



**TECHNICAL REPORT**

**SAFE STORAGE IN ABORIGINAL  
COMMUNITIES: EXPLORATORY REVIEW  
OF CENTRAL FIREARM STORAGE  
PROGRAMS IN MANITOBA**

**E. Frank Cormier**

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**UNEDITED**

**Canadian Firearms Centre/  
Centre canadien des armes à feu**

**Policy Sector/  
Secteur des politiques**

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solely those of the author and do not necessarily  
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## **Report Highlights**

- This report describes the research carried out from January to March, 1998 in order to provide an overview of central storage practices in Manitoba First Nation communities. This research focussed on the process of establishing and maintaining central storage programs through interviews and the collection of documents. This research may serve to inform other Aboriginal communities that might be considering a similar program.
- There are currently four central storage programs operating in the communities of God's Lake, God's River, Mathias Colomb, and Shamattawa, Manitoba. The findings of this research show that these programs exceed the safe storage requirements under the federal firearms legislation.
- The program in God's Lake was started in response to a coroner's inquest into the shooting death of a community member. The programs in the remaining communities were established in response to perceived high rates of firearm-related offences.
- All of the programs involve storing firearms in a secure location when they are not being used for hunting. Two of the programs (God's River and Mathias Colomb) are administered by the Band, while the remaining two are administered by the local RCMP. All of the programs are voluntary; in Shamattawa, community members are strongly encouraged to use it, and the Chief and Council have passed a Band Council Resolution to that effect.
- The Shamattawa and God's Lake programs require that written records be completed every time a firearm is checked in or out of the storage facility. The approach in these two communities contribute to a more successful central firearms storage program compared to Mathias Colomb and God's River. The use of more informal administrative methods by the latter communities appear to yield lower rates of use and less confidence in the programs.
- Rates of use of central storage vary among the communities, with the highest rate found in Shamattawa, where 91% of firearm owners reported that they use the program. All of the respondents believed that central storage has benefits to the community including the reduction of firearm offences, reduction of accidents, and increased safety of children. All of the programs were started with minimal cost, and were reported to have had immediate and substantial benefits for the peace and security of the community.
- In Shamattawa, a site visit was made to more closely study the storage program. Of the firearm owners using central storage, 94% reported that they are satisfied with it and could not identify any areas for improvement. For all of the communities, while complaints about the program were very rare, some respondents reported that some firearms went missing, were used by unauthorized persons, or were damaged while stored at a central facility.
- The likes, dislikes, and suggestions for improvement reported by the respondents were analyzed to determine what aspects of a central storage program led to higher rates of use and satisfaction among community members. Four main elements of a successful storage program were identified. These include the presence of community will to use the program, the level of public awareness of the program, the level of public confidence in the program, and the relative convenience of the program.

# 1. INTRODUCTION

The objective of this research report is to examine the central firearm storage programs implemented in four different Aboriginal communities in Manitoba. The following sections of the report provide the reader with an exploratory or “first time” glimpse of the central storage programs currently underway in God’s Lake First Nation, God’s River First Nation, Mathias Colomb Cree Nation, and Shamattawa First Nation.

## 1.1 Purpose of the Study

During the development of Canada’s newest firearms legislation (*Firearms Act*), the Department of Justice found that many First Nations communities are concerned with the safe use of firearms in their communities. Some groups expressed an interest in the concept of centralized storage programs, where individuals voluntarily store their firearms when they were not needed for hunting. This research studies the practice of centralized storage of firearms in various Aboriginal communities in Manitoba. It will provide a general overview of central storage practices and the extent to which central storage facilities are being utilized by Aboriginal communities in Manitoba. More specifically, this research will examine the circumstances surrounding the implementation of central storage, explore the goals of the programs, as well as the benefits and difficulties experienced. Furthermore, the research will examine the rate at which the facilities are being used, and other aspects of firearm ownership and use by Aboriginal people. The study will also examine the users’ perception of the program with respect to its benefits and levels of satisfaction. Overall, this research may lead to improvements in current programs and also inform other Aboriginal communities that may wish to consider a similar program.

## 1.2 Background

In total, it is estimated that 7 million guns are owned by 3 million civilian gun owners in Canada. Approximately 24% of Canadian households (2.7 million) own one or more firearms (Department of Justice, Research Note, 1998). Manitoba is slightly above the national average, with 28% of households owning firearms (Angus Reid, 1991).

From 1970 to 1995, gunshot wounds caused an average of 1,300 deaths per year. Approximately 80% of firearm-related deaths are suicides, for an average of 1,060 firearm suicides per year in Canada. Approximately 14% of all firearm-related deaths are homicides. From 1986 to 1995, there were approximately 183 firearm homicides per year, and the rate of firearm homicides has remained relatively stable. Four percent of firearm-related deaths involve accidents (Department of Justice, Research Note, 1998). According to Statistics Canada, between 1981/82 to 1993/94, the average annual number of persons hospitalized for firearm-related injuries was 1,293 (Hung, 1997).

Data concerning firearm ownership levels among First Nations people in Canada are scarce. There are few comprehensive statistics dealing with harms caused by firearms in Aboriginal communities, making it difficult to compare any of the national data with the First Nations experience. The data that are available, however, suggest that firearm related incidents in Aboriginal communities are certainly worthy of attention.

Between 1989 and 1993, the rate of firearm suicides among First Nations people was three times the national rate. During this period, firearms were used in 31% of suicides among First Nations people in Canada, the second most common method after hanging.<sup>1</sup> In Manitoba, between 1989 and 1993, approximately 28.8% of suicides involved firearms, while hanging (57.5%) was the most common method used (Health Canada, 1996).

