INJURY PREVENTION SERIES

INJURIES FROM GUNS IN CREE COMMUNITIES OF EEYOU ISTCHEE, QUEBEC, CANADA: A TEN YEAR STUDY

Guns are an important part of Cree life. Unfortunately, they are also an important cause of death and other injuries, both from intentional and unintentional shootings. Intentional shootings include suicide and parasuicide (suicide attempts), as well as homicide and assaults. Unintentional shootings occur during hunting and transporting guns and when children play with guns. Unintentional injuries are sometimes called "accidents", and this sounds like bad luck, or a happening that can't be prevented. Really, the opposite is true. Many unintentional injuries could have been prevented, as this study on injuries from guns showed.

On average, people who keep a gun in their home are at much higher risk of being shot — by themselves or others — than people without a gun. Because Cree have more guns in their homes than other Canadians, the prevention of gunshot wounds is more important for Cree than for the average Canadian. This is similar to drownings. Cree, and most other aboriginal peoples, have a high rate of dying from drowning because they are more likely to travel by boat and snowmobile on lakes and rivers.

In 1992, the Cree Board of Health and the Injury Prevention Module of the Montreal Public Health Department began a study on how Cree in Eeyou Istchee had been hurt by injuries during the period 1982 to 1992. The project was done as the first step leading to recommendations to help prevent future injuries among the Cree. The study obtained information from the ministry of health's records on hospital use, individual hospital files, interviews with family and friends of victims, and coroners' reports. This material was used to prepare a detailed report on the circumstances of Cree who had died or been admitted to hospital as a result of a gunshot wound. This paper is a summary of the longer report.

ARE GUNS AN IMPORTANT CAUSE OF INJURIES FOR THE CREE?

During the 10-year period 1982-92, 14 Cree died from guns (see figure 1):

- eight deaths were suicides;
- four were murders;
- two were unintentional or "accidental" shootings.
Another 31 Cree with gunshot wounds were admitted to hospital, where they stayed for a total of 215 days:

- about one-half were intentional shootings — 14 persons shot themselves (suicides) and 3 were shot by others (assaults);
- the other half were unintentional shootings while hunting or transporting a loaded gun.

![Deaths & hospital admissions for gunshot wounds by intent](image)

Guns caused 12% of all deaths and 3% of all hospital admissions for injuries. That is, 1 in 8 fatal injuries and 1 in 30 hospital admissions for injury resulted from a gunshot wound.

The number of injuries from guns was high for such a small population. The Cree population was about 8,000 during the study. There were on average about 1 death and 3 hospitalizations each year in Eeyou Istchee. The situation was compared with that for the province of Quebec (Figures 2 & 3). Cree were 2.5 times more likely to die and 9 times more likely to spend time in hospital from a gunshot wound compared to all people in Quebec. However, when compared with Inuit in Nunavik, Cree death rates were only half as high and hospitalizations one-quarter as high.

Since 1992, the last year examined in the study, injuries from intentional gunshot wounds — suicides and assaults — have continued to occur in Eeyou Istchee.

**WHO GOT SHOT? WHAT HAPPENED?**

The answers to these questions depend on the kind of shooting. For suicides and parasuicides, most victims were young males between 15 and 35 years old. Alcohol was an important contributing factor to these shootings. Other factors included breakup or separation from a girlfriend or partner. Most incidents occurred at home in the village and not in the bush. In all cases for which information was available, the guns had not been locked up. While most suicide victims were male, victims of homicide and assault included both males and females.

Many unintentional shootings occurred while hunting in the bush or while transporting a loaded firearm to or from the bush. Two-thirds of victims were shot by another person’s gun and one-third by their own gun. Alcohol was involved less often in unintentional shootings than in suicides and assaults.

![Safe storage of guns means unloading before a gun is taken home. As soon as you get home, the gun should be locked up. Bullets should also be locked away. A trigger lock provides added protection.](image)
WHAT CAN BE DONE TO PREVENT INJURIES FROM GUNS?

