



“Are Canadian Street Cops Outgunned?": The Debate over Police Handguns in the 1990s

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Abstract

This article offers the first scholarly analysis of the shift from revolvers to semi-automatic handguns in Canada to contribute to our knowledge of police militarization. In the 1990s, most Canadian police handed in their venerable service revolvers and received modern semi-automatic pistols. Advocates of new weapons pointed to relatively rare but high-profile shootings of police to show the dangers of law enforcement work and the need to have better firearms. The gun industry encouraged the rearming of police through an aggressive marketing campaign emphasizing that modern police forces required more advanced weapons and the military lineage of their products. The transition to semi-automatic handguns sometimes proved controversial, as human rights advocates believed the new handguns could result in excessive use of force. Despite this concern, most police were rearmed by the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Firearms, use of force, gun control, militarization, weapons

Résumé

Dans l'optique de contribuer à notre connaissance de la militarisation policière, cet article propose la première analyse scientifique sur la transition des armes d'usage des policiers en sol canadien. Plus précisément, dans les années 1990, la plupart des policiers canadiens ont échangé leurs vénérables revolvers de service pour des pistolets semi-automatiques modernes. Les partisans de ces nouvelles armes ont utilisé les fusillades impliquant des policiers, qui sont relativement rares, mais très médiatisées, pour montrer les dangers du travail des forces de l'ordre et pour illustrer la nécessité d'améliorer leurs armes à feu. L'industrie des armes à feu a alors encouragé le réarmement de la police par le biais d'une campagne de marketing agressive qui soutenait que les forces policières modernes avaient besoin d'armes plus avancées et qui mettait aussi l'accent sur la lignée militaire de leurs produits. La transition vers les armes de poing semi-automatiques s'est parfois avérée controversée; les défenseurs des droits humains soutenaient que les nouvelles armes de poing pourraient entraîner un

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recours excessif à la force. Or, malgré cette préoccupation, la plupart des policiers ont été réarmés au début du XXI^e siècle.

Mots clés: Police, armes à feu, usage de la force, contrôle des armes, armes de poing, militarisation, armes

Introduction

Police use of lethal force has attracted criticism for several years. For example, in 2013, a member of the Toronto police used a semi-automatic Glock handgun to shoot Sammy Yatim eight times on an empty streetcar. Onlookers recorded the incident which sparked furious complaints about the deadly use of firearms.¹ Yatim's death raises several issues, including the effect of systemic racism on the use of force, and the main topic of this article: when and why police forces replaced traditional service revolvers with semi-automatic handguns that could quickly discharge considerable quantities of ammunition.

In offering the first scholarly analysis of the shift from revolvers to semi-automatic handguns in Canada, this article draws from, and contributes to, literature on police militarization, paying close attention to the role of firearms marketing in shaping police gun culture. Scholars note that police militarization can occur along several dimensions, including a “material dimension,” which encompasses the adoption of weapons and equipment to more effectively use violence. This dimension involves outfitting special weapons and assault teams (SWAT), also known as “tactical teams” or “emergency response units.”² Scott W. Phillips notes, however, that there is a “distinct absence of scholarship examining the history of weapons used in policing,” despite “how important guns are in police culture, their impact when used and the amount of scholarship dedicated to examining their use.”³ Police militarization scholars often note the adoption of assault rifles by police, but pay less attention to changes in handguns. Canada's leading historian of the police, Greg Marquis, has considered how the 2017 shooting in Moncton that left three Mounties dead led to plans to provide front-line members with assault rifles, though he has not examined the transition from revolvers to semi-automatic handguns in detail.⁴ Brenden Roziere and Kevin

¹ Mary Rogan, “The Killing of Sammy Yatim,” *Toronto Life*, August 14, 2014, <https://torontolife.com/city/the-killing-sammy-yatim/>.

² Trent Steidley and David M. Ramey, “Police Militarization in the United States,” *Sociology Compass* 13, no. 4 (2019); Radley Balko, *Rise of the Warrior Cop: The Militarization of America's Police Forces* (New York: Public Affairs, 2013); Peter B. Kraska, “Militarization and Policing—Its Relevance to 21st Century Policing,” *Policing* 1, no. 4 (2007): 501–513.

³ Scott W. Phillips, “Myths, Militarism and the Police Patrol Carbine,” *Policing and Society* 26, no. 2 (2016): 193, n. 1.

⁴ Marquis notes the debate over the provision of semi-automatic handguns in his discussion of the tension between a “community policing” model and a more militarized approach to policing, suggesting that the more aggressive look to policing included arming members with semi-automatic pistols. Greg Marquis, *The Vigilant Eye: Policing Canada from 1867 to 9/11* (Halifax: Fernwood, 2016); Greg Marquis, “The 2017 Moncton Canada Labour Code Trial and the Future of the RCMP,” *Journal of New Brunswick Studies* 11 (2019): 9–30.

Walby believe it is “time to begin examining police militarization in Canada,”⁵ and, as we show, part of this is how front-line police were rearmed in the 1990s.

Until the early 1990s, most Canadian police carried revolvers, as they had for decades. These weapons were deadly but generally carried just six rounds of ammunition and were slow to reload. In the 1990s, most police exchanged their traditional service revolvers for modern semi-automatic handguns. Several factors contributed to this transition. Relatively rare, but high-profile, shootings of police motivated the change. Law enforcement commemorated officer deaths to show the dangers of their work, the bravery of officers, and the need for new guns to protect them from allegedly better armed criminals. The firearms industry encouraged the rearming of police through an aggressive marketing campaign emphasizing that modern police forces required more capable and advanced weapons and by highlighting the military lineage of their products. The transition to semi-automatic handguns sometimes proved controversial, as human rights advocates believed the new handguns could result in excessive use of force. Despite this concern, most police were rearmed by the beginning of the twenty-first century.

A key primary source for this article is *Blue Line* magazine, which has been carefully examined from 1989 to 2000. *Blue Line* declares itself “Canada’s national law enforcement magazine”⁶ and is popular with front-line officers. It was first published in 1989 as the brainchild of publisher / editor / writer Morley Lymburner, a veteran of the Metropolitan Toronto Police Force. He said that *Blue Line* had no political affiliation and that its purpose was to help keep police up to date. Lymburner remained the editor-in-chief of *Blue Line* until 2000.⁷ The magazine includes articles on police training, equipment, policy, and weapons, as well as editorials and letters from readers. *Blue Line* also publishes numerous firearms industry advertisements marketing guns to police. The magazine thus offers an exceptional window into police debates about firearms and how the gun industry sought to cater to, and shape, the procurement of weapons. In addition to *Blue Line*, we draw information from other police publications, government documents, legislative debates, and newspaper coverage.

This article begins with a brief overview of the use of revolvers by police up to the 1980s. The efforts of the firearms industry to market semi-automatic handguns to police is then considered. Next, the article explores the debate over the possible transition from revolvers to semi-automatic pistols. Finally, we trace the adoption of semi-automatic handguns. The fractured nature of policing in Canada—with the existence of municipal, provincial, and federal services—means that broad claims

⁵ Brendan Roziere and Kevin Walby, “The Expansion and Normalization of Police Militarization in Canada,” *Critical Criminology* 26 (2018): 30. On the increased use of SWAT teams in Canada see Brendan Roziere and Kevin Walby, “Police Militarization in Canada: Media Rhetoric and Operational Realities,” *Policing* 13, no. 4 (2017): 470–482; Brendan Roziere and Kevin Walby, “Special Weapons and Tactics Teams in Canadian Policing: Legal, Institutional, and Economic Dimensions,” *Policing and Society* 30, no. 6 (2020): 704–719. Also see Leslie J. Wood, *Crisis and Control: The Militarization of Protest Policing* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2014).