According to Statistics Canada, 11.3% of homicide victims and 16.5% of homicide suspects were of Aboriginal origin, even though Aboriginal people comprise about 3% of the Canadian population in 1992 (Statistics Canada, 1993). Although Aboriginal people are over represented in overall homicide cases, they are less likely to be involved in firearm homicides compared to the general population (those involving Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people). According to Statistics Canada, over the last ten years (1987 to 1996), 32% of all homicides involved firearms (Hung, 1997). Between 1988 and 1993, shooting was the third leading method of homicide among Aboriginal people accounting for almost 20% of all homicides. A study completed by Doob et al (1994) found similar results in their examination of Aboriginal homicides in Ontario between 1980 and 1990.

There are a variety of risk factors that have been associated with firearm-related deaths and injuries. Research by Kellermann et al (1986, 1992, 1993) reported that firearm ownership increased the likelihood of a firearm-related death among family members or acquaintances in a gun-owning household. A research study on suicide among Aboriginal people in Manitoba suggested that *access* to firearms is a pivotal factor (Malchy et al., 1997). For a detailed overview of the research literature concerning the impact of availability and access to firearms on violent crime, suicides and accidents see Gabor, 1994.

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<sup>1</sup> First Nations suicide data were provided to the Department of Justice by Health Canada, Medical Services Branch, First Nations and Inuit Health Program Directorate. Number of Suicides by Method 1989 to 1993 - FN Population, (unpublished data tables), November 27, 1996.

### 1.3 Current Legislative Requirements for Safe Storage

In general, the current requirements for storage of firearms will not change under the new legislation and regulations (March 24, 1998).<sup>2</sup> According to the current storage requirements, non-restricted firearms (i.e. rifles and shotguns) must:

- be stored unloaded;
- be rendered inoperable (by the use of a secure locking device or the removal of the bolt or bolt-carrier), or stored in a container, receptacle or room kept securely locked and constructed so it cannot be easily broken open or into; and
- not be readily accessible to ammunition unless the ammunition is stored in a secure container or room (as described above).

Any person who stores a non-restricted firearm temporarily for the control of predators or other animals may store the firearm unlocked provided it is unloaded, that ammunition is not readily accessible and it is in a place where it is lawful to discharge a firearm. Under the new firearms legislation a person may store a non-restricted firearm unlocked in a remote wilderness area that is not used for a purpose that is incompatible with hunting if it is unloaded.

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<sup>2</sup> For detail please see *Storage, Display, Transportation and Handling of Firearms by Individuals Regulations* SOR/DORS 97-151-02. March 24, 1998. The safe storage provisions of the regulations will come into force on October 1, 1998.



## **2. METHODOLOGY**

This research project was conducted in two stages. The first stage involved a feasibility phase that included contacting key officials and Aboriginal organizations in Manitoba. As a result of the feasibility phase, a data collection strategy was developed which involved telephone interviews in three communities, and a site visit to Shamattawa.

It is important to note that this study is not a statistical evaluation of the impact of the central storage programs, in terms of reducing gun harms. However, some data are gathered on the perceptions of police, program administrators, and community members regarding the contribution of the program to safety. The following section describes the individual phases of the research project.

### **2.1 Initial Contacts**

In order to determine the number of central firearms storage programs currently operating in Manitoba, all relevant associations and individuals were contacted and canvassed. Among the groups contacted were:

- The Assembly of First Nations (AFN);
- The Assembly of Manitoba Chiefs (AMC);
- Manitoba Justice (Firearms Control);
- Manitoba Keewatinowi Okimakanak (MKO);
- The West Region Tribal Council;
- The Swampy Cree Tribal Council; and,
- RCMP “D” Division.

These initial inquiries found that a total of four central storage programs are currently operating in the following First Nations communities:

- God’s Lake First Nation;
- God’s River First Nation;
- Mathias Colomb Cree Nation; and,
- Shamattawa First Nation.

## **2.2 Data Collection**

### **2.2.1 Preliminary Interviews**

Individuals involved with the storage programs in each of the communities above were contacted and briefly interviewed regarding the general nature and objectives of their storage programs, estimated rates of use, length of operation, and perceived satisfaction of users. These initial discussions were intended to inform the development of the detailed research instruments utilized in data collection.

### **2.2.2 Telephone Interviews**

This component of the research involved telephone interviews with storage program administrative personnel in those communities not selected for a site visit. In God's Lake the RCMP member most familiar with the program was interviewed; the Band Councillor selected was unavailable for an interview. In both God's River and Mathias Colomb, the Band Councillor responsible for justice issues, and a RCMP member were interviewed. The questionnaire was faxed to the respondents in each community, who were selected for their knowledge of the central storage program. The survey was later completed by telephone, and the original form completed and faxed back to the researcher. The types of questions these individuals were asked are presented below under the heading Program Administrators on the following page.

### **2.2.3 On-site Interviews**

A site visit was made to the Shamattawa First Nation for the purpose of conducting in-person interviews, and to observe the set up and operation of the firearms storage program. There were two broad categories of respondents that were interviewed.

#### ***Program Administrators***

- Those persons involved in the creation and oversight of the firearms storage program.
- Those persons currently involved in the day-to-day operation of the storage program.

#### ***Community Members***

- Those persons who currently use the storage program.
- Firearm owners who do not use the storage program.
- Other community members (i.e. persons who do not own firearms).