For Cree, safe storage of all guns and ammunition should be the most practical way of preventing injuries from guns. When leaving the bush, guns should be unloaded. On arrival back in the village, all guns should be immediately locked up in a gun cupboard with a padlock. Trigger locks can also be useful. Ammunition should be locked up too.

While special gun lockers can be bought, you can also make your own by adding a padlock and sturdy latch to a regular closet or cupboard, or by building a gun storage locker. It may be better to use a padlock than a special locker, since a padlock can be cut off and replaced if you lose the key. If you use a separate storage locker for ammunition, this provides even more protection.

If a depressed or drunk person can easily put his hands on a loaded gun, it makes it simple for them to go out and shoot themselves or someone else. But if guns and ammunition are locked away, this may be enough to stop a temporarily upset young man from getting at the gun until he has time to calm down and sober up.

In the Sinti Québec Survey in 1991, about one-third of Cree said that they already kept their guns locked up. Unfortunately, the other two-thirds did not.

The Canadian government recently introduced new laws to try to prevent deaths from guns. Many groups, including aboriginal bands across the country, opposed these laws. However, the Cree of Eeyou Istchee took a positive position and worked with the government to improve the laws so that injuries from guns could be prevented. The Cree also did their best to ensure that the laws would respect hunting as an important part of Cree traditional life.

Locking a gun away does take a few moments for the gun owner, but it makes life safer for family and community. This is one way of showing love and concern for others.

Figure 1: Deaths from gunshot wounds by locality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Deaths</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sault</td>
<td>21.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homerville</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>26.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: Rates of hospital admission for gunshot wounds by locality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Locality</th>
<th>Rate per 100,000 population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sault</td>
<td>20.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homerville</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>29.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Because of the importance of hunting in their culture, both Cree and Inuit have more guns in their homes than the average family in Quebec. While most Cree homes have guns, in the entire province of Quebec only about 1 in 4 homes has a gun.

Some people might therefore say that nothing can be done to prevent injuries among the Cree, short of getting rid of all the guns. However, the presence of guns is not the only reason that gunshot wounds occur. The recent increase in gunshot deaths from suicide and violence among the Cree, together with even higher rates among the Inuit, show that there is more than one reason why people get shot. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the presence of guns in the home and the community puts everyone at greater risk. If people want to keep guns for hunting, but also want to keep their loved ones safe and secure, special precautions have to be taken.

While locking a gun away does take a few moments for individual gun owners, it makes life safer for other family members and the community, and is a way of showing love and caring for others. Caring enough for yourself to get help when you are depressed or upset is also a way of expressing love for your friends and family who care about you.

WAYS OF PREVENTING GUN INJURIES:

- Establishing community regulations (bylaws) for locked storage of guns, with checks to make sure that regulations are enforced.
- Making people more aware of the danger of drinking alcohol when they are unhappy or angry.
- Learning better ways than getting drunk to deal with problems.
- Helping men to communicate and share their feelings when they are upset, instead of hurting themselves and others.
- Learning to recognize when people are depressed and need help.
- Reducing the amount of violence and suicides that children and adults watch on TV.
- Using community radio to talk with people about gun safety, safe storage of guns, and how to prevent violence and suicide.

Injury Prevention Series

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Thanks: Cree interviewers, Public Health Officers, Safety Officers, Clinic Staff, Janis Bobbish.

Funding: The Cree Board of Health, the Direction de la santé publique de Montréal-Centre, the ministère de la Santé et des Services sociaux du Québec (Public Health Grants Program).

Design: Infography: Paul Cloutier, Marine Girard

Illustration: The image of Canada's gun is based on a painting by Margaret Orr, a Cree artist from Eeyou Istchee. The grizzly symbolizes Cree life and culture. Their upward摆头 evokes a sense of freedom, and suggests traditional values guiding the way to the future.

Information: Public Health Module, Cree Region (514) 861-2352 or fax (514) 861-2581. Copies available at local clinics and social services offices, band councils, and schools.