⁶ “About,” *Blue Line*, accessed January 26, 2023, <https://www.blueline.ca/about/>.

⁷ Morley Lymburner, “Blue Line Magazine. What is This Thing All About?,” *Blue Line*, January 1989, 4; “Blue Line Ushers in New Era,” *Blue Line*, May 2000, 23.

manufacturers employed swing-out cylinders with “extractors” allowing all shell casings to be removed more quickly.⁸

Many police in Canada began to carry revolvers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Early members of the Northwest Mounted Police were issued revolvers and rifles. In Hamilton, the death of a constable in 1884 led to the temporary provision of revolvers to constables on night patrol. Another constable’s death in 1904 contributed to the decision to arm Hamilton police with revolvers.⁹ Some forces, however, waited to receive service revolvers. The fact that police in England generally did not carry firearms may have contributed to a reluctance to arm some Canadian police. Halifax police, for example, were finally armed with revolvers as standard equipment only in the early 1970s.¹⁰ The Royal Newfoundland Constabulary had to wait even longer—its members started to carry service revolvers in the late 1990s.¹¹ By the mid-twentieth century, the standard revolver carried by police was a .38 calibre handgun that held six rounds of ammunition.¹²

Marketing of Semi-Automatic Handguns to Police

In the 1990s, many Canadian police forces stopped using revolvers as sidearms and instead received semi-automatic pistols. In general, semi-automatic handguns carried more ammunition and were faster to reload. Unlike revolvers, which contained ammunition in cylinders, semi-automatic handguns usually held ammunition—typically at least twice as much as a revolver—in a magazine inserted into the handle of the weapon.¹³ An operator could discharge all the ammunition in the magazine, then quickly remove the empty magazine and replace it with a full one. Depressing the trigger of a semi-automatic handgun both fired the weapon and loaded a new round into the gun’s chamber.

The firearms industry targeted police as an important market for semi-automatic handguns. Pamela Haag argues in *The Gunning of America: Business and the Making of American Gun Culture* that fewer and fewer Americans needed firearms as tools by the late nineteenth century. As a result, the gun industry worked ceaselessly to create and expand markets for its products, such as when it spurred interest in recreational hunting among urban, middle-class men and

⁸ Priya Satia, *Empire of Guns: The Violent Making of the Industrial Revolution* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018); David A. Hounshell, *From the American System to Mass Production, 1800–1932: The Development of Manufacturing Technology in the United States* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 46–50; W. Y. Carman, *A History of Firearms, from Earliest Times to 1914* (London: Routledge, 1955).

⁹ John C. Weaver, *Crimes, Constables, and Courts: Order and Transgression in a Canadian City, 1816–1970* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995), 122–123; R. Blake Brown, *Arming and Disarming: A History of Gun Control in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press and the Osgoode Society, 2012), 142.

¹⁰ Michael Boudreau, *City of Order: Crime and Society in Halifax, 1918–1935* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012), 242.

¹¹ “Sidearms Out of the Trunk, on the Hips of RNC Officers,” *Blue Line*, August–September 1998, 61.

¹² Calibre refers to the approximate internal diameter of a firearm barrel or the diameter of the projectile it fires. Firearm calibres are designated in millimeters or inches. Examples include .38 inch calibre ammunition or 9 mm ammunition.

¹³ A magazine is the receptacle in or attached to a firearm that holds several cartridges that are fed into the chamber. Magazines take many forms. They can be fixed or detachable. They can also accommodate different numbers of rounds.

marketed revolvers as self-defence weapons.¹⁴ The firearms industry also targeted the police market. In the late 1880s, the Charles Stark company, which billed itself as Canada's biggest firearms retailer, advertised revolvers to police.¹⁵ In the crowded gun market of the late twentieth century, the firearms industry continued its effort to create and expand markets for weapons. One aspect of this involved convincing police that their revolvers should be replaced with tens of thousands of semi-automatic handguns. Previously, such weapons had largely been used by, and associated with, the military. As Peter Squires notes, gun companies saw the police market as important, in part because selling semi-automatic handguns to law enforcement would make such guns more acceptable and alluring in the civilian market.¹⁶

The gun industry's intense marketing effort to get police revolvers replaced with semi-automatic handguns can be seen in the advertisements in *Blue Line* magazine. The first advertisement for a semi-automatic handgun in *Blue Line* appeared in a 1991 issue, and by 1995 several major gun companies—Glock, Smith & Wesson, Beretta, Ruger, and SIG Sauer—had bought advertisements.¹⁷ Glock was the new kid on the block. This Austrian company produced polymer-framed semi-automatic pistols. The Austrian military began using the company's guns in the 1980s, and Paul Barrett suggests that Glock aggressively marketed its modern handguns to police in part because it believed that police adoption would normalize these firearms in the minds of civilians, thus opening up the massive consumer market.¹⁸ Smith & Wesson was an American company that had manufactured revolvers since the mid-nineteenth century. It had a long history of producing .38 calibre revolvers for police, but also manufactured semi-automatic handguns. Beretta, an Italian gun maker with roots that reached back to the sixteenth century, produced well-known semi-automatic handguns among its suite of firearm products. In 1985, Beretta won the contract to provide the primary sidearm to the American military, the Beretta 92FS (known in the American military as the M9). SIG Sauer, a Swiss company, began to produce semi-automatic handguns in the 1970s. Ruger (technically Sturm, Ruger & Company, Inc.) was an American company based in Connecticut that made a variety of weapons, including semi-automatic handguns.¹⁹

¹⁴ Pamela Haag, *The Gunning of America: Business and the Making of American Gun Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 2016). For discussions of recent trends in firearm retailing strategies in the United States see Ryan Busse, "The Gun Industry Created a New Consumer. Now It's Killing Us," *The Atlantic*, July 25, 2022, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/07/firearms-industry-marketing-mass-shooter/670621/>; Elizabeth A. Saylor, Katherine A. Vitte, and Susan B. Sorenson, "Firearms Advertising: Product Depiction in Consumer Gun Magazines," *Evaluation Review* 28, no. 5 (2004): 420–433.

¹⁵ R. Blake Brown, "'The Largest Stock of Guns in Canada': Charles Stark, Firearm Retailing, and Gun Culture in Late-Nineteenth-Century Toronto," *Ontario History* 106, no. 1 (2022): 88–108.

¹⁶ Peter Squires, "Semi-Automatics for the People? The Marketing of a New Kind of Man," in *Gun Studies: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Politics, Policy, and Practice*, ed. Jennifer Carlson, Kristin Goss, Harel Shapira (New York: Routledge, 2019), 34–37.

¹⁷ *Blue Line*, June–July 1991, 11, 13, 15, 32.

¹⁸ Paul M. Barrett, *Glock: The Rise of America's Gun* (New York: Broadway Books, 2012).

¹⁹ Barrett, *Glock: The Rise of America's Gun*; R. L. Wilson, *The World of Beretta: An International Legend* (New York: Random House, 2000); Terry J. Gander, ed., *Jane's Infantry Weapons, 1998–1999* (Surrey, UK: Jane's Information Group, 1998), 3–7, 34–44, 65–69, 75–81.