The interviews entailed the completion of a semi-structured questionnaire administered in-person by the researcher. The instruments included questions designed to obtain information in the broad areas identified below.

### ***Program Administrators***

- Length of time the storage program has been in operation.
- Circumstances/impetus for creating the program.
- Description of how the program operates (procedures, regulations, documentation, etc.).
- Number of users and number of firearms stored.
- Demographic profile of users (if possible).
- Perceived benefits of the program.
- Perceived problems with the program.

### ***Community Members***

- Level of awareness of the storage program.
- Reasons for use/non-use of the program.
- Perceived benefits of the program.
- Perceived problems with the program.
- User satisfaction levels.
- Levels of firearms ownership (individuals and households).
- Awareness of current safe storage requirements.
- Level of firearms safety training among respondents.

In-person Program Administrator interviews were completed with one of the RCMP members responsible for administration of the central storage program in Shamattawa, and with the Band Councillor who is most familiar with the storage program. With respect to the Community Member interviews, a total of 66 households in Shamattawa First Nation were visited by the researcher and a total of 41 in-person interviews were completed. Selection of households entailed dividing the community into its four major sections, and selecting every third household in each of the sections for interview. If the selected household was unoccupied when visited, the adjacent house was visited. Of the 66 households visited, 19 were unoccupied. The remaining six were occupied, but there were no qualified respondents available at the time of the visit.

It should be noted that all data collected for this research represent a “snapshot” of the current situation with respect to central storage facilities in the four Manitoba First Nation communities. The data associated with usage levels of storage facilities may be especially prone to change due to factors such as caribou migration and trapping cycles. The figures quoted within this document are those reported during the data collection period February 23 to March 16, 1998.

## 2.3 Limitations of the Data

### 2.3.1 Margin of Error

As is the case with any research sample, the data obtained from the Shamattawa community survey are subject to error related to sample size. The specific margin of error for the Shamattawa survey data was calculated based upon the total number of occupied households in the community and the number sampled, as shown in Table One below.

**Table 1. Margin of Error (Assumes 95% Confidence Interval)**

Occupied Households	Households Visited	Households Sampled (Completed Survey)	Percent Error
113	66	41	12.22%

Percent error refers to the amount by which the results calculated from a sample might be expected to differ from results that were calculated based upon data from the entire population. For example, if data were collected from all 113 households, the margin of error would be zero. Since data are only available for 41 of the households, it must be assumed that these findings may be somewhat less accurate. Thus, any generalization of the sample data to the entire population must include the associated margin of error. For example, if it is calculated that 25% of the respondents own two rifles, we may conclude only that *somewhere between* 12.78% and 37.22% of the population (25% plus or minus 12.22%) own two rifles. The confidence interval of 95% means that we can assume that the calculated margin of error will be accurate 95% of the time, or “19 times out of 20”.

### 2.3.2 Sampling Bias

Sampling bias is an issue anytime a survey is conducted over a short period of time. A sample taken over two days might not be a truly random sample, since it was not possible to re-visit all of the selected households that did not complete an interview. That is, the respondents that did complete the survey might share certain characteristics, which led them to be available to answer the survey on the days when it was conducted; characteristics that might not be shared with the entire population. In some cases, this may result in data that are 'skewed' toward one type of person, rather than data that are representative of all people.

There are other factors that contribute to the difficulty of carrying out research in remote First Nation communities. Language differences can lead to misunderstanding or misinterpretation of data, and sampling strategies are difficult to devise given the lack of sources such as voter registration lists or telephone directories. The remoteness of the community also poses logistical problems to the researcher; obtaining basic necessities like accommodations and food can present major challenges. These factors also limit the amount of time that can be spent attempting to secure a random sample of respondents, often necessitating the use of convenience sampling methods. In an attempt to reduce the effect of these challenges, the researcher secured the cooperation of a local contact in the community chosen for the site visit. The contact arranged accommodation and transportation, provided the household location information used to define the sample frame, and provided interpreter services during the interview process. It should also be noted that the objectives of this research focus mostly upon qualitative data, which are not as susceptible to the limitations discussed above. Thus, while the limitations should be borne in mind when interpreting results or making generalizations, it is not expected that they will compromise the quality of the data in this study to any great extent.

### **3. FINDINGS**

#### **3.1 General Objectives and Rationale for Central Storage**

Preliminary interviews with Program Administrators identified three main rationales for firearms central storage. The first is that firearms should not be readily available in any situation where their use would be inappropriate or a threat to persons and/or property. The second is that firearms should not be accessible to persons who are not skilled in their safe use and handling (e.g., children). The third is that firearms should be stored in a way that will protect them from theft. These general principles underlie the main objectives of central firearms storage identified in this study, which are as follows:

- to reduce the number of deaths, injuries, and incidents of property damage caused by the illegal use of firearms;
- to reduce the number of suicides and accidental deaths and injuries caused by the improper use of firearms; and,
- to reduce the incidence of firearms theft and possible subsequent use by criminals.

The central firearm storage facilities available to members of the God's Lake First Nation, God's River First Nation, Mathias Colomb Cree Nation, and Shamattawa First Nation exceed the minimum requirements for the safe storage of rifles and shotguns. The operation of the central firearms storage programs in each of these communities is described below.

