the billions, with no clear ceiling in sight. Previous federal gun-control efforts, such as Canada's long-gun registry, ultimately cost taxpayers over \$2 billion before being scrapped in 2012 as ineffective and wasteful.

The current buyback program has already required repeated extensions, new administrative layers, outside contractors, and pilot projects that have yielded minimal results—all while compensation to gun owners is not even guaranteed. As costs rise and returns remain negligible, critics warn the program risks becoming another open-ended public expenditure that absorbs vast sums of taxpayer money without delivering measurable gains in public safety.

For Americans watching from south of the border, Canada's experience offers a sobering lesson. Gun debates in the United States often assume that buybacks and bans are clean, efficient solutions. Canada shows otherwise. Even with far fewer constitutional protections for gun ownership, the logistics, costs, and public resistance are formidable. Policies framed as modest safety measures can quietly evolve into sweeping mandates enforced by criminal penalties.

None of this denies the reality of violence or the need for solutions. But durable public safety comes from targeting criminal behavior, improving border security, addressing mental health, and enforcing existing laws--not from expanding bureaucratic power over compliant citizens. When governments struggle to enforce their own rules, the temptation is always to punish those easiest to reach.

In the end, the Canadian gun buyback is less a crime-reduction strategy than a stress test of governance. It asks how far the state can go when it labels coercion as choice, and enforcement as compassion. That question matters not only for Canada--but for any society deciding whether safety is best secured through trust, or through threat.

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