In their advertisements, companies tended to include pictures of their firearms and assert the advantageous characteristics of semi-automatic handguns for police, while also articulating how the designs of their weapons differentiated their products from competitors. Businesses frequently described their firearms as more technologically advanced than revolvers and, in doing so, suggested that they would improve officer safety. Gun companies routinely pointed out that semi-automatic handguns carried more ammunition than revolvers. In a 1993 advertisement, Beretta pictured its handgun along with two magazines. One was a revolver cylinder holding six rounds of ammunition; the other was a Beretta magazine with fifteen rounds of ammunition (plus one round sitting separately for the gun's chamber). Beretta said its gun had everything “you like about a revolver ... and more,” referring to the ammunition, and claimed that the large number of rounds held by its semi-automatic pistol was a “life saving advantage.”²⁰ Many manufacturers portrayed semi-automatic handguns as having advanced ergonomic designs, allowing the guns to be pointed quickly and accurately, as if the weapons were extensions of shooters' arms. For example, Smith & Wesson described the ergonomics of its Sigma semi-automatic handgun as ensuring that police could aim accurately. “Pick up any pistol, close your eyes, and point. Now open your eyes. If you're pointing a Sigma, your aim will be straight.” “Aiming a Sigma is as natural as pointing your finger,” trumpeted Smith & Wesson, for the “Sigma's superior pointability is the result of sophisticated research into how the human hand, wrist, and arm operate while grasping and firing a pistol.”²¹

Glock strongly emphasized new technology, particularly its use of polymers. In 1992 it said that, while “other companies were improving upon their technology of the past,” Glock was “busy perfecting the technology needed for the 21st Century.”²² In another advertisement, Glock superimposed a picture of its handgun on a NASA space shuttle, claiming that, “When NASA needed a new sidearm for the Security Force at the Kennedy Space Center, it's no wonder they chose the most advanced semi-automatic pistol on earth, the GLOCK.” Glock was the leader “when it [came] to space age handgun technology.” It encouraged purchasers to put their “hands on the technology of tomorrow”²³ (see Figure 2). The message was clear: Glock was the technological leader, and police organizations should buy the most advanced weapon to be considered a “modern” force. Glock also claimed that the use of polymers and other materials made its handgun more durable than competitors' products. For example, in 1993, Glock ran a full-page advertisement in *Blue Line* with ten bullet holes in the centre of the image. Glock described its gun as “Virtually indestructible,” in part because it was made with “tough polymer that can't break down or corrode.” Glock bragged that the company froze one of its handguns in a block of ice, then submerged it in saltwater for fifty hours. “Then we

²⁰ “The Beretta “D” Models: Everything You Like about a Revolver ... and More,” *Blue Line*, June 1993, 4.

²¹ “Nobody Gets to the Point Faster than Sigma,” *Blue Line*, January 1996, 4.

²² “Someday All Handguns Will Be This Good,” *Blue Line*, May 1992, 19.

²³ “NASA's Choice, Glock Technology,” *Blue Line*, June 1993, 19.

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Figure 2. Glock strongly emphasized new technology in its marketing. In this 1993 advertisement, it trumpets its association with the Kennedy Space Center to portray its semi-automatic handgun as advanced. Source: *Blue Line*, June–July 1993, 19. Reproduced with the permission of *Blue Line*.

used it to make this ad,” meaning, to make the bullet holes in the advertisement. In other words, police under threat could rely on the Glock to shoot.²⁴

Gun companies also used emotional appeals in their marketing to tap into the personal views of police and to possibly shape the broader attitude of law enforcement towards firearms. Police, like other groups of firearm users, tended to share a particular “gun culture.” As scholars have noted, gun cultures are not monolithic attitudes shared by citizens of an entire nation. Rather, there often exist distinct gun cultures affected by factors such as region, gender, or employment.²⁵ Many police shared attitudes to firearms, seeing them as symbols of authority and practical instruments needed to provide protection for themselves and the public. Gun companies thus often stressed how guns would make police “feel” when they possessed modern semi-automatic handguns. Police holding semi-automatic weapons would sense the robust construction of the handguns and imagine themselves as safe and authoritative. For example, in 1994, Beretta said that police carrying semi-automatic handguns “routinely express a feeling of greater confidence in being able to control dangerous situations.”²⁶

²⁴ “You Can’t Abuse a Firearm...,” *Blue Line*, November 1993, 31. Also see “Can a Handgun Live Forever?,” *Blue Line*, May 1994, 6.
²⁵ Sarah Jane Blithe and Jennifer L. Lanterman. “Subcultural Variability and Protean-Identification in Gun Culture,” *Culture and Organization* 28, no. 2 (2022): 148–166.
²⁶ Beretta U.S.A. Corp., “Pistols Versus Revolvers,” *Blue Line*, January 1994, 27.

Firearm companies often noted the use of their semi-automatic handguns by the military, thus blurring the line between weapons appropriate for police and soldiers. As Squires notes, an association with the military “added enormously to a firearm’s reputation, its ‘aura’ and mystique.”²⁷ Beretta often diminished the distinction between weapons of war and weapons for policing. The company emphasized its success at securing a contract with the United States armed forces. In 1992 it used an advertisement that displayed the inner workings of the handgun it sold to the American military, using evidence of its procurement as proof of the gun’s quality.²⁸ In the May 1993 issue of *Blue Line*, Beretta began to publish full-page advertisements to market its new Model 96. It emphasized the gun’s “legendary reliability,” ergonomic design, easy maintenance, and safety features, as well as the fact that its handgun was the “standard handgun for the U.S. Armed Forces and over one thousand police departments.”²⁹ Beretta also mentioned the “Combat Style Frame” of one of its handgun models.³⁰ Beretta frequently employed the word “tactical” in describing its guns for police, which suggested military uses.³¹ In 1994, Beretta used an advertisement showing a collection of semi-automatic handguns, shotguns, and an assault weapon, and said it offered “America’s premier collection of tactical firepower” (see Figure 3). Beretta claimed it had won “an enviable, hard-earned reputation for excellence in today’s military and law enforcement circles.”³² Other gun makers also leaned into military connections. Ruger claimed that its handguns were built to meet NATO standards and employed the term “tactical”³³ (see Figure 4). SIG Sauer, meanwhile, noted that the American army had selected one of its semi-automatic handguns for use with some units.³⁴

Revolvers vs. Semi-Automatic Handguns

Authors in *Blue Line* debated the relative merits of revolvers and semi-automatic pistols as police weapons, though the journal’s contributors eventually came to a consensus that police should possess semi-automatic handguns. *Blue Line* published its first article on this topic in 1991. Steven Sheppard threw cold water on the idea that police needed semi-automatic handguns, concluding that these weapons were not, in fact, better than revolvers. Sheppard was a staff sergeant with two decades of experience with the Metropolitan Toronto Police. He discussed the advantages and disadvantages of both kinds of firearms. He noted a few weaknesses

²⁷ Squires, “Semi-Automatics for the People?,” 35.

²⁸ “Anatomy of a Legend...,” *Blue Line*, May 1992, 20. Beretta also published an advertisement in *Blue Line* that showed seven different versions of its semi-automatic handguns, noting it could be purchased “any way you want it.” In doing so, Beretta made clear that police “consumers” could choose the details of their guns, just like civilian consumers could pick the colour and trim level of cars. “Any Way You Want It,” *Blue Line*, May 1992, 21.