#### **3.2 God's Lake First Nation**

##### **3.2.1 General Characteristics**

God's Lake (Indian Reserve No. 23) is located 1,037 air kilometres Northeast of Winnipeg, Manitoba at the point of the narrows in God's Lake. The reserve is bisected by the narrows, with the majority of the population living on the east side islands. The majority of the reserve land is along the Northwest shore of the southern portion of God's Lake. The community is not accessible by all weather road; a winter road is constructed across the lakes and muskeg each year in order to bring in freight. The First Nation is signatory to the 1909 Adhesion to Treaty 5. The native language is Cree. According to the most recent statistics, the on-reserve population is 1,224 and there are 233 households in the community. First Nation Constables and the local RCMP detachment provide police protection for the community. The economic base of the community is fishing, hunting, trapping, and tourist guiding (Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, 1996).

### 3.2.2 Firearms Storage Program

The issue of central firearms storage in God's Lake was first examined following the tragic death of a community member on October 30, 1992. A provincial inquest into the death revealed that the RCMP were called to investigate reported gunshots in the community. The inquest also revealed that RCMP officers responding to the call fatally shot a member of the community, who was reportedly intoxicated at the time, after he pointed a rifle at the officers. One of the recommendations made in the report, stemming from the provincial inquest, is reproduced below.

The first recommendation relates to the control of firearms, both on the reserve and off. Prior to this tragic incident, there were some 35 instances this year of firearms being discharged in the community. I would urge that the Chief and Band Council, as well as the Mayor and Community Council, consider a method of control. A locked and secure location could be made available in each community for the storage of all firearms.

Whenever an owner of a firearm requires it for legitimate purposes of hunting, trapping, etc., it would be released by a designated custodian to such owner under suitable conditions of sobriety, intended length of use, etc. Enforceable by-laws would have to be enacted with appropriate penalties for non-compliance (Report on Inquest Into the Death of Lawrence Kenneth Halcrow, 1993: 5).

The research carried out for this report indicates that the storage program was started on February 30, 1996, and is administered by the local RCMP. Use of the program is voluntary; no by-law was enacted. The stated reason for implementing the voluntary program was "to reduce the number of complaints involving unsafe use/storage of firearms". The community was informed of the storage program using the local radio station, and by posting bulletins at various locations in the community.

The firearms are stored in a secure storage shed located in the RCMP compound; numbered racks have been installed to organize the stored firearms. When firearms are brought in for storage, a form is completed listing the name of the owner and the number and type(s) of firearms being stored. When the firearm is needed, the registered owner can sign it out of the storage facility between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 2:00 a.m. (operating hours of the God's Lake detachment). The on duty member completes the necessary paperwork and releases the firearm to its owner. The RCMP detachment members are the only persons with access to the storage area.

At the time that this research was conducted, there were fourteen firearms stored by six persons in the central storage facility. It was reported that this number has been consistent, with no recent trends or changes in usage levels. All of the firearm owners using the facility are residents of the First Nation and are male.

It was reported that the main benefit of the program is that it reduces the number of instances of firearms being used in the commission of offences. It was noted that this is accomplished by providing a secure location for firearms storage, which reduces easy access and potential for misuse. When asked for their opinion of the program, users reported that they liked it, and are pleased with the convenience and the security of the facility. The only problem with the facility that was reported is that not enough community members are using it. It was estimated that approximately 172 of the 233 households in the community have firearms, clearly indicating that the rate of use of the storage facility is very low.

The costs associated with the storage program were minimal, and were shared by the Manitoba Community Justice Council, the Solicitor General of Canada, and God's Lake First Nation. The bulk of these funds was spent to construct the storage shed; the remaining funds will be used for any future expenses. There are no personnel costs associated with the storage program, since it is administered by RCMP members as part of their duties.

### **3.3 God's River First Nation**

#### **3.3.1 General Characteristics**

This community (Indian Reserve No. 86) is located on the north shore of God's Lake at the outlet to God's River, approximately 850 air kilometres Northeast of Winnipeg. The community is not accessible by all weather road, but a winter road is constructed each year from Cross Lake. The First Nation is a signatory to the 1909 Adhesion to Treaty 5. The native language is Cree. According to the most recent statistics, the on-reserve population is 450, and there are 77 households in the community. Two First Nations Constables and the RCMP detachment at God's Lake provide police protection. The economic base of the community is commercial fishing, hunting, and trapping (Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, 1996).



### **3.3.2 Firearms Storage Program**

Information from this community was provided by the Band Councillor responsible for policing issues, and from a member of the local RCMP detachment. The central storage program was started in 1992 in the interests of “family safety”, and is administered by the local Band Constables and Band Councillors. The stated reason for starting the program was that there were many shootings in the community, and the Chief and Council decided it would be a good idea to offer secure storage for firearms. The program is not compulsory, but the Chief and Council strongly support and promote use of the facility. The community was made aware of the program through meetings and announcements on the local radio station.

A secure room in a RCMP trailer is used to house the firearms. Band Constables are responsible for the day to day operation of the facility, which is accessible at any time. The only condition that must be met for the release of a firearm is that the owner must be sober. There are no paper records kept of firearms in storage, or of when they are checked in or out. The Band Constables and the Band Councillor responsible for policing are the only persons with access to the storage facility.

At the time that this research was conducted, there were 60 firearms stored by approximately 58 persons. The respondent indicated that this represented about three-quarters of the firearm owning households in the community, since every household in the community has a firearm. It was reported that there had been no significant changes in usage levels, and that the users were not from any identifiable age or gender group.

The respondent indicated that the main benefit of the program was that it increased “home safety” by not having firearms available in situations where they would be dangerous. The respondent also noted that it reduced the number of accidents resulting from unsafe storage of firearms. The RCMP member reported that the program has helped to reduce the number of firearm offences and accidents. Both respondents believe that the people using the program are satisfied. No complaints have been received, and a large proportion of local firearm owners use it. No specific problems with, or possible improvements to, the program were identified.

