

## Firearms Control Amendment Bill hearings

*By Tasneem Matthews, Child Health Services Programme*

A study by the National Injury Mortality Surveillance Systems in 2004 indicated that firearms were the major cause of non-natural death among children aged 10 – 14 years, and accounted for 48.3% of all homicides in this age group.

With these figures in mind, the Children's Institute as a partner in the [Gun Control Alliance \(GCA\)](#) made two submissions on the Firearms Control Amendment Bill - the first to the South African Police Services during the Bill's drafting process, and the other to Parliament.

Aimed at strengthening gun control provisions in the Firearms Control Act, the CI's submission to the Portfolio Committee on Safety and Security in Parliament focused on the impact of gun violence on children. Key recommendations were that:

- handguns should be banned;
- the age limit for obtaining a licence should be raised from 21 to 25;
- people with a history of violence should not be granted a firearm licence; and
- competency certificates be regularly renewed along with licences for each gun.

Other submissions to the committee were made by organisations such as the Hunters' Forum and the Institute for Security Studies. The most contentious source of debate during the two days of the hearings was the issue of competency certificates and the renewal of firearm licences.

Pro-gun lobbyists argued for the removal of the licence renewal process and the background checks for competency certificates. The CI, along with other members of the GCA, opposed this because it would mean that someone who had a protection order issued against them in terms of the Domestic Violence Act could still get a firearm. Given the high risk that such a person poses, it would be sufficient grounds to deny a competency certificate.

Media interest was intense during the committee's deliberation period, and the CI contributed to the debate by publishing an opinion-editorial to raise public awareness of the impact of firearms on children. It advocated for strong legislation on firearms as a measure to ensure children's safety and fulfil their constitutional right to protection. The op-ed was published in several provincial papers and evoked both positive and negative responses from the public. It also generated coverage by a local radio station on issues related to children and firearms.

The Members of Parliament were more interested in evidence than emotive appeals, and they responded well to the fact sheet submissions. Despite intense pressure from the pro-gun lobby and the heated media debates, the GCA lobbying succeeded in ensuring that gun licences and competency certificates must be renewed. The final Bill also provides that people with protection orders will not be granted a competency certificate.

For more information, contact Tasneem Matthews.

[back to contents pages](#)