²⁹ “This is the new Beretta 96,” *Blue Line*, May 1993, 4. Also see “You Won’t Find a Better Partner Anywhere in the World,” *Blue Line*, January 1995, 4.

³⁰ “Beretta U.S.A.,” *Blue Line*, March 1993, 16.

³¹ For examples, see “Tactical Deployment,” *Blue Line*, June-July 1995, 27; “Tactical Equipment,” *Blue Line*, April 2000, 37.

³² “The Beretta Arsenal. America’s Premier Collection of Tactical Firepower,” *Blue Line*, February 1994, 7.

³³ “Precision P-94,” *Blue Line*, May 1995, 8.

³⁴ “P228 9mm,” *Blue Line*, January 1996, 33.

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Figure 4. Like Beretta, Ruger offered a range of weapons to police, including semi-automatic handguns, sniper rifles, and fully automatic rifles, as "tactical" weapons. Source: *Blue Line*, June–July 1995, 27. Reproduced with the permission of *Blue Line*.

automatic pistols often had more recoil than .38 calibre revolvers, were more difficult to operate, and could not be handled easily by small or weak-wristed officers.

Sheppard's article downplaying the advantages of semi-automatic pistols precipitated several harsh responses in *Blue Line*. W. N. Burton wrote that he had "never seen such a biased and slanted list of advantages and disadvantages associated to the pistol."³⁶ Burton noted that many American police services had

³⁶ W. N. Burton, "Handgun vs. Revolvers Response," *Blue Line*, April 1991, 22.

switched to, or were considering the switch to, semi-automatic handguns, and that some Canadian emergency response teams had also acquired such firearms. Burton argued that, if police officers could be expected to modernize by mastering new computer technology, then those same police could also learn how to handle and fire semi-automatic handguns. In a letter to *Blue Line*, RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) member Brian Largy was even harsher in his assessment of Sheppard's article: "If one didn't know better, it would appear that Mr. Sheppard had been commissioned by some police administrative department to dissuade the average police officer, who is not overly familiar with firearms, from requesting or demanding a switch from revolver to semiautomatic pistol."³⁷

The question of how police should be armed became entwined with concerns of excessive use of police force, particularly against minorities. Several high-profile shootings of Black civilians in Toronto in the late 1980s sparked community protest and brought the topic of police racism to the attention of the public. The Ontario government responded by creating the Task Force on Race Relations and Policing.³⁸ The task force's report, released in 1989, made several recommendations regarding police use of force, including amendments to the Ontario police act specifying that firearms only be fired in defence of life and that reports be filed by police officers following the use of force. Notably, the report's recommendation that police shootings be investigated by an independent civilian organization, a request often made by community groups such as the Black Action Defence Committee, led to the creation of the Special Investigations Unit (SIU). The SIU was designed as an independent body tasked with investigating possible wrongdoing of police in incidents in which a person died or was seriously injured.³⁹

Police violence continued to be a controversial public topic into the early 1990s, encouraged by shooting deaths, such as the police killing of Raymond Lawrence by Peel Regional Police in 1992, just days after a jury acquitted four police officers charged with beating Rodney King in Los Angeles the previous year.⁴⁰ The provincial NDP (New Democratic Party) government, under Premier Bob Rae, announced it would introduce reforms to require police officers to complete a report whenever they drew or discharged guns, rather than, as before, when they fired weapons. The plan to strengthen reporting requirements incensed some

³⁷ "Letters to the Editor," *Blue Line*, June–July 1991, 4. Also see Michael P. Dungey, "Pistols vs. Revolvers," *Blue Line*, October 1991, 24–25.

³⁸ Julia Nunes, "Protesters Assail Police Shooting," *Globe and Mail*, August 15, 1988, A11; Timothy Appleby, "Blacks Seek Probe of Police Shooting," *Globe and Mail*, August 19, 1988, A16; Timothy Appleby, Gary Webb-Proctor, and Deborah Wilson, "Ontario Won't Call for Civilian Probe into Killing of Youth," *Globe and Mail*, December 13, 1988, A16; Mary Gooderham, "Group to Study Police Relations with Visible Minorities," *Globe and Mail*, December 14, 1988, A17.

³⁹ Race Relations and Policing Task Force, *Report of the Race Relations and Policing Task Force* (Toronto, 1989), 126–150; Robyn Maynard, *Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present* (Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2017); Dale Brazao and Nomi Morris, "Passionate Pleas Made at Black Activist Rally," *Toronto Star*, January 18, 1989, A4; Jane Armstrong, "Admit Racism Exists on Force, Groups Urge," *Toronto Star*, June 7, 1990, A7; Jacques Gallant, "SIU's Creation Came Amidst Racially-Charged Atmosphere," *Toronto Star*, April 18, 2016, <https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2016/04/18/siu-creation-came-amidst-racially-charged-atmosphere.html>.

⁴⁰ Andrew Duffy, "Officer Fired Warning Shot, Civilian Investigators Declare," *Toronto Star*, May 5, 1992, A2.

police, who said it would lead to unnecessary paperwork, make police reluctant to draw weapons in dangerous situations, and create a paper trail that could be used to later malign as “trigger happy” officers who fired their handguns.⁴¹ Doug Ramsey of the Metropolitan Toronto Police Association said the new reporting requirement was “just another attack on the credibility of the police.”⁴² There tended to be political overtones to the police push back. Representatives of both the Police Association of Ontario and the Metro Toronto Police Association specifically criticized the advocacy of the Black Action Defence Committee, referring to the group as “notoriously anti-police.”⁴³ Articles in *Blue Line* hinted at distrust of the NDP government, with authors arguing that the Rae government was soft on crime and failed to appreciate the dangers faced by front-line police.⁴⁴ The subsequent decision of the NDP government to appoint a commission to examine the problem of systemic racism in the province’s criminal justice system accentuated these complaints. Toronto human rights lawyer Peter Rosenthal told the commission that providing semi-automatic handguns to police could result in more civilian deaths. Instead, he wanted police to be more creative in how they approached tense situations.⁴⁵ Rosenthal’s comments produced a furious response from police, including the chief of the London Police Force, Julian Fantino.⁴⁶ The part of the commission’s final report that examined shootings by police focused on how such incidents were subsequently reported and investigated.

Authors in *Blue Line* emphasized the dangers faced by police from well-armed criminals and eventually argued the necessity of semi-automatic handguns to keep officers safe. In its first issue, *Blue Line* reported that police died “in bars, stores and homes, on sidewalks and highways, in alleys and gutters, predominantly by guns.”⁴⁷ In “Under Fire: Are Canadian Street Cops Outgunned?,” Robert Hotston, a sergeant with the Peterborough Police, suggested that incidents involving heavily armed criminals meant that “Canadian cops are lobbying for firepower and ammunition that have a greater stopping ability.”⁴⁸ Most Canadian civilians owned long guns, not handguns, and Hotston expressed concern that police faced shooters armed with powerful shotguns and rifles. He surveyed several options available to police, including providing front-line officers with more capable revolvers.⁴⁹ By the

⁴¹ Martin Mittelstaedt, “Rae to Adopt Race Proposals,” *Globe and Mail*, June 17, 1992, A6; Martin Mittelstaedt, “Ontario Police Face Tighter Firearms Rules,” *Globe and Mail*, September 5, 1992, A6; Virginia Galt, “Fearful Police Officers Feel under the Gun,” *Globe and Mail*, November 5, 1992, A1.

⁴² Doug Ramsey, “Cops – The Good Guys,” *Blue Line*, December 1992, 4.