There were no start-up costs associated with the program, since it was set up in an existing building provided at no cost by the RCMP. There are no personnel costs associated with the storage program, since the Band Constables administer it as part of their regular duties.

### **3.4 Mathias Colomb Cree Nation**

#### **3.4.1 General Characteristics**

This community (Indian Reserve No. 198 & 199) is located on the eastern shore of Pukatawagan Lake, approximately 819 air kilometres Northwest of Winnipeg. The community is not accessible by all weather road, but a winter road is available for approximately three months per year. The Mathias Colomb Cree Nation was formed in 1910 by a group separated from the Peter Ballantyne First Nation of Saskatchewan. The First Nation is signatory to the 1898 Adhesion to Treaty 6, and the native language is Cree. According to the most recent statistics, the on-reserve population is 2002, and there are 204 households in the community. Police protection is provided by three local First Nation Constables and a RCMP detachment staffed by two members on an eighteen-hour basis. The economic base of the community is fishing and trapping (Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, 1996).

#### **3.4.2 Firearms Storage Program**

The central storage program was started in 1992 in an attempt to reduce the number of firearm offences in the community. A high number of shootings and thefts of firearms prompted the Chief and Council to create a central storage area. The program is voluntary, but the local Justice Committee supports and promotes its use as part of their crime prevention efforts. The concept of central firearm storage received prominence and publicity during the local elections prior to being implemented.

The firearms are kept in a storage closet located in the Band Office. When firearms are brought in for storage, any member of the office staff with a key can store the gun. When the firearm is needed, it can be retrieved from storage anytime between 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. (the normal hours of the Band Office). Again, any of the key holders in the office can give the owner access to his or her firearm. There are no paper records kept of firearms in storage, or of when they are checked in or out. It was reported that a large number of people have access to the storage area.

At the time that this research was conducted there were 47 firearms in storage, most of which were no longer in working condition. Due to the fact that written records are not kept, it is not known how many firearm owners are using the facility. The respondent estimated that approximately 100 of the households in the community have firearms. It was noted that of all the firearms checked out during the fall hunting season, none were checked back in to the storage facility.

It was reported that a program to keep firearms in a secure area when they are not being used for hunting is worthwhile and has many potential benefits, but the very low rate of use of this program has prevented them from being realized. It was reported that at the outset of the program, usage was quite high and the number of shootings and firearm thefts were drastically reduced. Former users of the program indicated that several problems with the program caused them to discontinue centrally storing their firearms. The main problem identified was that too many firearms went missing once they were stored in the facility. Owners attempting to check their guns out found that they were no longer there, that they had been damaged, or that they had been used without the owner's knowledge. This, according to the respondent, is what has led to the current situation where very few people use the program. Possible improvements to the program included restricting access to the storage area, and instituting a strict record keeping system. It was noted that if community members were confident that their firearms were secure in the facility, usage rates may be much higher.

There were no start-up costs associated with the central storage program, since it was set up in an existing storage area in the Band Office. There are no personnel costs associated with the storage program, since Band employees administer it as part of their regular duties.

## **4. ON-SITE RESEARCH FINDINGS**

### **4.1 Shamattawa First Nation**

#### **4.1.1 General Characteristics**

This community is located along the north shore of the intersection of God's River and Echoing River, approximately 1,277 air kilometres Northeast of Winnipeg. The First Nation is a signatory to the 1910 Adhesion to Treaty 5. The native language is Cree. According to the most recent statistics, the on-reserve population is 897, and there are 113 households in the community. The economic base of the community is commercial fishing and trapping. The community is not accessible by all weather road, but a winter road may be constructed when heavy equipment is required in the area. The community maintains a gravel airstrip and is served by scheduled flights from Thompson (Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, 1996). One First Nation Constable and a RCMP detachment located on the reserve provide police protection.

### **4.2 Firearms Storage Program**

#### **4.2.1 Program Administrator Interviews**

Information in this section was obtained from interviews conducted with the Shamattawa RCMP detachment commander, one of the RCMP members, and the Band Councillor responsible for justice issues. The program was started in 1988 in response to a very high number of shootings the previous year. The Chief and Council passed a Band Council Resolution (BCR) that all firearms were to be placed in a central storage facility when they were not being used for hunting; the text of the resolution is reproduced below.

Whereas; Nation are	the Chief and Council of the Shamattawa First Concerned about firearm safety on the reserve, and
Whereas; RCMP	all firearms should be surrendered to the local on the Shamattawa Indian Reserve for Safe Storage,

Be It Resolved; that all concerned should respect and implement the request by the Chief & Council of the Shamattawa First Nation immediately.

The program is technically voluntary, however the existence of the BCR provides a strong incentive for the community members to use the program. Band Council Resolutions reflect the will of the community, and are therefore taken very seriously by First Nation community members. Although there is no Band by-law requiring the use of central storage, and there are no penalties assessed for non-compliance with the BCR, the RCMP support and encourage community members to use the central firearms storage facility. The community was informed at start-up of the program through the use of notices posted at the Band Office and announcements on the local radio station.

The firearms are stored in a locked room with barred windows located in a secure building within the RCMP compound. The facility's location in the centre of the community is convenient for most users. Numbered racks have been installed to organize the stored firearms. Each user is assigned a number corresponding to the location in the rack where their firearms are stored. A registration form for each user listing name, address, number of firearms, and types of firearms is kept in a binder in the storage room (a standard RCMP seized exhibit form is used). When firearms are brought in for storage, the date and time are recorded. When the firearm is needed, the registered owner can sign it out of the storage facility between the hours of 10:00 a.m. and 2:00 a.m. (operating hours of the Shamattawa RCMP detachment). No one other than the registered owner may check out a firearm unless the owner gives permission in-person, or has provided a signed note indicating permission to release the firearm to another person. The respondent noted that if no member is present at the detachment when an owner wants to check out a firearm, one will be called to return the detachment and release it. In addition, it was noted that members will often pick up and deliver firearms, especially for Elders who might have more difficulty travelling to and from the detachment. The on duty member releases the firearm after noting the date and time on the owner's registration form. The only conditions on the release of firearms are that the person must be sober, and must not be prohibited from possessing firearms. In a case where a person is borrowing someone else's firearm, the borrower must hold a Firearms Acquisition Certificate. The RCMP detachment members are the only persons with access to the storage area. It was noted that anyone with access to a firearm storage facility should have expertise in such areas as firearms handling, assessment of impairment, and record keeping.

There are 254 firearms stored by 84 persons in the storage facility. It was noted that this number has been consistent, and that the BCR has encouraged

members to participate in the program. All of the firearm owners using the facility are residents of the First Nation and are male.

It was reported that this program has many benefits. First is the increased safety of the community members resulting from not having firearms available when they are not being used for hunting. Second is the increased safety of police when attending calls that have the potential for violence. Third is peace of mind for the firearm owner from the knowledge that their firearm is safe from theft, and not accessible to their children or other untrained persons. RCMP members reported that firearm offences have decreased drastically since the central storage program was implemented. It was noted that while misuse of firearms used to be the rule in this community, it is now the rare exception. Users were reportedly pleased with the program, and no complaints have been received. RCMP members reported that Elders have expressed their support for the central storage program. It was also noted that the high rate of use of the program is indicative of its popularity. Respondents noted that in the early stages of the program some difficulties were experienced with record keeping errors and misplaced/lost rifles and shotguns. The record keeping system has since been improved and no more firearms have been misplaced or lost.

There were almost no initial costs associated with the central storage program since it uses an existing building. The only cost incurred was a minimal amount for the lumber used to construct the storage stalls. It was noted that some startup costs would be incurred in a non-RCMP-administered program, or in a detachment with fewer existing facilities. There are no personnel costs associated with the program, since it is administered by the RCMP members as part of their duties. It was noted however, that the members' workload was increased significantly in hunting seasons.

#### **4.2.2 Firearm Incident Data**

Attempts to obtain specific data from Shamattawa RCMP regarding levels of firearm offences were unsuccessful. The recording and file systems do not allow incidents involving firearms to be identified other than by manual examination of individual files. However, the detachment commander was able to provide some data on offence rates prior to and following the launch of the central storage program. The RCMP members reported that prior to 1988 (the year central storage was begun), Shamattawa experienced an average of five murders per year (it is not known how many were committed with a firearm), and that there were a "steady stream" of weapons offences being committed. Some individuals would, when intoxicated, discharge weapons indiscriminately in the community. There was a very high suicide rate prior to 1988, and firearms were used quite often. Following the launch of the central storage program, homicides dropped markedly. The detachment commander reported that in his two years in

the community, no homicides were committed. There are now virtually no complaints related to firearms use. It was reported that suicides have decreased to some extent, but the rate is still perceived to be high and other methods are used instead of shooting.

### 4.2.3 Community Member Survey

The data presented in this section are based upon 41 in-person interviews conducted in Shamattawa over a period of three days in March, 1998. The Principal Researcher and an assistant from the community visited a total of 66 households. In total, 41 of the 66 households completed the interview. Nineteen houses were unoccupied at the time of the visit, and six did not have a qualified respondent available. The average number of individuals 12 years or older per household was nearly identical for all households (3.17) and for gun-owning households (3.26). There was an average of 1.76 firearms per firearm owning household, and 1.1 owners per firearm owning household. Of the 34 respondents from firearm owning households, all but one were owners.

Firearms ownership levels are quite high in this community, with 83% of households surveyed reporting that they had at least one gun. Of those households having firearms 38% reported having one firearm, 47% reported having two firearms, and 15% reported having three firearms. Table Two shows the number of firearms as a proportion of all households successfully interviewed. Types of firearms owned were nearly evenly distributed between rifles (45%) and shotguns (55%).

**Table 2: Household Firearms Ownership Levels**

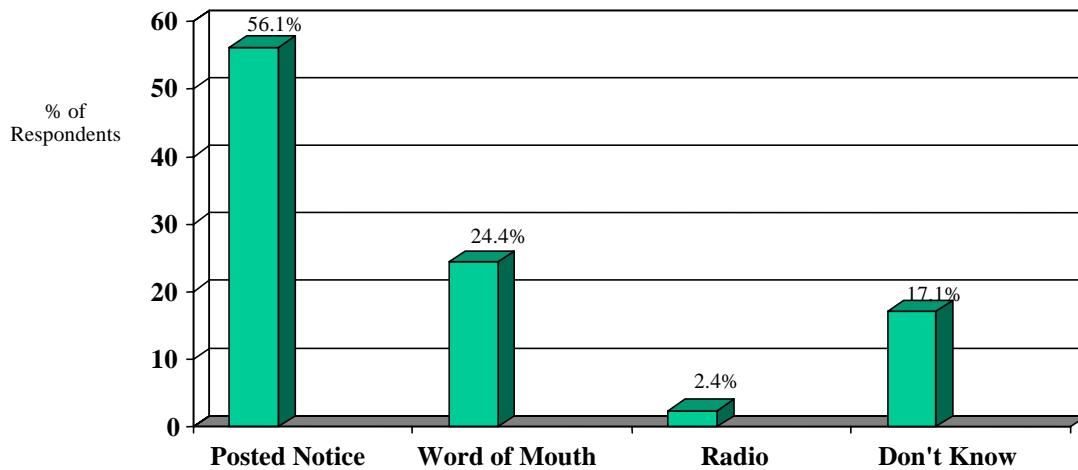
<b>Number of Firearms</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Cumulative Percent</b>
Zero	7	17.1 %	17.1 %
<b>1</b>	13	31.7 %	48.8 %
<b>2</b>	16	39.0 %	87.8 %
<b>3</b>	5	12.2 %	100.0 %
<b>Total</b>	41	100.0 %	