⁴³ Nicolaas van Rijn, “Police Protest ‘NDP Dumping on Officers,’” *Toronto Star*, October 5, 1992, A24; Police Association of Ontario, “An Open Letter to the People of Ontario,” *Sault Star*, August 4, 1992, A6.

⁴⁴ “Gun Unholstering Report,” *Blue Line*, March 1993, 38; Gil Puder, “Use of Force Reporting,” *Blue Line*, January 1996, 26–27.

⁴⁵ *Report of the Commission on Systemic Racism in the Ontario Criminal Justice System* (Toronto: Queen’s Printer, 1995), 377–384.

⁴⁶ “Disarming Police ‘Simple Madness’ Police Chief Suggests,” *Blue Line*, January 1994, 29.

⁴⁷ “Street Survival: Tactics for Armed Encounters,” *Blue Line*, January 1989, 20–21.

⁴⁸ Robert C. Hotston, “Under Fire: Are Canadian Street Cops Outgunned?,” *Blue Line*, Summer 1989, 6–7.

⁴⁹ Robert Hotston, “In the Gravest Extreme: The Decision to Use Deadly Force,” *Blue Line*, February 1989, 6–9. *Blue Line* also pressed for another solution: more, and better, firearms training, particularly training that tried to replicate realistic situations faced by police. See James Dalweg,

early 1990s, authors in *Blue Line* increasingly argued that semi-automatic handguns were key to protecting police. They repeated many of the claims made by firearms manufacturers, such as that semi-automatic handguns were faster to load, constructed of high-tech materials, and had advanced ergonomic designs that made them easy to point and fire. Revolvers were portrayed as the tools of old-time cops, not modern police officers. Revolvers were wood-handled relics; semi-automatics were sleek and modern. A lengthy article published in *Blue Line* in May 1993 by Corporal Gerry Pyke of the Vancouver Police Department demonstrated the marshalling of such arguments. Pyke noted that criminals could “equip themselves with any type of weapon available whether that be a long rifle or a handgun, fully automatic (machine gun) or any varian[t] thereof.” Criminals were also aware that the police carried a handgun that “fires only six rounds while on duty.” Heavier police armaments were thus necessary. Pyke also questioned why computer equipment was replaced every few years, “while the revolvers we use are 120 years old.” It was unfair to police, in Pyke’s view, to deny police a “better, more modern handgun.”⁵⁰ In January 1994, *Blue Line* published an article on the history of revolvers that implicitly made the case that police needed modern semi-automatic handguns. The revolver “has reached the peak of its refinement,” and there “isn’t much more that can be done to the weapon to make it any better,” as, essentially, “the weapon itself has remained unchanged for the past 90 years.”⁵¹ Modern law enforcement needed modern guns. Some police rejected objections to semi-automatic handguns based on the supposedly threatening appearance of the firearms. One letter writer from Alberta, in 1993, said “I have heard that people may think they look too aggressive. So what! If they are better we should have them.”⁵²

Several high-profile shootings of police were repeatedly invoked as evidence supporting the necessity of replacing revolvers with semi-automatic handguns. Even though the number of police officers killed on duty did not actually spike in the late 1980s and early 1990s, tragic incidents served as parables highlighting the dangers faced by front-line law enforcement and the failures of police leaders and, especially, politicians to understand those dangers and take sufficient action to ensure officer safety.⁵³ The most prominent episode employed by advocates of arming police with semi-automatic handguns was the death of Sudbury Constable Joseph MacDonald, who died after emptying his revolver in a gunfight with two

“The Firing Line: Okay! I’ll Be The Target,” *Blue Line*, November 1992, 4; “Hi-Tech Shooting Part of New O.P.P. Facility,” *Blue Line*, December 1989, 22–23; Craig Best, “A Progressive Approach to Firearms Training,” *Blue Line*, April 1991, 10–11; Craig Best, “Judgemental Firearms Training,” *Blue Line*, January 1992, 26–27; Jim Dalweg, “The Firing Line: A Training Officer’s Dream Come True,” *Blue Line*, March 1993, 26–27.

⁵⁰ Gerry Pyke, “Playing by the Rules,” *Blue Line*, May 1993, 28–29.

⁵¹ “A Weapon at Maximum Refinement,” *Blue Line*, January 1994, 11.

⁵² B. G. Rahier, “Frustrated with Training Concepts,” *Blue Line*, January 1993, 14.

⁵³ Sara Dunn, “Police Officers Murdered in the Line of Duty, 1961 to 2009,” *Juristat* 30, no. 3 (2010), <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/en/pub/85-002-x/2010003/article/11354-eng.pdf>. Michael Sierra-Arévalo suggests that the emphasis on danger provided a rationale for a “warrior mentality” among police, and that this mentality can “propagate aggressive, enforcement-centric policing practices.” Michael Sierra-Arévalo, “The Commemoration of Death, Organizational Memory, and Police Culture,” *Criminology* 57 (2019): 633.

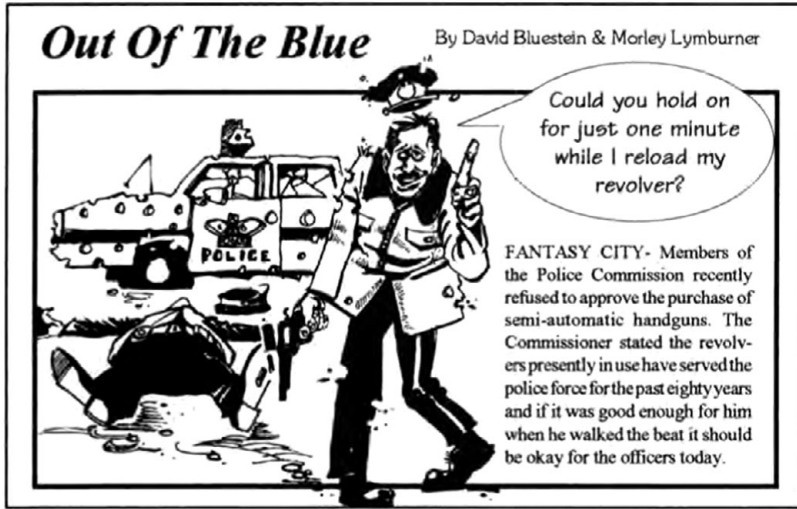


Figure 5. In this 1993 cartoon, *Blue Line* suggests that revolvers placed police in danger when faced with well-armed criminals. Source: *Blue Line*, January 1993, 3. Reproduced with the permission of *Blue Line*.

men in 1993. Clinton Suzack, armed with a semi-automatic handgun, reportedly shot and killed MacDonald while he reloaded.⁵⁴

By the mid 1990s, the revolver versus semi-automatic pistol debate was largely settled in favour of semi-automatics on the pages of *Blue Line*. The magazine began to draw attention to American police forces that had adopted the new pistols, hinting that Canadian police should do the same, and published political cartoons that emphasized the importance of semi-automatic handguns to ensure police safety⁵⁵ (see Figure 5). The journal pressed strongly for police use of semi-automatic handguns. In 1998, *Blue Line* published an article by its firearms training editor, Dave Brown, making the case that semi-automatic handguns were superior to revolvers. Brown was less focused on the technical differences of the two kinds of firearms than on how real-world conditions made semi-automatic handguns preferable. He suggested that the limited ammunition capacity of the revolver made police reluctant to shoot when in danger. Brown argued that an officer would freely fire one shot from a revolver if faced by danger, but "there is an enormous reluctance to fire subsequent shots. If the officer fires two, they will then be subconsciously reluctant to fire a third." He believed the "mind knows that three shots will exhaust half the ammunition supply," and the "subconscious mind is very

⁵⁴ "Ontario to Approve," *Blue Line*, 19; "Don't leave me here to die," *Montreal Gazette*, October 8, 1993, A5; Sue Bailey, "Police Demand More Firepower," *Windsor Star*, October 13, 1993, A5; *R v Suzack*, 2000 CanLII 5630 (ON CA), <<https://canlii.ca/t/1fb1j>>, retrieved on 2022-07-28.