In an attempt to get an idea of the number of potential gun *users* per household, respondents were asked to report the number of household members 12 years of age and older. About one third (32%) of households reported two persons, about one-quarter (27%) reported three persons, 34% reported four persons, and 7% reported five persons.

Respondents were then asked if there were any members of the household who did not own firearms, but who used them. In all of the firearm-owning households surveyed, twelve households reported having a non-owner who uses firearms—all were immediate family members. In the case of non-firearm owning households, none reported having a member who uses firearms.

Awareness of the firearms storage program is extremely high; all survey respondents indicated that they were aware of the program. Chart One shows that when asked how they first became aware of the program, the majority (56.1%) indicated that they had seen a posted notice. The next most common response was “word of mouth” (24.4%), and “don’t know” (17.1%). Only one respondent reported hearing about the program on the local radio station.

**Chart 1. How did you first hear about the central storage program?**



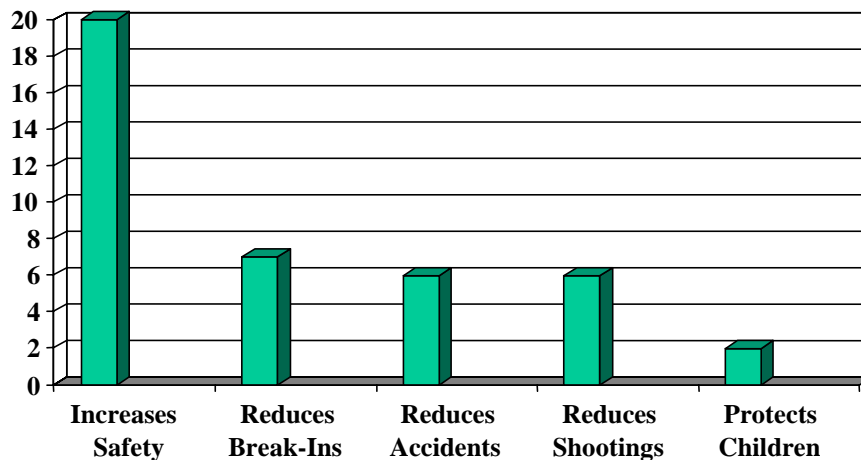
Participation in the central storage program is also extremely high, with 91% of firearm owners surveyed reporting that they use the central storage facility for their guns. Of the three respondents who do not use the storage facility, all said it was because it was not convenient for them to do so.

All respondents indicated that they believe the central storage program has benefits for the community. Chart Two reveals that the most common benefit mentioned by respondents was that the program “increases safety in the



community” (20 mentions), followed by “reduces break-ins” (7 mentions), “reduces accidents” (6 mentions), “fewer shootings” (6 mentions), and “protects children” (2 mentions).

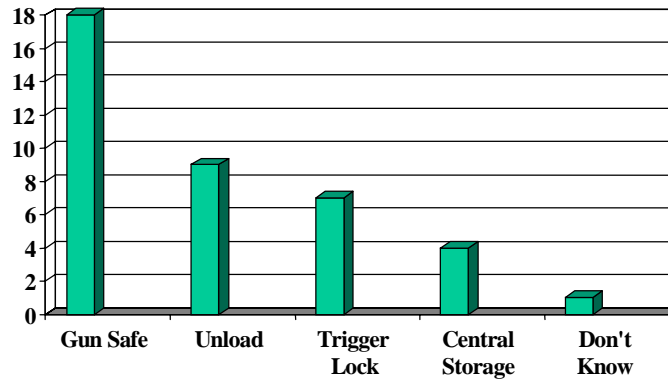
**Chart 2. Benefits of Safe Storage**  
(number of mentions)



Satisfaction with the central storage program was very high, with 93.5% of those respondents using the program reporting that they are satisfied with the way it works. Of the two users of central storage who were not satisfied, one noted that he had a gun that was lost some years before, and the other said that it was not convenient.

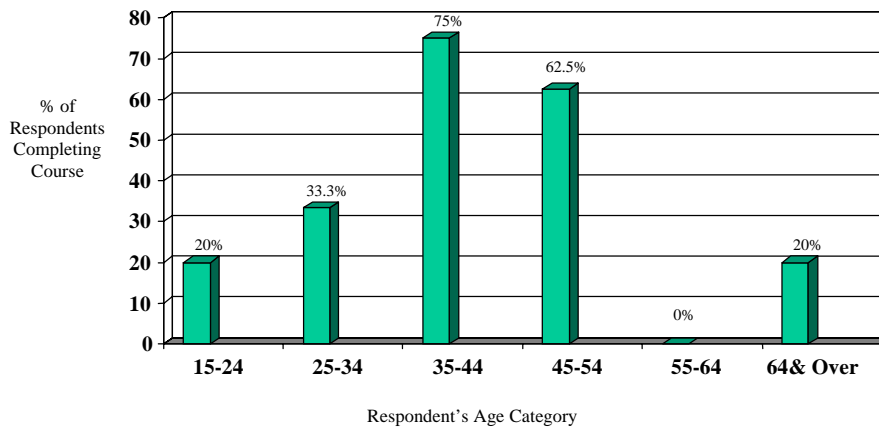
Chart Three reveals that knowledge of safe storage practices was also high, with all but one of the 34 respondents to this question being able to identify at least one aspect of safe storage. The most common method cited was using a gun safe (or gun locker) (18 mentions), followed by “unloading” (9 mentions), using a trigger lock (7 mentions), and using central storage (4 mentions). Note that the number of mentions adds up to 38 due to some respondents mentioning more than one method.

Chart 3. Knowledge of Safe Storage  
(Number of mentions)



The majority (58.8%) of gun owners reported having taken a firearm safety course, while 41.2% had not. Of those who reported having taken a course 35% said that they had taken the Canadian Firearms Safety Course; the remainder could not identify what course they had taken. Chart Four indicates that the older the respondent, the less likely they are to have completed a firearms safety training course. Only one respondent 55 years of age or older reported having taken a course.

Chart 4. Rate of Completion of Course (by age category)



## **5. CONCLUSIONS**

### **5.1 Central Storage**

There are currently four central firearms storage programs operating in Manitoba First Nation communities. According to the respondents surveyed, all of the programs are believed to have benefits for the community, namely an increase in peace and security.

The level of success among these programs, however, varies considerably. One of the research tasks was to identify the factors that contribute to the success (or lack of success) of central storage programs. The following points summarize the elements that appear to contribute to the successful implementation of a central firearms storage program in Aboriginal communities.

#### **5.1.1 Incentive to Use the Program**

In the Shamattawa case, the existence of a Band Council Resolution (BCR) promoting central storage of firearms is clearly a major factor in the high rate of use of the facility. Since there are no penalties associated with non-compliance, the Resolution alone may serve as an incentive to comply. In First Nation communities overall, BCRs carry a great deal of weight because they reflect the will of the community and therefore foster a high rate of compliance. In addition, the discussions leading up to the passage of a BCR serve to unite the community around the issue being considered. These discussions serve to inform the public of the dangers of unsafe firearms storage and use, as well as the benefits to community peace and safety that central storage may yield. Following the implementation of the storage program, more specific incentives to use central storage become apparent. In Shamattawa, the benefits include decreased worry about break-ins and the fact that individuals need not bear the expense of storage equipment (e.g., gun safes and trigger locks).

#### **5.1.2 Public Awareness**

The Shamattawa central storage program was obviously well publicized, since all respondents in this study were aware of its existence and how it operates. Certainly the fact that it has been in existence for ten years has contributed to the high level of public awareness. However, the majority of respondents indicated that they had first become aware of the program through notices posted in the community. This fact underlines the importance of making every effort to bring attention to the objectives of central storage, and especially to ensure that the launch of a new initiative is highly publicized. The use of posted notices in high

traffic areas (Band Offices, nursing stations, local stores), announcements on local radio and television stations where available, and community information meetings are likely to increase the success of a central storage program.

### **5.1.3 Public Confidence**

The data collected in this research clearly show that a well organized and efficiently run storage program is far more likely to be used by community members. There were several aspects of central storage that emerged during this research that appear to create public confidence. First, the data show that secure facilities will be used at a higher rate than non-secure ones. That is, respondents said that they had confidence in a storage facility that is in a building or room that cannot easily be broken into, and that is monitored. Second, the data show that confidence is increased when the facility is well organized; respondents indicated that they wanted a facility where firearms cannot be misplaced or lost. The use of numbered racks with specific slots for each firearm owner in the Shamattawa program is an example. Third, respondents stated that accurate record keeping contributed to their confidence in the storage facility. The research has shown that when complete records are not kept, there is the potential for firearms to be lost. Finally, respondents said that when access to the storage area is not strictly controlled, there is reduced confidence in the program. The data support this perception; reports of lost and/or unauthorized use of firearms were more common in those facilities where access was less strictly controlled.

### **5.1.4 Convenience**

Respondents indicating that they were satisfied with the storage program in their community often identified convenience as a major reason for their satisfaction. That is, facilities that are centrally located, with broad hours of operation, were viewed favourably by respondents.

This research suggests that if these four elements of incentive, public awareness, public confidence, and convenience are present in a central storage program, its likelihood of success will be maximized.

## **5.2 Successful Central Storage Programs**

This research has provided new insight into central firearms storage programs in Manitoba First Nation communities. There are four such programs operating in the communities of God's Lake, God's River, Mathias Colomb, and Shamattawa. The storage programs in all four communities are voluntary; however in Shamattawa central

storage is more strongly encouraged by the presence of a Band Council Resolution. The specific information gathered from all four of the communities has provided insight into the main elements necessary for the success of a central storage program. Every effort should be made to maximize incentives, awareness, confidence, and convenience when developing a firearms storage program. The data indicate that central firearm storage can have substantial benefits for the community, and that it can be achieved in a way that causes little inconvenience to the users. In many cases these programs can be started at little or no cost, as were three of the four programs considered in this report. The benefits to the community, combined with low cost and a minimum of inconvenience for users, suggest that central firearm storage is a worthwhile community initiative.

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