⁵⁵ "Missouri State Adopts Semi-Auto-Guns," *Blue Line*, April 1991, 14–15; "Semiautomatic Pistols Approved For New York City Cops," *Blue Line*, December 1993, 16; "U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service to Purchase over 16,000 Beretta 40 Calibre Handguns," *Blue Line*, February 1995, 26.

much aware of how difficult it is to reload the revolver under stress.” Brown concluded that this “psychological ‘freeze’ may be just enough time for the officer to lose the fight.” On the other hand, the semi-automatic handgun “provides a comfortable margin of self-confidence at a time where it is critical that the officer gain every tiny advantage possible.”⁵⁶ This was because semi-automatic handguns carried more rounds of ammunition, and because reloading a revolver required fine motor skills that degraded under stress, while semi-automatic guns could be reloaded much more easily, even in difficult situations.

The Transition to Semi-Automatic Police Handguns

Beginning in the early 1990s, semi-automatic handguns began to replace service revolvers as the sidearms of Canadian police. Some SWAT forces had already received semi-automatic handguns, opening the door to their use by all police. In 1989, for instance, a review of police tactical units in Ontario recommended that team members be issued semi-automatic handguns.⁵⁷ Developments in several provinces illustrate the relatively quick adoption of semi-automatic handguns for police despite some public apprehension. Alberta took the lead in providing all members of municipal police forces with semi-automatics. In 1992 a firearms committee of the Calgary police recommended the adoption of such weapons.⁵⁸ There was some resistance to this move. The *Calgary Herald* asked the police committee why it was “recommending arming Calgary constables with a semi-automatic weapon more suitable for house to house combat than the peaceable maintenance of law and order?”⁵⁹ The Calgary police nevertheless became the first service to fully transfer to semi-automatic handguns when its members were armed with Glock pistols.⁶⁰ The Edmonton police soon received semi-automatic handguns, and by 1993 the Medicine Hat police also made the switch.⁶¹ The desire to be a modern force was evident in the decisions to adopt semi-automatic handguns. In Medicine Hat, for instance, a local inspector said of the Medicine Hat police, “Although we are not as large as many police forces, [we] pride ourselves in being the pioneer of weapons transition in Canada.”⁶²

In British Columbia, a committee consisting of representatives from police organizations studied the appropriateness of different handguns for police and, in early 1993, recommended the purchase of Beretta semi-automatic pistols.⁶³ The shift to semi-automatic handguns in British Columbia received a boost when

⁵⁶ Dave Brown, “An Open Letter to Deputy Sheriff John R. Smith,” *Blue Line*, May 1998, 18.

⁵⁷ “Review of Tactical Units,” *Blue Line*, August–September 1990, 19–20; *Review of Tactical Units* (Toronto: Ontario Police Commission, 1989).

⁵⁸ Rick Mofina, “City Policy Study Purchase of Powerful Handgun,” *Calgary Herald*, February 14, 1992, B1.

⁵⁹ “No Glock for Calgary,” *Calgary Herald*, February 18, 1992, A4. Also see Tahra Sabir, “Upgrading of Police Firepower ‘Alarming,’” *Calgary Herald*, August 2, 1992, A7.

⁶⁰ “Calgary Police Service Switches to Semi-Automatic Pistols,” *Blue Line*, December 1992, 18; Brock Ketcham, “Police to Upgrade Firepower,” *Calgary Herald*, July 25, 1992, A1.

⁶¹ Ian Williams, “Semi-Automatic Handguns on City Police Wish List,” *Edmonton Journal*, February 27, 1992, A1; Ian Williams, “City Police Want to Pack New Pistols,” *Edmonton Journal*, October 3, 1992, B4; “Police to Buy Semi-Automatic Pistols,” *Edmonton Journal*, October 6, 1992, B2.

⁶² “Medicine Hat Police Converting to Pistols,” *Blue Line*, April 1993, 16.

⁶³ Pyke, “Playing by the Rules,” 28–29.

heavily armed thieves robbed a Vancouver jewelry store. This led the *Times Colonist* to note that police felt that the .38 calibre revolver was an antique. The newspaper concluded that the “men and women who lay their lives on the line for us every day deserve a more effective weapon.”⁶⁴ Then, in 1994, a commission of inquiry into policing in the province issued its recommendations, which included upgraded police handguns. British Columbia police organizations had told the commission that revolvers should be replaced with semi-automatic handguns to protect officers and the public. The British Columbia Civil Liberties Association initially opposed the change to semi-automatic handguns, in part because it deemed increasing police firepower unnecessary. The commission nevertheless recommended that the police be permitted semiautomatic handguns.⁶⁵ In early 1995, the New Democratic government of British Columbia announced that the province’s independent municipal police forces would replace revolvers with semi-automatic handguns.⁶⁶

In Ontario, the shift to semi-automatic handguns proved especially controversial. The province’s Progressive Conservative Party positioned itself as a “law and order” party in the early 1990s, a time when the public expressed considerable concern with crime.⁶⁷ Jennifer Carlson suggests that, as crime becomes a “central social concern worthy of militaristic response, the state breeds suspicion regarding its own efficacy to take on the slippery, but mammoth, task of crime suppression.”⁶⁸ Carlson uses this insight to help explain the tendency of citizens to arm themselves; however, it also explains the desire to strengthen police by providing new firearms. Some Progressive Conservative leaders urged the governing NDP to provide police with semi-automatic pistols. In a 1991 debate over amendments to the *Police Services Act*,⁶⁹ member of provincial parliament (MPP) Bob Runciman highlighted the problem of violent crime and said the NDP lacked solutions, including the provision of adequate weapons to police. Police “have to go into some areas of Metro Toronto and be faced with semi-automatic weapons. What do police officers in Toronto have? When they talk about getting better weaponry, what kind of approach do we get from the Solicitor General and the Attorney General? Absolute

⁶⁴ “Police Deserve Better,” *Times Colonist*, October 20, 1993, A4.

⁶⁵ “Semi-Automatic Pistols Sought for B.C. Police,” *Vancouver Sun*, June 7, 1993, B10; British Columbia Civil Liberties Association, “Firearms and Ammunition: Submission to B.C. Police Commission,” February 24, 1993, https://bccla.org/our_work/firearms-and-ammunition-submission-to-b-c-police-commission/; Policing in British Columbia Commission of Inquiry, *Closing the Gap: Policing and the Community* (Victoria, BC: The Commission, 1994); “Semi-Automatic Handguns Can Replace ‘Outdated’ .38-Calibre Revolvers,” *Vancouver Sun*, September 16, 1994, B3; Craig McInnes, “Police Need Better Training, Report Says,” *Globe and Mail*, September 16, 1994, A6.

⁶⁶ Justine Hunter and Mike Crawley, “B.C. Police Trade Wild West-Style Six-Shooter for ‘Safety’ of a Semi-Automatic,” *Vancouver Sun*, January 19, 1995, B4; Les Leyne, “Police to Beef Up ‘1894’ Firepower,” *Times Colonist*, January 19, 1995, A1.

⁶⁷ Jane B. Spratt and Anthony N. Doob, “Fear, Victimization, and Attitudes to Sentencing, the Courts, and the Police,” *Canadian Journal of Criminology* 39, no. 3 (1997): 275–291; Karin Stein, *Public Perception of Crime and Justice in Canada: A Review of Opinion Polls* (Ottawa: Department of Justice Canada, 2001), https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/csj-sjc/crime/rr01_1/p1.html.

⁶⁸ Jennifer D. Carlson, “States, Subjects and Sovereign Power: Lessons from Global Gun Cultures,” *Theoretical Criminology* 18, no. 3 (2014): 349.

⁶⁹ RSO 1990 c P15.

silence.⁷⁰ In December 1991, the Metropolitan Toronto Police Service Board approved the purchase of 400 semi-automatic handguns to help counter the threat posed by dangerous weapons in the hands of those involved in the illegal drug trade. The new police guns were to be distributed to officers working in drug investigations and in foot patrols in high-risk areas.⁷¹ Well-known Toronto lawyer Clayton Ruby warned against adopting new handguns: “Increasing firepower will merely increase the danger to the public that arises when one poorly trained person faces down another armed with deadly weaponry.”⁷² In October 1993, Progressive Conservative MPP (and future premier) Mike Harris raised the death of Constable MacDonald, while Runciman pressed the government to accede to police requests for semi-automatic handguns. Runciman also raised the death of Constable MacDonald, saying that “equipping officers with the semiautomatic handgun might have made a difference in this particular situation.”⁷³ The NDP solicitor general, however, would only say that the issue was under consideration.

An important decision in 1993 by the Ontario Ministry of Labour contributed to the provision of semi-automatic handguns to the province’s police. In 1991, Constable Cam Woolley confronted a heavily armed man near Caledon, Ontario. Constable Woolley emptied his revolver, then found himself in a ditch unable to quickly reload. Luckily, Woolley survived the incident, but afterwards he complained to the provincial ministry of labour that his service revolver was inadequate equipment that made his workplace unsafe.⁷⁴ The labour ministry subsequently found that revolvers were too slow to load and had problems of involuntary cocking and discharge. The ministry thus ordered that the province authorize the acquisition of semi-automatic handguns for police.⁷⁵ *Blue Line* editor Lymburner claimed that this was the “first time in Canada or the United States that a widely used weapon had been declared legally unsafe.”⁷⁶ The opposition Progressive Conservatives used the ministry’s finding to pressure the NDP government to replace revolvers with semi-automatic handguns.⁷⁷ Lymburner suggested that the labour decision was key to the transition to semi-automatics in Ontario, and in other parts of the country. In Ontario, the order “placed every organization that armed their

⁷⁰ *Debates, Ontario Legislature* (12 June 1991), <http://hansardindex.ontla.on.ca/hansardeissue/35-galt1/1046.htm>.

⁷¹ Jack Lakey, “High-Risk Metro Officers to Get Deadlier Handguns,” *Toronto Star*, November 29, 1991, A2; “Toronto Cops to Get Semi-Auto Guns,” *Blue Line*, January 1992, 16.

⁷² Clayton Ruby, “Fifth Column,” *Globe and Mail*, November 17, 1992, A22. Also see “Rally Criticizes Police,” *Globe and Mail*, November 30, 1992, A17; Robert Sheppard, “An Arms Race on Canada’s Streets,” *Globe and Mail*, December 2, 1992, A23; Robert Sheppard, “The Semi-Automatic Option,” *Globe and Mail*, November 11, 1993, A27.

⁷³ *Debates, Ontario Legislature* (12 October 1993), <http://hansardindex.ontla.on.ca/hansardeissue/35-3/1067.htm>.

⁷⁴ Galt, “Fearful Police Officers Feel Under the Gun,” A1; Gay Abbate, “Police May Get Semi-Automatics, Ontario Chiefs Told,” *Globe and Mail*, November 10, 1992, A15; Henry Hess, “Ontario Police Hang Up Ancient Guns,” *Globe and Mail*, October 22, 1993, A8.

⁷⁵ James Rusk, “Change in Police Weaponry Ordered,” *Globe and Mail*, October 16, 1993, A13.

⁷⁶ Morley Lymburner, “Just When We Thought We Saw the Last of Them ... Revolvers Are Still Out There!,” *Blue Line*, March 1998, 26.

⁷⁷ *Debates, Ontario Legislature* (18 October 1993), <http://hansardindex.ontla.on.ca/hansardeissue/35-3/1070.htm>; “Ontario to Approve Semi-Auto Guns by New Year,” *Blue Line*, November 1993, 19; Morley Lymburner, “Police 38 Special Revolver Declared Unsafe,” *Blue Line*, January 1994, 10.

members at risk of civil and prosecutorial repercussions” if they did not show reasonable diligence at removing revolvers from use.⁷⁸ Lymburner also surmised that authorities in the rest of Canada had to consider the Ontario labour decision, for if police with revolvers in other provinces suffered harm, authorities in those jurisdiction would be faced with the challenge of disproving the Ontario finding that revolvers were unsafe in the police workplace.

In early 1994, the Ontario government announced amendments to the *Equipment and Use of Force Regulation of the Police Services Act* to come into compliance with the order issued by the Ministry of Labour.⁷⁹ Ontario Solicitor General David Christopherson explained that, “in response to a health and safety issue that directly affects police officers in this province,” the government saw fit to enact measures that “would allow police officers to move from the .38-calibre revolver, which was deemed to be unsafe in some circumstances, to the far more efficient and safer 9-millimetre or .40-calibre semi-automatic.”⁸⁰ Every police officer had to be issued a semi-automatic handgun, and the .38 calibre revolver was prohibited as a police weapon after 1999.⁸¹ Ontario police soon began to announce choices of semi-automatic pistols. The Ontario Provincial Police received the SIG Sauer P229 pistol for its 4,500 members.⁸² The York Regional Police Service (and other law enforcement agencies, including the police in Sudbury and Thunder Bay) adopted a Beretta semi-automatic pistol. Other Canadian jurisdictions followed suit and adopted semi-automatic handguns. Police in Saskatoon, Regina, Winnipeg, and Brandon all received approval for new handguns.⁸³ In 1995, the RCMP decided to replace its revolvers with 17,200 Smith & Wesson semi-automatic handguns.⁸⁴

⁷⁸ Lymburner, “Just When we Thought We Saw the Last of Them,” 26.

⁷⁹ “Transition Plan to Semiauto Guns Released,” *Blue Line*, March 1994, 16–17; Martin Mittelstaedt, “Change in Police Guns Praised,” *Globe and Mail*, January 28, 1994, A6.

⁸⁰ *Debates, Ontario Legislature* (23 June 1994), <http://hansardindex.ontla.on.ca/hansardeissue/35-3/1149b.htm>.

⁸¹ “Amendment to the Handgun Regulation of the Ontario Police Services Act and the New Equipment and Training Standards,” *Blue Line*, March 1994, 19. The use of a labour safety complaint to force governments to provide heavier weapons to police would be repeated after the murder of three members of the RCMP in Moncton in 2014. Marquis, “The 2017 Moncton Canada Labour Code Trial and the Future of the RCMP,” 9–30.

⁸² “Ontario Provincial Police Purchase Semi-Auto Firearms,” *Blue Line*, June–July 1994, 23.

⁸³ “Beretta .40 Calibre Pistols Selected by York Regional Police and 10 Other Canadian Agencies,” *Blue Line*, August–September 1994, 22; Morley Lymburner and Myron Love, “Major Purchases by Police Agencies Keep Industry Moving,” *Blue Line*, March 1995, 21; “Police to Change Weapons,” *Leader-Post*, September 22, 1994, D3; Donella Hoffman, “Police to Junk Revolvers in Favor of 9 mm Pistols,” *Star-Phoenix*, September 22, 1994, A3.

⁸⁴ “Mounties to Get New Firearms and Body Armour,” *Blue Line*, August–September 1995, 8; “Mounties to Change Guns,” *Leader-Post*, January 28, 1995, A13. In Ontario, a debate also took place about the kind of ammunition supplied to police. At issue was whether Ontario should mandate that police be armed with so-called “hollow point” bullets, which were generally seen as more lethal because they expanded upon impact with human bodies. *Blue Line* urged hollow point rounds. The controversy about hollow point ammunition was settled in Ontario in 1995, when the Progressive Conservative government mandated the use of such ammunition. Morley Lymburner, “Less Than Lethal... Less Than Correct,” *Blue Line*, March 1994, 5; “Bullet Comes with Some Serious Doubts,” *Blue Line*, March 1994, 17; Morley Lymburner, “Truncated Bullet Law the Result of Truncated Thinking,” *Blue Line*, June–July 1994, 5; Gary Miller, “Full Metal Jacket vs. Controlled Expansion,” *Blue Line*, August–September 1994, 16–17; Larry McGhee, “Cops Are Outgunned by Crooks Bullet Manufacturer Says,” *Blue Line*, October 1994, 32–33; “Three Police Organizations

Blue Line undertook an ambitious Canada-wide survey of the police transition to semi-automatic handguns, and its findings, reported in January 1996, showed how quickly most police services received new weapons. The magazine contacted the firearms industry and police services to compile details on the make and model of handguns purchased or ordered, as well as the quantity each police force had or would acquire. *Blue Line* found that over 180 police services had purchased 43,272 semi-automatic handguns in the previous two years.⁸⁵ *Blue Line* reported the results of its survey by province and police force. It found, for example, that the tiny Saanich Police had ordered nineteen Glock handguns, while the Vancouver police had ordered 1,200 Berettas. Smith & Wesson handguns were most popular (51 per cent of all reported handguns purchased), while 26 per cent were Glocks, 13 per cent were SIG Sauer handguns, nine per cent were Berettas, and one per cent were produced by other manufacturers. For gun makers, there remained money to be made in the police market in Canada, as *Blue Line* estimated that over 31,000 police were still using revolvers. One important outlier was the Sûreté du Québec.⁸⁶ Holdout police forces, however, quickly succumbed and switched to semi-automatic handguns. In 2001, it was announced that the Sûreté du Québec (and the Montréal police) would acquire semi-automatic handguns.⁸⁷ In 2003, *Blue Line* completed another survey of handguns used by police and declared that the revolver was “almost completely extinct among Canadian police agencies.”⁸⁸

Conclusion

In the 1990s, Canadian police forces and organizations representing law enforcement demanded the provision of semi-automatic handguns that could fire faster and be reloaded more quickly. Police invoked memories of dead officers to support their arguments and employed workplace safety concerns to press their position. The gun industry encouraged the transition to semi-automatic firearms, both because the police market for firearms was large and because the adoption of these weapons by law enforcement would also normalize them for the civilian market. As demonstrated in the advertisements that appeared in *Blue Line* during the 1990s, the firearms industry portrayed semi-automatic handguns as more effective, faster to reload, more durable, and more modern than traditional police revolvers. They subtly or blatantly alluded to the military uses of such guns, blurring the line

Join in Battle to Dump the Bullet,” *Blue Line*, August–September 1994, 24; Blair McQuillan, “To the (Hollow) Point,” *Blue Line*, August–September 1995, 6; Equipment and Use of Force, RRO 1990, Reg 926, <https://www.canlii.org/en/on/laws/regu/rro-1990-reg-926/8282/rro-1990-reg-926.html>; James Rusk, “Ontario Police Will Switch to Hollow-Point Bullets,” *Globe and Mail*, August 10, 1995, A6.

⁸⁵ Lymburner, “Just When We Thought We Saw the Last of Them,” 26.

⁸⁶ Morley Lymburner, “The Cross Canada Gun Survey,” *Blue Line*, January 1996, 10, 13.

⁸⁷ Lianne Elliott, “SQ Draws New Pistols,” *Montreal Gazette*, May 19, 2001, A7; Linda Gyulai, “MUC Police Going Semi-Automatic,” *Montreal Gazette*, August 22, 2001, A4; Katherine Wilton, “Cops to Pack New Heat,” *Montreal Gazette*, April 10, 2002, A6.

⁸⁸ Dave Brown, “The Canadian Police Firearms Survey,” *Blue Line*, December 2003, 6. The Royal Newfoundland Constabulary Announced They Would Adopt Semi-Automatic Pistols in 2004. Danette Dooley, “Newfoundland Police Still Saddled with Revolvers,” *Blue Line*, February 2004, 18; Danette Dooley, “Newfoundland Police Get Pistols and In-Province Training,” *Blue Line*, May 2004, 34.

between policing weapons and weapons of war and contributing to the often criticized militarization of Canadian policing. Once some police forces transitioned to semi-automatic handguns, it proved very difficult for authorities in other jurisdictions to resist efforts to adopt these weapons. Concerns that semi-automatic handguns offered excessive levels of firepower were swept aside. The trusty revolver, which many police had carried for decades, was dumped in favour of the sleek semi-automatic handgun.

The long-term implications of arming police with semi-automatic handguns are still unfolding. As noted earlier, some critics in the 1990s expressed concern that arming police with these firearms would lead to more civilian deaths. Recent shootings by police have garnered considerable public attention, such as when Edmundston police fatally shot Chantal Moore in 2020, an Indigenous woman, during a wellness check. Scholarship on policing notes the large number of Black men and Indigenous people killed in encounters with police.⁸⁹ Canada lacks a national database of deaths caused by police, let alone a database that accurately traces what kinds of firearms police used in deadly encounters. The research that does exist, however, suggests that fatal encounters with police rose from an average of 22.7 per year in the 2000–2010 period to 37.8 per year from 2011 to 2022, a 66.5 percent increase.⁹⁰ Explaining this growth is undoubtedly complicated and requires further study, but one factor that should be considered is the change in police firearms.

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⁸⁹ Kent Roach, *Canadian Policing: Why and How it Must Change* (Toronto: Delve, 2022), 15.

⁹⁰ Andrew Crosby, Alexander McClelland, and Tanya L. Sharpe, “Data Shows that Police-Involved Deaths in Canada on the rise,” *The Conversation Canada*, April 18, 2023, <https://theconversation.com/data-shows-that-police-involved-deaths-in-canada-are-on-the-rise-201443>; Craig Bennell, Andrew Steven Brown, Bryce Jenkins, Ariane-Jade Khanizadeh, Audrey MacIsaac, and Tori Semple, “The Need for a Canadian Database of Police Use-of-Force Incidents,” *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice* 64, no. 1 (2022): 6–29.